



TRAINING REFLECTION
October-November 2023

The responsibility of governance within lay associations: An ecclesial service

Introduction: background to this reflection

In recent years, allegations of abuse of power within the governing bodies of international lay associations have been brought to the attention of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life (hereafter “LFL Dicastery”). The mission of this Dicastery is to support the work and development of international associations of the lay faithful such as AIC.

In this context, the LFL Dicastery stated that *“the absence of limits in terms of office favours forms of appropriation of the charism, personalisation, centralisation and expressions of self-referentiality which can easily cause serious violations of personal dignity and freedom, and even real abuses”* and that *“bad government inevitably creates conflicts and tensions which injure communion and weaken missionary dynamism”*¹.

This assessment led the LFL Dicastery to enact a new General Decree² designed to promote a change in generations inside the governing bodies of associations, through a rotation of responsibilities, as experience has shown that this *“benefits the vitality of the association. It provides an opportunity for creative growth and stimulates investment in training. It reinvigorates faithfulness to the charism, breathes new life and efficacy to the interpretation of the signs of the times, and encourages new and updated paths of missionary action”*¹.

In September 2021, the LFL Dicastery held a Symposium of international leaders of ecclesial movements and associations on the theme: *“The responsibility of governance within lay associations. An ecclesial service”*. Representatives from a wide range of associations were invited to reflect together on the exercise of authority in lay movements from an ecclesial perspective. Pope Francis introduced the day with a beautiful message³, several excerpts of which are included in this training reflection.

¹ Explanatory Note accompanying the new Decree mentioned below:

<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Pdf/decreto-mandati-governo/ENG%20NotaEsplicativa%2001.06.2021%20DEF.pdf>

² General Decree “The Associations of the Faithful” of 11th June 2021 – Prot. N. 2021/466

<http://www.laityfamilylife.va/content/dam/laityfamilylife/Pdf/decreto-mandati-governo/ENG%20Decreto%20Generale%2001.06.2021%20DEF.pdf>

³ Address by Pope Francis on 16th September 2021 (Annex 1)

<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2021/september/documents/20210916-associazioni-fedeli.html>

The **aim** of this training reflection is to **share some important recommendations on good governance** from this Symposium and the General Decree. These recommendations are applicable at all levels of our association: international, national and local.

The ecclesial mission of lay associations

The Pope reminds us that as members of international associations of the faithful we have a true ecclesial mission of our own:



*“With devotion you endeavour to **live out and make fruitful** those **charisms** that the Holy Spirit, through your founders, granted to all the members of your groups, **to the benefit of the Church and of the many men and women to whom you dedicate yourselves in the apostolate.**”*

*“You are a clear sign of the vitality of the Church. You represent a **missionary force** and a **presence of prophecy** that gives us hope for the future.”*

*“You too [...] have the responsibility of **building the future of the holy faithful people of God.**”*

The members of Executive Boards are therefore invited to use their gifts in the best possible way and to exercise their authority in a manner consistent with their ecclesial mission, that is, as a service dedicated to achieving their own objectives and aimed towards the good of their members.

Governance and the call to serve

The notion of **service** is a fundamental and necessary part of governance in ecclesial realities.

In carrying out the role of governance entrusted to us, the Pope reminds us that we must *“learn to be true **servants of the Lord and of our brothers and sisters**”*. We are called to humility, to docility to the will of God, of which Jesus gave us the example.

This is a **service**:

- ⇒ **To the person**: to seek people’s well-being, their human and spiritual growth, especially for employees, and ensure that they have dignified living and working conditions, that their freedom is protected, etc. (e.g. adequate rest, minimum economic independence, social security, etc.).
- ⇒ **To the specific charism** of the association.
- ⇒ **To the Church’s mission of evangelisation**: to help always keep in mind the purpose of the association, to bring God to those who are most in need.

Governance at the service of the charism

The charism is a **gift inspired by the Holy Spirit**, and is aimed at an encounter with Christ.

The **charism of the founder** is always intended to be passed on and to become a **collective** charism.

The charism belongs to all **members**, who are the **co-responsible guardians** of its observance. The charism is lived out and enlivened with what the people who join the movement bring, it is a path of constant maturing.



“Each one, where he or she is placed by the Lord, is called to make [the gifts received for the good of the Church] grow and bear fruit, confident in the fact that it is God who works all things in all people. [...] We need to trust in the Holy Spirit, who acts in the life of every association”

– Pope Francis

The president and the members of the Executive Board are the **primary servants** of the collective charism. They are not its infallible interpreters, their role is to share it.

How can we ensure that the charism is **passed on**?

- Through prayer
- By ensuring compliance with the statutes of the association
- By always reminding ourselves that Jesus is at the centre
- Thanks to the support of the Church, which guarantees the authority of the founding charism.

Pope Francis warns us against **2 obstacles** that can prevent us from being servants of God and of others:

- 1) The **desire for power**: this can be expressed in many ways (not actually delegating – only on paper – forcing one’s own re-election or that of others, staying in power forever, etc.).
- 2) **Disloyalty**: when, on the pretext of serving God and others, one serves only one’s own interests and ego.

Governance and the exercise of authority in the Church

Authority allows the community to grow. This movement is never completed.

The exercise of authority requires constant discernment and an ability to take a step back. A balance should be kept between two tensions, two extremes:

- 1) Excessive authority (I have God-given power and can do anything)
- 2) Lack of authority (I do not take on responsibility because we all have to agree)

It is sometimes inevitable that tensions arise during the exercise of a mission of governance. We are then invited to manage them with discernment, in keeping with our ecclesial mission.

Governance and the invitation to accept change, in order to improve and prepare for the future

The Pope draws our attention to the importance of accepting change in order to improve and prepare for the future:

- *“The charism to which we belong must be furthered more and more, and we must always **reflect together in order to incarnate it in the new situations we live in**. To do this, great docility is required of us, and great humility, in order to recognize our limitations and accept to change outdated ways of doing and thinking, or methods of the apostolate that are no longer effective, or forms of organization of internal life that have proved inadequate or even harmful.”*
- *“It is beneficial and necessary to **provide for a rotation in posts of governance**, and for the representation of all members in your elections.”*
- *“The future must be prepared here and now, [...] learning to listen and to **discern the present time** with honesty and courage, and with the willingness to engage in **a constant encounter with the Lord, a constant personal conversion**.”*

Governance and term limits

In order to promote a healthy renewal of governing bodies and prevent appropriations that have given rise to violations and abuses in the past, the LFL Dicastery decided it was necessary to **regulate the terms of office** of governing bodies in terms of the length and number of terms, as well as the representativeness of the governing bodies. The General Decree “The Associations of the Faithful” was therefore enacted on 11th June 2021.

The **AIC Constitution** already provided for a limit on the length of board members’ terms of office. A **new provision** aimed at complying with certain new requirements in this field imposed by the 2021 General Decree was approved at the International Assembly of AIC Delegates 2023.⁴

⁴ See article 12 d) al. 3 of the AIC Constitution and article 13 d) al. 3 and 4 of the AIC Canonical Statutes.

Conclusion

Our mission as Executive Board: to prepare for the future

- We **plant the seeds** of what will grow and develop when we are no longer around.
- It is important to **learn to withdraw**, to make room for other people who will in turn contribute their talents. Former board members can play an essential role in the renewal of management teams, encouraging “creative growth” in the association and “new and updated paths of missionary action”.
- It is necessary to **provide training on governance as an ecclesial service to all AIC volunteers**, taking into account the **reality of today’s Church**:
 - ⇒ so that we can give them responsibilities within our association later, at all levels (local, national and international);
 - ⇒ so that each volunteer can contribute to setting up a good Executive Board at all levels of our association.
- We are invited to **put into practice and pass on the spirit of the General Decree** (limiting the length and number of terms of office of board members) **at all levels** of the association.



Questions to discuss in your groups:

1. What caught your attention the most?
2. What are the main challenges related to governance in your group/association?
3. What training in good governance do you offer to your association’s volunteers?
4. How can we ensure that employees of AIC associations work in decent conditions? If necessary, what can we do to improve their working conditions?
5. What more could we do to spread the spirit of the General Decree within our association and encourage the renewal of leaders within our teams as requested by the Dicastery?



“The work done by lay people is enormous, especially since Vatican II”

“Without lay people, there would be no Church today! They are the ones who make it progress, who drive forward the development of social and educational programmes”

*– Cardinal K. Farrell,
Prefect of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life,
Vatican, 16th September 2021*

Reflection compiled by Tayde de Callataÿ, August 2023