



INTERNAL GOVERNANCE IN CONSECRATED LIFE AND ALLIED MATTERS: A CANONICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

This paper examines the complexity of internal governance in consecrated life, integrating canonical and theological perspectives to address contemporary challenges and propose future directions. The analysis begins with an exegetical exploration of foundational canonical texts, highlighting their role in defining the identity, mission, and governance structures of religious institutes. It underscores the interplay of canonical norms and theological insights, emphasizing a vision of governance rooted in service, transparency, and fidelity to charisms. The study also ventures into practical governance mechanisms, including the roles of superiors, councils, and chapters, showcasing their contributions to promote co-responsibility, collaboration, and accountability. The theological framework enriches this discussion by presenting authority as a ministry of accompaniment, guided by Christ's example, and obedience as a dynamic and collaborative practice that aligns individual actions with communal mission. The paper addresses the complexities of balancing traditional hierarchical models with contemporary demands for inclusivity, intercultural dialogue, and generational diversity. Furthermore, it examines how innovative approaches, such as participatory leadership, and a harmonious integration of canonical and theological principles can transform governance practices to better serve the evolving needs of the Church. This integration of practical governance frameworks with deep theological reflection gives the study the study the



advantage and leverage to offer a model for internal governance that remains faithful to tradition while embracing adaptability. The proposed approaches are aimed at strengthening the Church's mission through enhanced collaboration among religious institutes, dioceses, and the universal Church. By and large then, this paper calls for governance models that exemplify the Church's commitment to unity, service, and shared responsibility in an increasingly complex and diverse world.

Keywords: Consecrated Life, Theology, Canon Law, Governance, Church

Introduction

The governance of consecrated life within the Catholic Church is a foundational aspect of its identity, mission, and witness to the world. Rooted in a tradition that integrates canonical norms with theological insights, the internal governance of religious institutes serves not only as an administrative framework but also as a spiritual and communal praxis. This study examines the complexities of governing consecrated life in ways that are both faithful to the Church's long-standing traditions and adaptable to the evolving needs of contemporary religious communities. Focusing on the interplay between canonical regulations and theological principles, the paper explores the structures, roles, and dynamics that define governance in religious institutes. It highlights how canonical texts provide a juridical framework for leadership, co-responsibility, and the administration of resources, while theological perspectives enrich this foundation by emphasizing authority as service, obedience as a collaborative practice, and governance as an expression of communal fidelity to the Gospel (CICLSAL, 2008).

Amid contemporary challenges – ranging from cultural and generational diversity to demands for greater inclusivity and transparency – this study underscores the importance of innovative governance models that balance hierarchical structures with participatory leadership. As it addresses practical concerns and proposing transformative approaches, the paper aims to offer insights into how consecrated life can continue to be a dynamic force in the Church's mission (Kanu, 2015). This research not only reaffirms the relevance of canonical and theological principles in shaping governance but also calls for a deeper integration of these dimensions to nurture unity, accountability, and service within the Church's diverse and global context.

1. Canonical Foundations of Consecrated Life

1.1 Exegetical Analysis of Can. 573, §1

Canon 573, §1 provides the foundational understanding of consecrated life through several interconnected dimensions. At its core, consecrated life represents a stable form of living - not merely a temporary state, but a



permanent commitment to following Christ more closely under the Holy Spirit's guidance. This stability is expressed through the profession of evangelical counsels, marking a formal and enduring dedication to the religious life. The canon emphasizes total dedication to God as a central characteristic, involving a supreme love that surpasses all other commitments, (Code of Canon Law, 1983). This dedication is established through what the canon terms a “new and special title,” indicating a level of commitment that goes beyond the basic Christian obligations arising from baptism. The pursuit of perfection in charity stands as a primary goal, with members dedicating their efforts toward the service of God's Kingdom, the honor of God, and the building up of the Church. The ecclesial dimension of consecrated life is particularly significant, as those in consecrated life function as what the canon calls a “splendid sign” within the Church. This sign value has both present and future aspects - it manifests the Church's current holiness while also prefiguring heavenly glory. Through this witness, consecrated life contributes distinctively to the salvation of the world.

The spiritual foundation of consecrated life is rooted in following Christ more closely under the Holy Spirit's guidance. This following is concretely expressed through the profession of evangelical counsels and requires a complete dedication of life and service. The canon also establishes the institutional nature of consecrated life, requiring formal Church approval and operating within established ecclesiastical structures while maintaining proper relationships with Church hierarchy. This canonical definition thus establishes consecrated life as both a personal vocation and an ecclesial reality, formally recognized by the Church and oriented toward the pursuit of evangelical perfection. It provides the fundamental juridical framework that undergirds all other canonical provisions regarding consecrated life, establishing its essential characteristics and purpose within the Church's life and mission. Through this comprehensive definition, the canon articulates the theological and juridical foundations that shape the understanding and practice of consecrated life in the Church.

1.2. Governance Framework

Based on the document, the governance framework of consecrated life operates through a complex interplay of different roles and structures. The framework is built upon three distinct articles dealing with Superiors and Councils, Chapters, and the Administration of Temporal Goods, each playing a vital role in ordering the institute's life toward its foundational goals. The role of superiors is understood fundamentally as service, reflecting Christ's own example. This authority, received through the Church's ministry, must be exercised with genuine respect for human



dignity and in accordance with both universal law and proper constitutions. Superiors serve as unifiers who ensure cooperation for the institute's good while maintaining the legitimate authority to make decisions (Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life [CICLSAL], 2008). The law emphasizes that while superiors retain decision-making authority, they should work collaboratively with members for the institute's benefit.

Councils play a crucial complementary role to superiors, serving both to provide expanded vision and experience in decision-making and to prevent autocratic use of authority. Can 627 mandates that superiors have councils and specifies certain cases requiring either the council's consent or advice for valid action. This includes important matters such as alienation of property, establishment of novitiates, and decisions regarding members' status within the institute. General chapters hold supreme authority within religious institutes according to Can 631, with responsibility for protecting the institute's patrimony and promoting appropriate renewal. They must represent the entire institute and serve as a sign of unity in charity. The chapter's role extends beyond mere legislation and elections to encompass the total renewal of the institute, with wide membership participation in preparation and execution (CIC, 1983, can. 631).

The administration of temporal goods represents another crucial aspect of governance, with Can 636 requiring each institute and province to have a financial administrator distinct from the superior. This role demands particular expertise and must be carried out with attention to both practical management and religious dimensions of stewardship. This governance framework operates according to key principles including subsidiarity (ensuring decisions are made at appropriate levels), co-responsibility (sharing in the institute's mission), and complementarity (different roles working together harmoniously). The system aims to balance effective leadership with broad participation, ensuring both fidelity to the institute's charism and appropriate adaptation to contemporary needs. Throughout all these structures, the focus remains on serving the institute's mission while respecting both individual dignity and the common good.

2. Theological Perspective on Governance

2.1. *Authority as Service*

The document posits that the Church's authority in consecrated life is derived from Christ's example and mission. It asserts that there is only one authority in the Church, the power of Jesus Christ, and all other authority represents participation in this fundamental power. This authority is transmitted through ecclesiastical approval and must be exercised in a



spirit of service, reflecting Christ's own ministry. The document uses *Perfectae Caritatis* and *Ecclesiae Sanctae* to emphasize the importance of superiors exercising their authority with respect for human dignity and spiritual growth (Kanu et al., 2024). The role of religious superiors is understood through the threefold office of Christ: teaching, sanctifying, and governing. Superiors fulfill their duty of service and leadership in accordance with their institute's distinctive character, always in union with bishops to authentically fulfill Christ's command to preach the gospel. This theological framework rejects authoritarian approaches to governance and promotes a model where authority serves as a ministry of accompaniment, helping brothers and sisters towards conscious and responsible fidelity. This understanding of authority as service is not just an administrative principle but reflects the Church's fundamental nature as the people of God (CICLSAL, 2008).

2.2. Role of Obedience

The vow of obedience is a fundamental aspect of religious life, nurturing unity and collaboration within religious communities. Can 618 emphasizes that obedience is not just a hierarchical requirement but a means of aligning individual actions with the mission and spirit of the community. It encourages members to listen and respond collectively, ensuring a shared direction in the service of God's kingdom. Supervisors' role is outlined in Can 618 as service rather than domination, nurturing a culture of willing participation rather than compliance. This dynamic helps cultivate a community of charity, where members are united in their dedication to the institute's mission and the broader goals of the Church. Obedience is not blind submission but a collaborative process of discernment respecting the dignity and spiritual maturity of each member (CIC, 1983, can. 618).

The interplay of obedience and governance highlights the balance between authority and co-responsibility. Superiors are tasked with making decisions that align with the institute's charism and mission, but they are encouraged to work collaboratively with their councils and members (Connors, 2011). Pope Francis has highlighted the need for superiors to embrace bold and creative approaches to governance, moving away from rigid hierarchies toward relational models that prioritize fraternity and mutual respect. In the broader theological framework, obedience is deeply connected to the ecclesial communion, reflecting the unity of the Church as the Body of Christ (Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops, 2022; Pilani, 2023). When they commit to obedience, members of religious communities participate in Christ's mission of teaching, sanctifying, and governing.



2.3. Communion and Mission

Communion and mission are fundamental principles that shape governance structures in consecrated life, emphasizing the interconnectedness of religious communities and the broader Church (Pilani, 2023). Can 204 identifies the Christian faithful as participants in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices, with governance structures reflecting this ecclesial communion. Consecrated persons must align their internal governance with the universal mission of the Church while respecting their unique charisms. Ecclesial communion is rooted in the Trinitarian model of unity and diversity, mirroring the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This theological vision translates into collaborative structures that encourage dialogue, mutual respect, and co-responsibility (Usman & Paul, 2024). The integration of individual charisms within the broader mission of the Church is critical, as they shape the identity and mission of religious institutes. Governance structures must respect and protect these charisms, as emphasized in Can 578. Collaboration between consecrated persons and the Church hierarchy is vital for the effective integration of charisms into the Church's mission.

Community and mission are inseparable, and governance models must balance internal cohesion with outward engagement. In practice, this integration can face challenges, such as tensions between the autonomy of religious institutes and the authority of the Church hierarchy. To address these issues, governance structures must emphasize transparency, dialogue, and shared accountability which helps a underscoring culture of trust and mutual support (Pilani, 2024).

3. General Chapters: The Heart of Religious Governance

3.1. Supreme Authority

Communion and mission are fundamental principles in consecrated life, highlighting the interconnectedness of religious communities and the Church (Winters, 2017). Can 204 identifies the Christian faithful as participants in Christ's priestly, prophetic, and kingly offices, with governance structures reflecting this ecclesial communion. Consecrated persons must align their internal governance with the Church's universal mission while respecting their unique charisms (Kanu & Pilani, 2025). Ecclesial communion is rooted in the Trinitarian model of unity and diversity, promoting dialogue, mutual respect, and co-responsibility (CIC, 1983, can. 204). The integration of individual charisms within the Church's mission is critical, and governance models must balance internal cohesion with outward engagement. To address challenges, governance structures must emphasize transparency, dialogue, and shared accountability, to ensure trust and mutual support.



3.2. *Functions and Representation*

General chapters are crucial in the governance and vitality of religious institutes, ensuring the institute's alignment with its charism and maintaining its integrity (Kanu, 2015). They play a vital role in legislating norms, electing superiors, and ensure spiritual renewal. Legislative acts are debated and enacted by general chapters, addressing areas such as community life, apostolic missions, formation programs, and financial administration. The election of superiors is another key function, with Can 631 emphasizing the importance of careful discernment and the need for leaders who demonstrate spiritual and administrative qualities.

Spiritual renewal is also a critical function of general chapters, allowing for collective reflection on the institute's spiritual health, fidelity to the Gospel, and responsiveness to the needs of the Church and the world (Aigbona, 2025). The representative nature of chapters promotes inclusivity, ensuring decisions are informed by the diverse experiences and perspectives of the membership. This diversity of representation is both a strength and a challenge, as it requires careful planning to account for the institute's cultural, generational, and ministerial realities Kanu, 2015. In conclusion, general chapters are central to the governance and vitality of religious institutes, providing a framework for faithful and adaptive governance.

3.3. *Discernment and Decision-Making*

General chapters are a vital part of religious institutes, focusing on spiritual, reflective, and attuned proceedings. They go beyond administrative deliberations, involving prayerful reflection and collective dialogue under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This process aligns the institute's actions with God's will, encouraging a dynamic way of rejuvenating both the spiritual and practical life of religious institutes. The process requires an environment of prayer, openness, and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit. Capitulars are called to set aside personal biases and regional interests, embracing a collective responsibility for the institute's well-being (Kanu, 2015).

The deliberative nature of decision-making complements the spiritual aspects, involving structured discussions on pressing issues like governance structures, apostolic missions, formation, and financial stewardship (McDonough, 2003). This collective deliberation aids shared sense of ownership and accountability, embodying the ecclesial principle of co-responsibility. Cardinal Pironio's (1983) vision for general chapters emphasizes the importance of discernment in addressing both the spiritual vitality of the institute and its capacity to respond to contemporary challenges.



4. The Role of Superiors and Councils

4.1. Superiors

Religious superiors play a crucial role in the governance of religious institutes, ensuring both administrative efficiency and spiritual welfare. Their authority is characterized as a ministry of service, emphasizing collaboration, mutual respect, and a deep commitment to the spiritual and communal growth of the institute's members. They oversee daily operations, ensuring decisions align with the institute's charism, mission, and constitutions. Spiritually, superiors are grounded in pastoral care and demonstrate a spirit of service and promoting prayer, shared discernment, and collaboration within the community. They engage with councils and members in a spirit of co-responsibility while encouraging a culture of shared responsibility (McDonough, 2003).

Respect for members is a key aspect of their role as a servant-leader, recognizing their dignity, gifts, and unique contributions. They address individual needs with compassion and fairness, ensuring their spiritual, emotional, and material well-being. However, balancing administrative duties with spiritual leadership can be challenging, especially in the face of declining vocations, financial pressures, and cultural diversity. To navigate these challenges, superiors must return to principles of servant-leadership through prayer, dialogue, and adherence to the institute's charism and canonical framework (Ossai, 2015).

4.2. Councils

Councils are essential in the governance of religious institutes, providing advisory and decision-making support to superiors (McDonough, 2003). They ensure accountability, transparency, and participatory governance, reinforcing the collaborative ethos of consecrated life. Councils act as safeguards against unilateral decision-making and balance the exercise of authority with the collective wisdom of the institute's members (McDonough, 2003). They contribute to a governance model that respects individual dignity and the communal nature of religious life. Councils assist superiors in governance, offering advice and granting formal consent on significant matters (Connors, 2011). They also contribute to the integrity and efficacy of governance by providing a platform for collective discernment. This collaborative approach reflects the principle of co-responsibility, emphasizing that governance is a shared responsibility involving multiple stakeholders within the institute.

Councils also serve as a safeguard against potential abuses of authority, promoting a culture of accountability and protecting the institute's patrimony. They contribute to the institute's ongoing renewal and vitality



by participating in strategic decisions. The effectiveness of councils depends on the commitment and competence of councilors, who must be well-informed about the institute's charism, mission, and operational realities. Proper formation and preparation for council members are essential for effective fulfillment of their responsibilities.

4.3. Challenges

Effective governance in organizations faces challenges such as autocratic tendencies, neglect of council roles, resistance to change, and a culture shift. Autocratic tendencies centralize decision-making power, undermining collective input and creating discontent. Addressing these issues requires aiding inclusivity, shared responsibility, and democratic decision-making processes (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018). Neglect of council roles can lead to inefficiency and communication breakdowns. Resistance to change can stem from fear of the unknown, lack of understanding of benefits, or concerns over losing power. A culture shift emphasizing adaptability, continuous learning, and open communication is necessary. Building trust, ensuring open dialogue, and embracing a shared vision can drive meaningful, sustainable outcomes.

5. Collaboration between Religious and Bishops

5.1. Principles of Collaboration

The collaboration between bishops and religious institutes is vital for the Church's mission and addressing diverse pastoral needs. It is guided by Mutual Relations principles and canonical directives, emphasizing dialogue, respect, and shared commitment. Religious institutes bring their unique charisms, ministries, and spiritual traditions, while bishops ensure all initiatives align with the local Church's mission. A strong relationship requires open communication and shared responsibility. Both parties must engage in joint planning, decision-making, and implementation of pastoral strategies. Collaboration helps in effectively utilizing resources in ministries like education, healthcare, evangelization, and social outreach (Kanu, 2020). By adhering to Mutual Relations and canonical directives, the partnership strengthens the Church's global witness.

5.2. Case Studies

Case studies of collaboration between bishops and religious institutes show that intentional efforts can lead to enhanced pastoral effectiveness and a united approach to ministry. Joint planning sessions between bishops and major superiors can align diocesan leadership with religious communities' charisms and ministries, resulting in more cohesive strategies for addressing pastoral needs. Active participation of religious institutes in diocesan planning initiatives promotes a sense of ownership



and shared mission, ensuring resources are utilized effectively (Kanu, 2020). However, cases of misunderstanding or unilateral decision-making can lead to feelings of marginalization and resentment. Consistent communication and regular interaction between bishops and religious superiors are essential for resolving misunderstandings, building stronger relationships, and ensuring focus on the shared mission (Badke-Schaub & Hofinger, 2018).

5.3. *Future Prospects*

The future of collaboration between bishops and religious institutes depends on nurturing stronger relationships based on communication, shared efforts, and respect for each other's roles. Regular open channels of communication, joint planning sessions, and open discussion can ensure alignment and unified goals. Implementing shared formation programs can bridge gaps in understanding and build mutual appreciation for the unique roles of bishops and religious institutes. Recognizing the complementary roles of bishops and religious institutes allows for effective collaboration without compromising individual identities or responsibilities (Kanu, 2020). Regular communication, shared formation, and mutual respect can strengthen the Church's internal structures and enhance its mission of serving as a source of hope and transformation for society.

6. Charism as a Foundation for Governance

6.1. *Definition and Importance*

Charism is the spiritual foundation of religious institutes, shaping their identity, mission, and governance structures. It is the unique gift bestowed upon the founders by the Holy Spirit, embodied by the institute's spiritual vision, values, and mission. Can 574 and Can 578 emphasize the importance of charism in guiding the internal and external life of religious institutes. Can 574 highlights the consecrated life as a special gift to the Church, while Can 578 emphasizes its preservation, respect, and faithful observation by both members and Church authorities. Charism also influences governance, shaping leadership styles, communal practices, and the direction of the institute's activities (CIC, 1983, can. 574 and 578). Through preserving and promoting charism, religious institutes maintain their distinctiveness while responding to the needs of the Church and society, contributing uniquely to the Church's mission.

6.2. *Canonical Protection*

Canonical protection is crucial in preserving the integrity of a religious institute's charism, ensuring it remains faithful to the founder's vision while adhering to the Church's norms and teachings (Okwuosa, 2015).



Cans 578 and 587 emphasize the importance of maintaining the spiritual heritage of each institute, serving as a guide for their governance, mission, and relationship with the wider Church. Can 578 emphasizes the obligation to preserve the charism, requiring the founder's spirit, mission, values, and customs to be faithfully observed. Can 587 mandates the creation of constitutions, codifying the institute's charism, governance structures, and decision-making (CIC, 1983, can. 578 and 587). Other canonical provisions protect against external pressures or internal deviations that could compromise the institute's charism, while maintaining the institute's governance and mission alignment with the broader ecclesial mission.

6.3. *Practical Implications*

Charism-based governance is a crucial approach for religious institutes, ensuring their actions and priorities remain aligned with their mission. This approach prioritizes mission alignment, ensuring decisions are evaluated against the institute's founding charism and core mission. It also emphasizes spiritual renewal, promoting a culture of ongoing formation and spiritual growth among members (Nwabuzo, 2015; Kanu & Paul, 2024). This approach strengthens the community's internal cohesion and equips members to be effective witnesses of the Gospel. Charism-based governance also allows for adaptability to contemporary challenges, allowing institutes to respond creatively to the needs of the times. This approach promotes collaboration and shared responsibility within the community, building trust and a shared sense of ownership (Pilani, 2023). In conclusion, charism-based governance integrates mission alignment, spiritual renewal, and adaptability into the life of a religious institute, ensuring its charism remains a vital force that inspires its members, guides their decisions, and enhances their contribution to the Church and the world.

7. Contemporary Challenges in Governance

7.1. *Authoritarianism vs. Collaboration*

Contemporary governance, particularly within religious institutions, faces significant challenges in reconciling traditional authority structures with the demands for collaboration and inclusivity in modern contexts. A critical issue lies in the tension between authoritarian practices and collaborative approaches. Authoritarianism, characterized by centralized decision-making and rigid hierarchies, often undermines the communal and participatory nature of governance that many religious traditions aspire to embody. This tension poses a profound obstacle to the development of governance models that prioritize the shared responsibility and active engagement of all members within a community



(Tracey, 2012). Pope Francis has been a vocal advocate for addressing these challenges, urging leaders to embrace bold and innovative methods that nurture and promote co-responsibility and fraternity. He emphasizes the need to move beyond rigid control mechanisms toward governance practices that empower individuals at all levels to participate meaningfully in decision-making processes. This call for creativity and inclusiveness highlights the importance of dialogue, mutual respect, and shared ownership in building communities that are more reflective of their foundational values, even to the point of protecting the human environment being a gift from God himself (Pilani, 2024).

The prioritization of these principles can aid governance to become not only more effective but also more aligned with the ethos of service and unity that many religious organizations seek to uphold. In fact, addressing the divide between authoritarianism and collaboration requires a cultural shift within governance frameworks. It demands a reimagining of leadership as a service-oriented role that values the input and contributions of all stakeholders. Such a shift not only strengthens communal bonds but also ensures that governance structures remain relevant and resilient in the face of contemporary challenges.

7.2. *Cultural and Generational Diversity*

Cultural and generational diversity present both challenges and opportunities for governance in a rapidly globalizing world. As societies become increasingly interconnected, the traditional governance models must evolve to accommodate the vast array of cultural perspectives and generational expectations that define contemporary communities. Globalization has brought diverse populations closer together, creating a pressing need for inclusive frameworks that recognize and respect cultural identities. At the same time, demographic shifts, such as the growing presence of younger generations with different values and priorities, call for governance approaches that are adaptable and forward-thinking. Inclusive governance models must actively engage with these dynamics by promoting mutual understanding and respect across cultural and generational lines. Such models should encourage dialogue that bridges divides and ensures that diverse voices are not only heard but also valued in decision-making processes. Younger generations, often more attuned to issues like technological change, social justice, and environmental sustainability, bring fresh perspectives that can enrich governance practices. Meanwhile, older generations contribute wisdom and stability, offering a balance that can guide thoughtful and informed leadership (Kharroubi, 2021).



To thrive in this environment, governance structures must shift from rigid, one-size-fits-all systems to flexible, participatory approaches. This requires leaders who can navigate complex cultural landscapes and intergenerational differences with empathy and vision. Indeed, governance can achieve solutions that are not only more equitable but also more innovative by creating spaces where diverse perspectives converge and collaborate, while reflecting the shared experiences and aspirations of a pluralistic society

7.3. *Transparency and Accountability*

Transparency and accountability are foundational principles of effective governance, playing a critical role in maintaining trust and ensuring that institutions fulfill their missions responsibly. Fiscal and administrative transparency, in particular, are essential for building confidence among stakeholders, as they provide clear insights into how resources are managed and decisions are made. When institutions operate with openness, they demonstrate their commitment to ethical practices and reinforce their legitimacy in the eyes of the communities they serve. Financial transparency ensures that resources are allocated in alignment with the organization's stated mission and priorities (Karsono, 2023). Indeed, by the act of openly sharing budgets, expenditures, and funding sources, institutions can eliminate ambiguity and reduce the risk of mismanagement or corruption. This not only strengthens internal integrity but also bolsters public trust, as stakeholders are able to see that their contributions – whether financial or otherwise – are being utilized effectively for the common good. Similarly, administrative transparency involves clear communication about decision-making processes, goals, and policies. This openness allows stakeholders to feel informed and included, creating an environment where collaboration and mutual respect thrive (Chowdhury & Panday, 2018).

Accountability complements transparency by holding leaders and decision-makers responsible for their actions. Effective governance requires mechanisms for oversight, evaluation, and feedback to ensure that institutional goals are met and that errors or inefficiencies are addressed promptly. Together, transparency and accountability form a dynamic partnership that enhances organizational performance and credibility. When institutions uphold these values, they build trust not only within their own communities but also with external partners and broader society, enabling them to pursue their missions with integrity and impact (Karsono, 2023).



8. Relational Models and Service of Authority

8.1. *Fraternal Dynamics*

The shift from hierarchical to fraternal models of governance represents a significant transformation in the way authority is exercised and relationships are cultivated within organizations, particularly religious institutions (Ossai, 2015). This approach reflects the principles outlined in *Perfectae Caritatis*, the Vatican II document that emphasizes the importance of building balanced community, mutual support, and shared responsibility. Fraternal governance moves away from the traditional top-down structures of authority, which often prioritize control and command, toward models that are rooted in dialogue, collaboration, and co-responsibility. At the heart of fraternal dynamics lies the belief that authority should serve the community rather than dominate it. This perspective aligns leadership with the values of humility, service, and inclusivity. Leaders in a fraternal governance model are called to facilitate relationships, encourage participation, and create spaces where every individual feels valued and empowered to contribute. This transition requires a shift in mindset, from viewing authority as a position of power to understanding it as a service-oriented role aimed at strengthening communal bonds and advancing collective goals (Pope Paul VI, 1965).

Fraternal governance not only enhances relationships within an organization but also reinforces its foundational mission. Through an effort at nurturing trust and mutual support, it creates a culture where individuals are more likely to collaborate and work toward shared objectives. This model also encourages transparency, as open communication and mutual accountability are central to its success. By and large, fraternal governance reflects a commitment to living out the principles of solidarity and unity, ensuring that leadership is exercised in a way that prioritizes the well-being and growth of the entire community (Karsono, 2023).

8.2. *Service-Oriented Leadership*

Service-oriented leadership redefines authority as a ministry of accompaniment, particularly within religious life, where the exercise of leadership is deeply rooted in the principles of dialogue, discernment, and humility. Rather than being perceived as a position of dominance or control, authority in this model is understood as a means of guiding and supporting others on their spiritual and communal journey. This approach shifts the focus from command to service, recognizing that true leadership involves walking alongside others and fostering their growth, both individually and collectively. Dialogue plays a central role in service-oriented leadership, as it encourages open communication and mutual



understanding (Pilani, 2023). Leaders are called to listen actively to the concerns, experiences, and insights of those they serve, creating an environment of trust and collaboration (Kanu & Paul, 2024; Pilani 2022). This approach not only strengthens relationships but also ensures that decisions are informed by diverse perspectives, encouraging a sense of shared ownership and co-responsibility within the community.

Discernment is another key aspect of this leadership model, which emphasizes the importance of thoughtful reflection and prayerful consideration in decision-making. Service-oriented leaders are tasked with guiding their communities through complex challenges and uncertainties, ensuring that choices align with the values and mission of the organization. Through prioritizing discernment, leaders demonstrate their commitment to acting with integrity and wisdom, always seeking what is best for the community as a whole. Humility is the foundation of service-oriented leadership, as it calls leaders to recognize their role as servants rather than rulers. This requires a willingness to prioritize the needs of others, acknowledge personal limitations, and remain open to learning and growth. In doing so, leaders embody the spirit of selflessness and compassion that lies at the heart of religious life, inspiring others to follow their example (Kanu et al., 2024). In essence, service-oriented leadership transforms authority into an expression of love and care, securing an environment where all members feel valued, supported, and empowered to contribute to the community's mission. It is a model that reflects the highest ideals of leadership, rooted in the principles of humility, dialogue, and discernment.

8.3. *Role of Chapters and Councils*

Chapters and councils serve as essential components of governance, particularly within religious and communal organizations. They engender collective discernment and decision-making processes that value individual contributions and charisms. These bodies provide structured forums where members come together to deliberate on important matters, ensuring that decisions are made in a collaborative and inclusive manner. Their role is not simply administrative but deeply reflective of the communal and spiritual dimensions of governance, aligning the organization's actions with its core values and mission. Chapters, often composed of representatives from the broader community, function as a space for dialogue and shared discernment. They provide an opportunity for members to collectively assess the organization's direction, evaluate challenges, and determine priorities (McDonough, 2003). Through this process, chapters promote co-responsibility by encouraging all members to participate in shaping the future of the community. This participatory



model of governance helps to balance the exercise of authority, ensuring that decisions are not imposed from above but emerge from the collective wisdom and shared experiences of the group.

Councils, on the other hand, often operate as smaller, more continuous advisory or decision-making bodies that support leaders in the day-to-day governance of the organization. This inclusion of individuals to diverse perspectives and charisms, councils ensure that decisions are well-rounded and reflective of the community's needs and aspirations. These bodies play a crucial role in maintaining accountability and transparency, as their deliberations involve collaboration, critical thinking, and mutual respect. They provide a mechanism for checks and balances, safeguarding against the risks of authoritarianism and ensuring that leadership remains service-oriented and mission-driven. Both chapters and councils embody the principles of shared responsibility and subsidiarity, where decisions are made at the most appropriate level, respecting the gifts and insights of each member (Connors, 2011).. This approach not only enhances the quality of governance but also strengthens the sense of unity and belonging within the community. In fact, chapters and councils ensure that governance is both effective and deeply rooted in the spiritual and relational foundations of the organization, by valuing individual charisms and fostering a culture of dialogue.

9. Future Directions in Governance

9.1. Canonical and Theological Integration

Future directions in governance, particularly within religious and ecclesiastical settings, call for a deeper and more harmonious integration of canonical norms and theological insights. Effective governance must navigate the delicate balance between fidelity to established laws and adaptability to contemporary challenges (Hamrlik, 2011). Canonical norms provide the structural and legal framework necessary for order and consistency, while theological insights bring depth, meaning, and spiritual discernment to governance practices. Together, these two dimensions complement each other, ensuring that governance remains grounded in tradition while also being responsive to the needs of the present and future. The integration of canonical and theological elements allows governance to maintain fidelity to the core mission and identity of an institution. Canonical norms, rooted in centuries of ecclesiastical tradition, ensure that governance operates within a structured and ethical framework, preserving the integrity of the organization (Karsono, 2023). At the same time, theological insights bring a dynamic and reflective dimension, encouraging leaders to discern how best to apply these norms in light of contemporary circumstances and the evolving needs of the community



(Nell, 2024). This interplay between law and theology strengthens a governance model that is both principled and flexible, enabling institutions to remain relevant without compromising their foundational values.

Such integration also encourages a more holistic approach to decision-making. By considering both the legal and spiritual dimensions of governance, leaders can address issues with greater depth and clarity. This approach considers the well-being of the community while ensuring that decisions align with both the letter and the spirit of canonical law. Moreover, it empowers leaders to navigate complex situations with confidence, drawing on the richness of theological reflection to complement the legal tools at their disposal. In practice, achieving this balance requires ongoing dialogue between canonical experts and theologians, as well as a commitment to ongoing education and formation for leaders. True and sincere collaboration between these disciplines can aid governance structures to evolve to meet new challenges while remaining faithful to their spiritual and moral commitments. This harmonious integration ultimately strengthens governance, making it more resilient, adaptable, and reflective of the mission it serves.

9.2. *Adapting Governance Models*

Adapting governance models to meet contemporary challenges requires innovative approaches that balance the demands of modernity with respect for traditional values. Participatory leadership and intercultural dialogue are two key strategies that enable organizations, particularly religious and communal ones, to remain relevant and effective in a rapidly changing world. These approaches promote inclusivity, shared responsibility, and open communication, which promotes governance systems that are more responsive, equitable, and reflective of the diverse communities they serve (Kanu, & Paul, 2024). Participatory leadership shifts the focus from top-down authority to collaborative decision-making, where all members of a community have a voice and share in the responsibility for governance (Lya et al., 2021). When individuals are involved in active decision-making process and participatory leadership there is a sense of ownership and empowerment, ensuring that governance is not only more inclusive but also more effective. This approach enables communities to draw on the collective wisdom and unique contributions of their members, creating solutions that are both innovative and grounded in the lived experiences of the group. It also reinforces accountability and transparency, as decisions are made through dialogue and consensus rather than imposed unilaterally.

Intercultural dialogue further enhances governance models by addressing the growing diversity within communities and organizations.



Globalization and demographic shifts have brought together individuals from a wide range of cultural backgrounds, each with unique perspectives and values. Effective governance must embrace this diversity, creating spaces for dialogue that build mutual understanding and respect. Intercultural dialogue not only helps to resolve conflicts and bridge cultural gaps but also enriches decision-making by incorporating diverse viewpoints and traditions. This approach aligns with the principle of respecting traditional values while adapting to new realities, as it allows governance to evolve in a way that honors the past while embracing the future (Temitope, 2023). This integration of participatory leadership and intercultural dialogue can aid governance models to become more dynamic and resilient. These innovative approaches ensure that governance remains rooted in traditional values such as solidarity, co-responsibility, and service, while also addressing the complexities of contemporary life. They provide a pathway for organizations to navigate change with integrity, helps communities that are unified, adaptable, and equipped to face the challenges of the future.

9.3. *Promotion of Collaboration*

Encouraging and promoting collaboration among religious institutes, dioceses, and the universal Church is essential for creating a more unified and effective approach to governance and mission. This collaboration requires a commitment to ongoing dialogue, a shared vision, and mutual respect, ensuring that all parts of the Church work together harmoniously while respecting their distinct roles and contributions (McDonough, 2003). Through the strengthening of relationships across these entities, the Church can better address contemporary challenges and fulfill its mission with greater unity and purpose. Dialogue lies at the heart of collaboration, serving as the foundation for understanding and cooperation. Regular communication between religious institutes, diocesan leadership, and the universal Church aids a culture of openness and trust, where concerns can be voiced, insights shared, and common goals identified. Such dialogue allows each entity to contribute its unique perspective and charism to the broader mission, while also facilitating the resolution of conflicts and misunderstandings (Kanu Pilani, 2025). Effective communication ensures that all parties remain aligned in their efforts and rooted in their shared faith.

A shared vision further strengthens collaboration by providing a unifying goal that transcends individual interests or priorities. This vision, grounded in the Gospel and the Church's mission, helps to align the efforts of religious institutes, dioceses, and the universal Church, ensuring that their work is coordinated and complementary. Through focusing on common



objectives, such as evangelization, social justice, or pastoral care, these entities can pool resources and expertise to achieve outcomes that might not be possible independently. A shared vision also inspires a sense of solidarity, reminding all members of their interconnectedness and their responsibility to support one another. Mutual respect is equally crucial, as it ensures that collaboration is characterized by equality and recognition of each entity's unique gifts and contributions (Tracey, 2012). Religious institutes bring their distinct charisms, rooted in specific spiritual traditions and ministries, while diocesan structures provide local leadership and pastoral care. The universal Church, in turn, offers guidance and unity through its overarching authority and vision. Respecting these roles and valuing each entity's contributions increases a spirit of co-responsibility and partnership, where all voices are heard, and all contributions are valued.

Through ongoing dialogue, a shared vision, and mutual respect, the Church can build stronger relationships among its various entities, ensuring that governance and mission are carried out in a way that reflects both unity and diversity. This collaborative spirit not only enhances the effectiveness of the Church's work but also serves as a powerful witness to the world of what can be achieved through genuine partnership and solidarity.

Conclusion

This study underscores the critical importance of integrating canonical and theological perspectives in the governance of consecrated life. Through an exploration of foundational norms, governance structures, and theological frameworks, it highlights how authority, obedience, and co-responsibility can align to reflect the Church's mission of unity and service. The research demonstrates that effective governance not only safeguards the charisms and identities of religious institutes but also nurtures adaptability in addressing contemporary challenges such as cultural diversity, generational shifts, and demands for greater participation. Through advocating for innovative approaches such as participatory leadership and intercultural dialogue, this paper contributes to the ongoing renewal of governance practices in religious life. Ultimately, it calls for governance models that embody the Gospel's principles of service, fraternity, and inclusivity, ensuring that the consecrated life continues to be a vibrant and prophetic witness in the world.

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