

# PROSPECTS FOR THE REFORM OF RELIGIOUS CONSTITUTIONS

By JEAN BEYER

THE COUNCIL'S call to renewal, according to the principles laid down in *Perfectae Caritatis* (return to the sources, the suppression of outmoded rules and of customs which have lost their significance, the preservation of sound traditions<sup>1</sup>) and the particular form of consecrated life (monastic, apostolic, secular<sup>2</sup>), has been seen by many Institutes as an urgent invitation to a radical reform of their Constitutions.

## REVISION—THE PRESENT SITUATION

The Motu Proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* had already given approval for prudent adaptation, even where this ran contrary to the existing norms of common law, and granted permission for experimentation in the areas of formation and apostolic activity;<sup>3</sup> and the Instruction *Renovationis Causam* left even wider scope for freedom in the matter.<sup>4</sup> In addition, numerous decrees have been published since 1964, revising or abrogating various canons of the Code concerning religious life.<sup>5</sup> The time, perhaps, was ripe for a wholesale, though experimental, revision of the Code. However, this would have prevented the commission for its revision from doing a thorough job. In fact the commission, as far as the law for Institutes of the consecrated life is concerned, has completed its first draft, which is an entirely new look at everything that concerns common law for all these Institutes, whilst it leaves to the Institutes themselves the task of drawing up the prescriptions proper to each: and this not by way of exception or of privilege, but as their primary and fundamental right.<sup>6</sup> Here it is no longer a question of merely tinkering with or adapting the old, but rather of constructing a proper law, wholly in accord with the mind of the founder, which will find its inspiration in the practical wisdom of the norms already formulated by the Council, clarified by the Motu Proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* and elaborated by those on the Commission responsible for this particular section of the new Code.

<sup>1</sup> Cf *Perfectae Caritatis*, 3.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-8.

<sup>3</sup> Cf *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 6 and 7.

<sup>4</sup> Cf the effect of the Instruction *Renovationis Causam* on the Code of Canon Law, itemized in *Supplement to The Way*, 8 (1969), pp 172-81.

<sup>5</sup> Cf *Actae Apostolicae Sedis*, *passim*, vols 59 (1967) to 66 (1974).

<sup>6</sup> Cf *Communicationes* 2 (1970) pp 168-71; 5 (1973), pp 47-69; 6 (1974), pp 72-93.

*Special Chapters: new approaches*

It must be remembered that many Institutes are living in a state of confusion. The Code has been amended, but their old Constitutions are still applicable. So renewal Chapters have produced decrees which change the Constitutions *vis-à-vis* the Code; and a few of these changes have been approved by the competent Congregations. There have been other changes — which, though not contradicting common law in the strict sense, have profoundly altered the physiognomy of certain Institutes: for example, to mention only two, their form of government and the shape of their apostolate. There is the further problem affecting international Institutes: provinces have gained an autonomy which is damaging to the flexibility of mission of the Institute as a whole. One wonders whether in practice some apostolic Institutes are now any more than a federation of their various provinces.

It is not easy to see, either, what is meant today when we say 'to make profession according to the Constitutions'; nor is it sensible to keep prolonging this kind of uncertainty. In many Institutes, this is not doing any good to the authenticity of their apostolic vocation.

Some Institutes have retained their Constitutions in their original form as documents witnessing to a much venerated tradition: no one would think of tinkering with the Rule of Monks, for example. The Constitutions of Ignatius Loyola have also been kept in their entirety: their power and equilibrium constitute a guarantee for the future of the Society of Jesus. Other Institutes of more recent foundation have not found it possible to retain their pristine texts; though, occasionally, where serious research has been made, they have been found to contain unsuspected treasures. Here, everything is up for reassessment. Where texts do exist, their sources remain unrevealed. Others, according to the strength of their tradition, have altered their Constitution. Some even did this revision during the Chapter, without any preliminary work. Such texts are certainly not noted for their quality: they tend to be diffuse, to lack unity, to suffer grave lacunae. Nor have they received the Holy See's approval. It is just as well that, in cases of conflict, recourse can be had to approved Constitutions. This is particularly important in juridical matters (non-acceptance to profession, dismissal, leaving the Institute), where the rights of individuals and the well-being of the Institute may be at risk. In some chapters there have been considerable achievements: for example the Dominicans' 'fundamental law'.

Some religious families, who are moving towards amalgamation, are still at work on a common text. This takes time, since it demands a return to the sources in order to find the way to unity. To bring Congregations together, when they have suffered dismemberment or have been affected by a certain diocesan absolutism, is no easy task: we have in mind groups which had the same founder, where the separation was due to outside influences in various parts of the world, and where fidelity to the original charism did not seem important.

A significant number of modern Congregations, founded for the most part in France, were constrained to achieve uniformity in their Constitutions according to the Norms of 1902, the Code of 1917, and the necessary approval which was given on the basis of a scheme which certainly made the work of the consultors easier, but inevitably resulted in the deformation of the Institutes. They have to look at everything again. There is only one possible solution: to revise their Constitutions. But do the times and circumstances permit of such a revision? How can we be sure? Too many Chapters have worked too feverishly, and they still tend to be chapters of affairs rather than of prayer and reflection. Pressure-groups still wield a preponderant influence; and there are other outside forces which have led to a certain secularism, particularly in chapters of religious women: the presence of 'experts' in theology, psychology and sociology; the influence of diocesan priests or religious who have become involved in forms of apostolate which run counter to the spirit of the Institute, or for which they have not been trained; the loss of assurance among certain priests, who are calling into question the values of obedience and celibacy; the false and exaggerated views about 'social' poverty as an ideal of uncertainty in modern religious life. All these factors have, profoundly affected certain Institutes which are only just beginning to extricate themselves from a crisis which it would have been better to avoid, and which has often been a cause of dissatisfaction to a significant number of religious. Many of these left the Institute after the renewal chapter, and others are still leaving.

#### *Constitutions and the reform of the Code*

At one time, it was hoped that the revision of Constitutions could be achieved during a term laid down in *Ecclesiae Sanctae*. The Council had recommended a renewal chapter within three years; and the majority of Institutes followed the advice. Then there were to be two successive chapters for the study of the plans for reform in the light of experience, and the texts were to have taken the experimentation into account. In the event, such a procedure was too much to expect, and has been abandoned.

Meantime a new factor has intervened: the reform of common law and the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law. Some think it will be much wiser to wait until its publication: but this does not appear to be on the immediate horizon. There are those who think the Institutes will enjoy a greater freedom without settled Constitutions; but this is a mistake. It is not possible for an Institute to survive for long without valid norms for life and action. The consecrated life is essentially bound up with the charism of the founder, with his spirit, his kind of life, his mission, his role in the Church, his specialization. Even where the scope of an Institute's vocation is very simple and universal, it cannot remain in a permanent state of experimentation and uncertainty. People have a right to be respected, their works have a right to a certain stability; without this, the entire heritage of an Institute can be threatened by disaffection or indiscreet initiatives.

We ought not, then, to sit around waiting for the new Code to be promulgated. So far, the spirit of the Council has been the deciding factor, and it is hardly likely that the particular law of any Institute can prevail over common law, whatever its shape or form. The work can be done, and be done well, provided that there is the necessary preparation and reflection. New Constitutions can be drawn up, which will be healthy and invigorating if we concentrate on the essentials, and leave the details to be handled in the daily living of the Institute and its capitular statutes and decrees, which will always need revision and adaptation. Such is in fact the vision of the Council. The Rule of Monks has, over the centuries, recognized adaptations, constitutions and declarations which constitute the history of various monastic congregations and of individual monasteries. Some mendicant orders are in possession of basic texts which have been and remain the foundation of their living. The Society of Jesus has succeeded in preserving its Constitutions because of their flexibility and openness. Rules, usages, decrees of general chapters and superiors general have from time to time specified the application of the Constitutions to the life of the Institute. Not a few founders of more recent Institutes would have wished to follow a tradition of this kind. For a long time this was not possible; the road to this sort of freedom was blocked. The Council has reopened it, by inviting all Institutes to return to their sources; which, in practice, means a re-examination of those texts expressive of the life of the Institute.

#### CONSTITUTIONAL TEXTS

The history of the consecrated life is a school of spiritual direction. The great founders were always called upon to teach their disciples their own way of life. Even where founders left few documents or none at all, as is the case with St Bruno, normally speaking a contemporary disciple or successor emerged, who set out in writing the outline of the master's evangelical ideal.

#### *Historical facts and constitutional texts*

Not all, however, have had the genius which promotes the synthesis between the love which gives life and the institution which expresses and protects that life. The two most notable texts to have achieved this in the Western Church are the Rule of Monks and the Constitutions of Ignatius Loyola. The Rule of Monks remains the ideal of the cenobitic life, and its wisdom sustains every other formulation of rule in the West. Recent attempts to revive a monasticism prior to Benedict's, or to create a new style of cenobitic life, have had singularly little success. They have only pointed up the power of the pristine Rule, its importance and adaptability.

The Jesuit Constitutions have a special creative value, because Ignatius, by freeing himself from monastic structures and observances, was able to profit by the Church's experience of the Mixed Life to arrive at a mode of life which would suit every possible form of apostolic, priestly, missionary and pilgrim vocation. The Society of Jesus has preserved its heritage without ever having

fully realized it in community. Yet in every epoch of its history there have been Jesuits who have been inspired by the ignatian ideal and have succeeded in returning to their sources.

There have been other founders who never wrote their own rule — St Dominic amongst others. He had to adopt the Rule of St Augustine; but in the Constitutions of the Order he defined the structure of community life proper to his own. The dominican Rule has given to the Church its most democratic form of religious life and has maintained it in full vigour, thanks to its contemplative impetus, its deep theological foundations and its insistence on the value of true fraternity.

Some Institutes do not have as part of their patrimony a single text which offers them stability in terms of doctrine and institution. This absence of uniformity has led to different interpretations of a common ideal which has enriched the Church and the consecrated life. The franciscan family brings together a great variety of life-forms, all of which find their inspiration in the love of St Francis for Christ and his Church.

*The call to revise constitutional texts*

The Church's invitation to all Institutes of consecrated life to revise their constitutional texts and to draw up new ones is at once grace-giving and breath-taking. The proposal is to draw up two texts: a basic document, which, with the Church's approval, will determine the essentials of the charism and structure of the Institute, and a second entitled 'statutes' or 'directives' which will deal with the details of daily life — a document which will be subject to constant revision by successive Chapters, in such a way as to help the Institute to adapt to new necessities of the consecrated life and of apostolic activity. One can hardly doubt that these recommendations of the Church are inspired by a very ancient tradition. The basic text will resemble the Rule of Monks or the ignatian Constitutions, while the 'statutes' will set out the necessary interpretation and declarations — in other words, what the monastic tradition called 'Constitutions'.

The history of religious life is very helpful to us here. St Dominic followed the Rule of St Augustine, which became the first constitutional text for the Order of Preachers. St Ignatius did not take up any older document. When he decided, as did Dominic and Francis, to put himself at the disposition of the holy Father, he drew up a basic scheme, to which he gave the name 'Formula of the Institute'. In a few short but pregnant paragraphs, the first Jesuits presented to Pope Paul III the ideal which they believed they should follow. The Pope approved the document and inserted it into the Rule of Foundation. After experimentation, a revision of this formula was produced, which Pope Julius II approved and inserted into a new pontifical document. All this happened during the life-time of Ignatius, and these texts incorporated the essentials of the Society of Jesus which, once approved, could never thereafter be called into question.

To answer the Church's call, then, it would appear that Institutes of consecrated life should consider drawing up two types of document: a short, but very pregnant 'formula of the Institute', and 'Constitutions', which would explain and elaborate on the formula, and ensure its application to life. This second text will have to be more than a canonical memorandum, even as the first will have to be more than a simple spiritual outline. What we need is a marriage between spirit and life, between love and law. Between them, the two documents must form the constitutional foundation of the Institute.

Some renewal Chapters desired before all else to determine the essentials of their Institutes. They set themselves the task of drawing up a text which would be the fundamental law of the Institute. Some of the documents produced really achieved their purpose. The best of them, at present, would seem to be the 'Fundamental Constitution' of the Order of Preachers — a short and pregnant text of nine paragraphs. It follows on the Rule of St Augustine which keeps pride of place; but it has the advantage of bringing together the essentials — the spirit and the structure of the Order. It is followed by 'Constitutions and Declarations'.

These simple hints can clarify the task which faces every Institute: what documents should we draw up? What texts should be submitted as fundamental for the approbation of the competent ecclesiastical authority, or (in the case of Institutes of Pontifical Right) of the Holy See? From the point of view of history and of the rich patrimony of so many Institutes, it is too simplistic to say that every Institute should have a 'fundamental law' and 'statutes' or 'accessory Code'; the situation is too delicate for so simple a solution. The 'fundamental law' could contain several texts.

#### *The situation of the older Orders*

In the benedictine-cistercian family, the Rule of St Benedict is always the fundamental law of life. Each order or congregation has its own 'Constitutions' or 'Declarations' or Rule, giving each its own stability and autonomy. The Jesuits have their pristine texts approved by Paul III and Julius II. This is their essential law, which is taken up and explained at length in the Constitutions of Ignatius. The details of daily life was further codified in 'common rules', and decrees of general Congregations were always subject to constant revision.

There is nothing to prevent these older Orders from keeping their original texts, as long as these contribute to the growth of the spiritual edifice which constitute their spirit and structure. It is clear also that uniformity here would be damaging, and contrary to the will of Vatican II.

#### *Options for Institutes of more recent foundation*

The more modern Institutes will have the opportunity of giving first place to pristine texts which represent the foundation of their spiritual heritage. Some follow the Rule of St Augustine, others have found their inspiration in the Rule of St Benedict, even though these are dedicated to the apostolic life of teaching or of healing the sick. Yet others owe their origins to St Francis.

These writings belong to the sources of their inspiration without having given to the Institutes their proper structure.

What of those Institutes that have drawn their inspiration from the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus? As far as we know, these are very few. One of them would like to preface their own Constitutions and Declarations with the ignatian text in its entirety. Another has already adapted that text to its own time and requirements. A third is toying with the idea of using the entire text, but suppressing whatever is not applicable to its own life and spirit. However, the majority of Institutes, especially of apostolic women who followed the jesuit ethos, based themselves on the 'Summary of the Constitutions'.<sup>7</sup>

When one considers how the situation varies from one Institute to another, and the complexity of the problems involved, one must regretfully admit that the norms recommended by the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae* have turned out to be an oversimplification. One can only say that it is up to each Institute to decide what is the true foundation of its own life, to have the greatest respect for its traditions and to set about organizing its own apostolic action. There will be a variety of texts which formulate the patrimony of the Institute — often linked to forms of government and administration.

#### NEW DIRECTIVES

Some renewal chapters wanted to publish new Constitutions which have not as yet received the approval of the Holy See. (If such texts are eventually approved, it will be in the form of capitular decrees.) Their aim has been to bring into prominence the spirit and spirituality of the Institute, the understanding of community living, the importance of its apostolic mission, the practice of the evangelical counsels: all this in contradistinction to previous constitutions, the majority of which consisted almost entirely of systematic canonical prescriptions, in line with the Code and the Norms published by the competent roman Congregations. The new texts are often brief, but meaty enough to provide matter for prayer and meditation. The influence of the Rule of Taizé is clear; but to adopt it without a commentary will, as Roger Schutz himself has pointed out, lead to a 'unanimity of pluralism'. The Norms of this Rule, which are still no more than a rearrangement of the Code, are brought together in a canonical memorandum, and published as an appendix or in a separate booklet, without it being made clear that certain orientations of the new text lead to quite different interpretations of the canonical norms. This manner of presentation can only create confusion: the law will appear always in the hands of Superiors and administrators, and thus become separated from life.

Meanwhile, since the Holy See has not yet approved texts like these, the old Constitutions still obtain. However, the new texts can be interpreted as making legitimate derogations from the approved Constitutions, which remain valid

<sup>7</sup> Cf McCarthy, Sister Caritas: 'Constitutions for Apostolic Religious', in *Supplement to The Way*, 14 (1971), pp 33ff.

and establish the law in the case of conflict. This can only lead to confusion in the life of the Institute and the minds of its members, when faced with texts of differing values.

Other Institutes have judged it more prudent only to promulgate capitular texts. Sometimes these are very numerous; and the longer they are, the less likely are they to be studied; so that few of them make any impact on the life of the Institute. The result is a vacuum. The surfeit of capitular literature has tended to stifle life. Furthermore, for a vast number of religious, many of the documents have proved too difficult to digest; they are also too modern, in the sense that they presuppose a knowledge of recent literature; and they were very often the work of pressure-groups. Some of them, on careful examination, are found to be doctrinally impoverished, and without any firm bond with the spirit and charism of the Institute. Terminology and catch-phrases cannot succeed in bringing alive the Institute's spirit.

It is difficult in a short space to offer a panoramic view of the vast quantities of capitular literature spawned by the Council. Its richness and its complexity cannot be denied. Very few Institutes have prepared what will be their fundamental code, and their statutes or rules. And there is room for making terminology more precise. We have 'laws of life', 'rules of life', 'the book of life'; whilst secondary texts are indiscriminately called constitutions, decrees, statutes, rules, directory.

Here we meet a double difficulty. In religious Congregations, the Directory was often considered as the book of the spirit which animated the life of the Institute. The Constitutions, on the other hand, were rather like the handbook of a charitable association, largely concerned with administration. When one speaks today of Constitutions being a book of life, or of a fundamental document, many think instinctively of the old Directory or Customal. It is indeed a directory, but more complete and organic; it brings together law and spirit. In any case, the terminology is a cause of confusion to not a few. The other problem is that profession is made 'according to the Constitutions'. Some people now want to make it according to the revised Constitutions, the 'book of life'. But such a formula is often too vague, and rarely makes mention of the clearly-defined obligations attaching to profession; it is also open to interpretations which are eccentric even when they are not abuses. What then does the formula mean? We have seen that the old Constitutions are still in force, but in a modified form. What has been introduced against existing canon law has often not been approved by the competent authority; whilst the Institute draws its inspiration from its capitular texts only in so far as these have been accepted and have become part of its life. The formula in question no longer has the canonical precision which some have wanted to give it. In effect, the Constitutions to which profession-formulae refer express the obligations integral to vocation in the Institute and to its structures; they indicate fidelity to its spirit, to its mission in the Church, to the demands of fraternal charity, and the traditions of life in community. Do the revised Constitutions specify



all this? It is to be hoped that drafts of the revisions will contain the essentials and explain them. It would certainly seem an excellent idea to give a fuller significance to the formula of profession. To make profession means to follow Christ according to the charism of the founder; and hence according to the texts which officially explain it and the obligations deriving from it. The matter needs further study. Perhaps the traditional formulation is not worth preserving. The doubt has been raised, and should be settled. It cannot be settled if we continue to use terminology which creates difficulties.

#### PREPARING NEW TEXTS

The point of departure for the preparation of new texts concerning constitutions is the renewal Chapter. It must be said that very few texts so far published have succeeded in finding a real integration of letter and spirit. (The value of established documents, like the Rule of St Augustine, the Rule of Monks, the ignatian Constitutions, is universally accepted: an indication that there is a general search to draft texts that are at once short and meaningful.) However, this ideal has been achieved in the Constitutions of the Society of St Francis de Sales of Don Bosco, promulgated in 1972. Their Constitutions consist of 200 articles and 187 rules. But how few Institutes have so far managed to clarify their own particular law! So often they find it nearly impossible to produce a spiritual doctrine which characterizes their own existence. So often one is left with the impression that everything has still to be dealt with: government, the position of superiors, how properly to convene a chapter; the division of the Institute into regions or provinces, impediments to admission, formulae and rites of profession, temporary and definitive apostolates, leaving the Institute, refusal of admission, transfer to another Institute.

When one examines these capitular texts which approximate to the directives set out in *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, one finds that several Institutes, in their chapters, have inevitably arrived at a kind of fundamental text. For they have come up with statements on the charism of the Institute, on the consecrated life according to the evangelical counsels, on filial obedience, consecrated virginity, evangelical poverty, the life of prayer, the spiritual and apostolic life, unity in diversity (government), loyalty to the Lord (formation and mission). On the other hand, one asks why the matter of government — including chapters themselves — could not be the purpose of a single chapter, in the sense that here we have certain essential elements of life in community. And as far as the vows are concerned, the manner of presentation so often seems to separate them from the idea of consecration. And if much is made — perhaps too much — of collective poverty, the new texts tend to contain precious little on the obedience characteristic of the Institute, and on chastity as an ideal of community life.

The order in which the various topics appear in the new 'law of life' can be significant. It makes a difference, in terms of the Institute's spirit, whether poverty is treated before obedience, for example. Some texts deal first with

the apostolic life: the whole life and spirit of an Institute may depend from mission. Others put the emphasis on community, in particular the local situation; there is a risk here of losing the impetus provided by apostolic mobility, and of gradually becoming a federation of autonomous local communities — like the monasteries of the same monastic congregation. Legislative texts have a way of affecting life in this gradual way and of changing it according to the spirit of the law.

What, then, to do? Revise our texts, correct them, give them a 'good going over'? From the canonical view-point, of course, they are no more than capitular decrees. They could well be emended in the course of an ordinary chapter. It might be better 'to give them a taste of ordinary life', or at least those elements which are now provoking obvious deviations from the spirit. And certainly new drafts can be prepared and subjected to the study and research which is necessary for a better text.

Should we all wait for the promulgation of the new Code for Institutes of the consecrated life? I doubt it. The main principle of the revised common law will be the primacy of the particular law of each Institute, and its relations with the competent ecclesiastical authority — in particular with the Sacred Congregation of Religious and Secular Institutes. It will be a question of facing up to one's own responsibilities. There will be emphasis on the need to know the Institute's origins and its true spiritual character: all of which demands serious study and reflection. It is the oddest thing: but so many chapters of renewal addressed themselves to what was fashionable and were unable to develop any insight into their own proper spirit. In fact, in not a few cases, Institutes unconsciously discarded certain essentials of their traditional character, and are already feeling the need of a salvage operation. The tragedy is that many of those who were prominent in the dismantling process have since left the Institute. However, it is becoming clear that the present moment is the time for serious reflection; the call for thorough revision of constitutional texts may turn out to be providential.

#### THE NEW STYLE

The first thing that comes to mind in studying chapter documents, and particularly drafts of Constitutions, Books of Life, and revised Rules, is that editorial norms of the past have been put aside. We no longer have a list of canons or of codified articles. The texts are more diffuse, but written with a verve, with inspiration, which reflects deeper thought, a higher level of assimilation and meditative prayer. Inevitably, and may be unconsciously, there is a return to the style of the great founders, whose texts are an expression of their love for God and man and a witness to the quality of their lives, the fruit of many hours of prayer and genuine discernment. These ancient documents bring into focus the unique exemplar of the consecrated life, Christ himself, whom these founders followed with such fidelity according to their own proper grace and mission.

It usually turns out that the quality of a document's spirituality is reflected in the tranquillity and even the rhythm of its prose, which is easily adaptable to liturgical reading and to prayer in common; and yet this does not prevent it from being concise, clear, precise. These are texts which can inspire because they are inspired, in the sense that they are communicating a charism. They have a simplicity which stems from their use of key-phrases echoing the Council documents, and a richness whose source is the gospel and the teaching of the Fathers.

Some of these documents, however, are difficult to read because of the plethora of citations in the text itself or in the margin. Though these are usually to the point, they would be better off in a commentary. There are other drafts which emphasize the pride of place to be taken by the scriptures: the gospel is the supreme law of religious life. In these documents, every chapter contains numerous scriptural quotations: a sort of florilegium which is both evocative and practical. This was the method introduced by Charles de Foucauld for his Little Brothers and Sisters. It has been adopted by several other Institutes. The preference is for St Paul and St John — one which is often that of the founder himself. However, the method can, and has been, overdone.

This, then, is the new style; one might almost call it a new literary genre. But the quality of the text does tend to rest on the vision of those who drafted it, their discernment and motivation. Its vigour does seem to depend on its being the work of a single person. When it is the work of a group it tends to be more impersonal, more bloodless. Sometimes it is far too legalistic, and its very appearance excludes the possibility of its providing that stimulus and depth necessary to communicate the vital charism which can bring to life institutional structures.

Given a new style, it follows that those responsible for approving the new texts officially will need to examine them on the basis of new criteria. It would be disastrous if the traditional juridical approach were to be applied. These documents form a dynamic whole, and cannot be subjected to the old methods whereby a text was dissected in order to discover its various organic parts. The fear that canonists will destroy the work has a real justification. And the same can be said of chapters, which have a habit of tearing texts apart and piling up emendations and modifications, to the extent that the building is reduced to a heap of rubble. It must be said unequivocally: Chapters can make decrees; they cannot write a Rule of Life.

A good basic text will be free from all constraint; but it will need a commentary. Statutes (or whatever name is given them) should do no more than to draw out the doctrine which is contained in the formula of the Institute, in the same way as the benedictine Constitutions explain, in order, the various sections of the Rule of Monks.

Some general chapters have succeeded in achieving the right balance in the renewal of spirit and structures, and have discovered what it is in their tradition which is the source of new inspiration and new rules.

It is to be hoped that these simple and scattered observations on the drafts of new constitutional texts will highlight the importance of the work that has already been done in accordance with the directives of the Council and of *Ecclesiae Sanctae*. There is still time to achieve a definitive and satisfactory text. The matter is urgent: one cannot go on revising documents *ad infinitum*. Candidates need to know with a fair amount of exactitude what sort of life and obligations they are taking on; and the professed religious would be happy to be presented with new texts which clearly set forth the ideal of life in the Institute, its mission and fidelity.

#### CONSTITUTIONS AND THE NEW CODE

It will not be possible for constitutional texts to be presented for ecclesiastical approval until the new common law for Institutes of consecrated life has been promulgated. The new code will call upon every Institute to decide its structures and to draw up its own proper law. In this direction, we are certain, it will make no impositions; the work of renovation initiated by the Council still needs time for reflection and review, and many Institutes are aware of this. Renewal means more than the promulgation of simple decrees and texts.

At the same time, constitutional documents are essential, for the Institute itself and for the life and fidelity of all its members. This has particular relevance for prospective candidates. They need to know what it is that they are committing themselves to, in the sight of God and of the Church. A way must be found of communicating to them the sound traditions of the Institute, in order that they can find within themselves their own resonance to its spirit and life. There is an urgency here which affects the work of those responsible both for the redaction of the new common law and for the direction of renewal chapters.

There are those who feel that any codification is at the moment premature, because everything is changing at such a rate. As soon as a text is promulgated, it will be obsolete! We ought to wait a while to see what happens to all these experiments. But if one were to take account of all the objections, one would never put pen to paper. The fact is that human nature does not change all that rapidly. And in many cases the throwing out of constitutional texts has eroded consecrated life, or has at least made it more difficult and less secure.

However, it is a question of a new beginning. A fundamental text must now bring together all that was lying loose in the past. It must describe the charism of the Institute's foundation, as this is understood in the light of conciliar teaching; it must sketch out clearly the spiritual physiognomy of the Institute and its links with the gospel, the teaching of the founder, the sound traditions of the Institute, and its relations with the Church's magisterium with regard to consecrated life and the counsels. On these vital issues, the situation should be clear; if it is not, then the consecrated life has already been emptied of meaning, and we are on the way to destroying the Institute in the name of renewal.

There is a further danger: change for change's sake. Some chapters seem to have substituted change for renewal; whereas the first essential is to find their own identity. It is in this respect that certain so-called experts have done a great disservice, by condemning texts and customs of an Institute as being outmoded or as an obstacle to renewal. Unfortunately, in so doing they paid little attention to the spiritual needs of the consecrated life; so often the advice they have given has turned out to be adverse to the real life of the Institute. The result has been, in several cases, delay or uncertainty in the publication or final formulation of chapter texts and decrees. Often enough there has been recourse to the ultimate in legal norms: the most fundamental of all laws is the safety of the people — *salus populi suprema lex*. The problem is the amount of time and effort that needs to be spent on repairing the damage. Apostolic Institutes have more to do than constantly to be taking their own spiritual pulse.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the new canon law for consecrated life will add to the responsibilities of each Institute. It will be up to each to decide upon its own structures, its own vocabulary, evangelical options, rite of profession, and, it is to be hoped, the question of a fourth vow which will express its own proper mission. Every Institute is invited to structure its own law, the spirit and law of its own life: letter and spirit, particular and common law, the gospel and specific charism.

The majority of Institutes have produced in their capitular decrees elements which can be of value in the redaction of fundamental texts. Some need to press on with their historical research, the study and evolution of their own law, and to deepen the foundation of their consecrated life. Expert knowledge is needed for all this: which must be within the competence of the Institute itself. A charism needs to be lived if its richness is to be understood. It is significant that many chapters are discontinuing the recent practice of inviting outside experts to participate. What it does mean is that the Institute must be ready to free competent personnel to forward this work.

What sort of person is needed to edit fundamental texts? There can be little doubt that ultimately we must speak of one person, who can collate all the research, discussion and capitular findings and decisions. What is needed is a synthesis in the simplest possible text intelligible to all the members of the Institute, which seeks to avoid the shallow and superficial and to communicate the vitality which has kept the work of renewal going in the Institute: a text which will give expression to its proper charism and spirit. All this asks for special graces: such texts can only be the fruit of assiduous prayer. It has happened more than once that the ideal person for the task is among the youngest members of the Institute's chapter: one who has imbibed the wisdom and preparatory work of his elders and can joyfully recognize the ideal of their vocation and the sense of their mission in the Church: in a word, one who can say with confidence of the life and spirit of his Institute — *Digitus Dei est hic*.