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SPIRITUAL AND PASTORAL NATURE OF THE AUTHORITY OF THE SUPERIORS IN RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES (CCEO C. 421: CIC CC. 618, 619)

Rosmin, SH[♦]

Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore

Abstract

Religious life is usually being understood as a life of total submission of oneself to God and superiors. Jesus came to the world as a servant leader. Thus, religious superiors are called to follow the footstep of Jesus, the master. This article outlines a different parameter for judging religious authority which goes after a servant leadership model of Jesus Christ. This reverse perspective of religious authority where the superiors reach out to the community members as a servant of God which strengthens the fraternal communion characterises the spirit of the codes of canon law. Spiritual nature and pastoral character of religious authority is clearly mentioned in the canons of both codes of canon law (canon 421 of CCEO and canons 618 and 619 of CIC) which are more theological and pastoral than juridical. The article examines the obligation of the religious superiors according to the canon 421 of CCEO and canons 618 and 619 of CIC and attempts to present an ideal kind of religious authority where an ambience of peace, fraternity and mutual self-giving is fostered and promoted.

♦**Sr Dr Rosmin Cheruvilparambil, SH** is a member of the Sacred Heart Congregation, Pala Province, Kerala, India. She obtained a licentiate in Oriental Canon Law from Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram Bengaluru and a doctorate from the Pontifical Oriental Institute Rome in 2012. Her thesis, "Oriental Legislation on Community Life in Religious Institutes" was published by the Dharmaram Canonical Studies, Bengaluru, in 2015. She served as judge in the eparchial tribunal of Pala, Kerala and now serves as the defender of bond in the eparchial tribunal of the eparchy of Mandya-Bengaluru. She is an assistant professor at the Institute of Oriental Canon Law, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bengaluru and a visiting lecturer in various formation centres. Email: csrrosmin@gmail.com

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Introduction

Religious life in the Church has never been static. Right from its very inception it has been renewing and refreshing itself responding to the needs and signs of the times in the Church and in the world. Hence, the notion of superior or moderator of religious community as we see it today is the result of a continuous and constant evolution through various phases of history. Moreover, corresponding to the renewal envisaged by the Second Vatican Council, the role of the superiors in religious institutes reassumed its spiritual and pastoral character. More than any other offices in the Church, the office of superiors of religious institutes are to be the embodiment of the ministerial aspect (*diakonia*) or the service-style of authority in the Church. Further, it is to be exercised in a fraternal and spiritual manner since the very office is to strengthen the fraternal communion and spiritual nourishment of the members. This renewal is reflected in the new Codes,¹ especially in those canons which speak about the rights and obligations of the superiors towards the members of the institute. The present article is a humble attempt to examine this obligation of the religious superiors according to the canon 421 of CCEO and canons 618 and 619 of CIC. These canons are more theological and pastoral than juridical and have their sources in the teachings of Vatican II.²

1. The Notion of Superior in Religious Institutes

Every religious community is a group of persons seeking a common end through a common way of life and action. This essential social and community nature makes inevitable the need of direction and leadership in the religious institutes to determine the ways and means, to allot functions, to establish discipline, to preside over community assemblies, and to redress grievances. Vatican II taught that after the example of Jesus Christ and moved by the Holy Spirit, the religious “subject themselves in faith to those who hold God’s place, their superiors” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). According to CIC c. 608, a religious community is to live “under the authority of a superior designated according to the norms of law.” In defining the religious

¹The *Code of Canon Law* of 1983 (CIC) and the *Code of Canons of the Eastern Churches* of 1990 (CCEO).

²Especially no. 14 of the Second Vatican Council Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC).

state, CCEO specifies that the religious should lead their lives “under a legitimate superior” (CCEO c. 410). All these references indicate the essential role of the superior in religious institutes.

All religious are subject to the Roman Pontiff as their “highest superior” (CCEO c. 412 §1). However, other external hierarchical authorities do not come under the designation “superior” (CCEO c. 418 §2). Therefore, under the title “superiors” come the internal authorities who exercise the ministry of leadership with that power, that is determined by law, in the governance of the religious (CIC c. 596 §1; CCEO cc. 441 §1, 511 §1). They are primarily the “major superiors,” who govern an entire institute, or a province, or a part equivalent to a province, or an autonomous house (CIC c. 620: CCEO c. 418 §1).

The titles used in CIC to denote the major superiors are: “the supreme moderator” (CIC c. 622),³ “provincial superior” (CIC c. 1427 §1), “abbot primate” (CIC c. 620, 1405 §2, 2^o),⁴ “abbot superior” (CIC cc. 620, 1427 §§1-2, 1438, 3^o),⁵ “local abbot of autonomous monastery” (CIC c. 1427 §1, 1438, 3^o), and “moderator of an autonomous house” (CIC c. 613).⁶ In CCEO, the major superiors are: “the superior general” (CCEO cc. 418 §1, 419 §1),⁷ “president of a monastic confederation” (CCEO cc. 418 §1, 439; 441 §3, 418 §1, 419 §1),⁸

³“The supreme moderator has authority over all provinces, houses and members of an institutes, to be exercised in accordance with the institute’s own law” (CIC c. 622). This term is found in CIC cc. 592 §1, 616 §1, 622, 624 §1, 625 §§1&2, 631 §1, 686 §§1&3, 688 §2, 699 §1, 690 §1, 691 §1, 698, 727, 717 §2, 743, 744 §1, 745, 1405 §3, 2^o.

⁴Abbot Primate is the head of all Benedictine monasteries, elected by the congress of Benedictine abbots.

⁵Abbot superior means the superior of a monastic congregation.

⁶Abbot is the name and title of the superior of an autonomous monastery of one of the old monastic orders such as the Benedictines, Camaldolese, Vallombrosians, and Cistercians. The abbot is, first of all, the religious superior of his community. However, an abbot of a territorial abbacy is also entrusted with the care of a certain portion of the people of God, who governs it in the manner of a diocesan bishop as its proper pastor (CIC c. 370). The term is derived from the Hebrew, “Abba,” meaning “father.” In the earliest years of Oriental monasticism, this title was employed to the hermits who guided and taught the younger monks, who lived under their direction. It had, thus originally, the idea of the spiritual fatherhood. Gradually, as religious state began to have established rules and structures, it developed into the juridical office of abbot, vested with authority. The monastic rules, especially that of St Benedict, introduced the term into Western canon law and liturgy. The abbot primate is the head of the modern Benedictine confederation (*New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Second Edition, s.v. “Abbot”). While CIC retains its usage in canon law, it is not found in CCEO.

⁷One who governs an entire order or congregation, in CCEO.

⁸One who governs a confederation of several monasteries *sui iuris*, in CCEO.

“provincial superior” (CCEO c. 418), the superior of a monastery *sui iuris* (CCEO c. 418 §1), and those who have powers like that of provincial superiors (CCEO c. 418 §1). The vicars of these persons, i.e., “those persons designated by the institute’s proper law to take the place of an absent or impeded major superior,”⁹ are also designated as major superiors in both Codes (CIC c. 620; CCEO c. 418 §1).

The local superiors also come under the common title “superiors.” A local superior in the proper sense is understood as the one who undertakes the governance of at least a canonically erected house of an order or congregation. He/she possesses authority, which is given by universal and proper law and not merely by the act of another.¹⁰ They are subjected to their major superiors in all those matters prescribed into the common law and particular law of the institute. Local superiors are appointed or elected according to the provisions given in the particular law of each institute.¹¹

2. The Fraternal and Spiritual Role of the Superior towards the Members (CCEO c. 421; CIC cc. 618-619)

The obligation of religious superiors to the members entrusted to their care is clear in CCEO c.421. It states:

Superiors are bound by the grave obligation to take care that the members entrusted to them arrange their life in accord with their own typicon or statutes; superiors are to help the members by example and encouragement in attaining the purpose of the religious state; they are to meet the personal needs of the members appropriately, solicitously to care for and visit the sick, to correct the restless, to console the faint of heart, and to be patient to be all.

The content of this Eastern canon is found in two canons in the Latin Code: canons 618 and 619. These canons complement to the Eastern canon by providing a theological description of the office of the superiors.

CIC c. 618: The authority which Superiors receive from God through the ministry of the Church is to be exercised by them in a spirit of service. In fulfilling their office they are to be docile to the will of God, and are to govern those subject to them as children of God. By their reverence for the human person, they are to promote voluntary obedience. They are to

⁹ Rosemary Smith, “The Governance of Institutes (cc. 617-640),” in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, edited by John P. Beal, James A. Coriden and Thomas J. Green, Bangalore: TPI, 2003, 780-805, 782.

¹⁰George Lobo, *New Canon Law for Religious*, Bombay: St Paul Publications, 1986, 51-52.

¹¹John Kochupurackal, *Religious Authority and Power in the Particular Law of the Little Flower Congregation*, Rome: PIO, 1994, 146-47.

listen willingly to their subjects and foster their cooperation for the good of the institute and the Church, without prejudice however to their authority to decide and to command what is to be done.

While the above canon “combines theological, spiritual, and legal understandings of the power exercised by superiors in a religious institute,”¹² the following canon “describes the superior’s threefold office of teaching, sanctifying, and governing, an organization of functions found throughout the code.”¹³

CIC c. 619: Superiors are to devote themselves to their office with diligence. Together with the members entrusted to them, they are to strive to build in Christ a fraternal community, in which God is sought and loved above all. They are therefore frequently to nourish their members with the food of God’s word and lead them to the celebration of liturgy. They are to be an example to the members in cultivating virtue and in observing the laws and traditions proper to the institute. They are to give the members opportune assistance in their personal needs. They are to be solicitous in caring for and visiting the sick; they are to chide the restless, console the faint hearted and be patient with all.

These norms of the universal Church, though canonically formulated, underline the spiritual and pastoral characteristics of the office of the superior in a religious community, in an “exhortative rather than prescriptive tone.”¹⁴ Here, we try to point out the spiritual and pastoral characteristics contained explicitly and implicitly in these canons focusing on the fraternal role of the superior towards his or her brothers and sisters. As seen above, CIC cc. 618-619 and CCEO c. 421 use the term ‘superior’ in a general manner, without distinguishing between the major superiors and the local superiors. What are stated in them are applicable to all the superiors at all levels of all religious institutes.

2.1. The Divine Nature of the Authority of the Superiors

Every “authority required by the moral order derives from God” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1899; cf. Rom 13:1). From its very beginning, the Church recognized that the authority exercised in it by those empowered to preside over the assemblies, to decide points of conflict, to administer common goods, etc., is received from God through Christ and exercised under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Thus, authority in the Church is holy in its origin, goal, conditions and exercise. It is so not only with regard to those in hierarchy but also with regard to those who fulfil the ministry of leadership in

¹²Smith, “The Governance of Institutes (cc. 617–640),” 781.

¹³Smith, “The Governance of Institutes (cc. 617–640),” 782.

¹⁴Smith, “The Governance of Institutes (cc. 617–640),” 782.

religious institutes.¹⁵ Therefore, the Latin Code explicitly states that the authority of the superiors is received “from God” (CIC c. 618). In another canon, CIC declares that the superiors “act in the place of God” (CIC c. 601).¹⁶

God alone is the source of all authority, and He gives this authority to some individuals as a charism, or a spiritual reality for some special purpose in a community. In that way authority in a religious institute is a juridical as well as spiritual reality.¹⁷ From theological and canonical perspective, a religious superior is representing God (CIC c. 601; *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). Superiors should be aware of the divine dimension of their authority and should exercise it as a divine providence for the members as well as for the institute.

2.2. Receiving the Authority through the Ministry of the Church

Every religious institute comes into existence through the approval of the Church. Its superiors are endowed with that authority over the members and on other things which is defined in the universal/common law and in the proper statutes (CIC c. 596 §1; CCEO c. 511 §1). The content of the authority and the manner of its exercise, the complex of rights and obligations, and the proper role and functions, belonging to the office of superior, are determined by the universal/common laws of the Church and also by the Rule of each and every religious institute, approbated by the competent ecclesiastical authorities.¹⁸

Therefore, the authority is received by the superiors “through the ministry of the Church” (CIC c. 618). It is conferred by the Church at the time of establishing each institute and by the approval of its constitutions. It is the authority invested in superiors for the duration of their term of office (*Essential Elements*, 49).¹⁹ It is received through

¹⁵Authors used to call this power, “Public Dominative Power” as distinguished from “Private Dominative Power” which parents exercise over their children. Thomas Pazhayampallil, *Pastoral Guide*, vol. III, *A Handbook on the Latin and Oriental Codes of Canon Law*, Bangalore: Kristu Jyoti Publications, 2004, 860.

¹⁶CCEO does not make any such explicit statements about the divine nature of the authority of the superiors, however it is a commonly accepted conception from the very beginning of religious life.

¹⁷Mary Linscott, “Leadership, Authority and Religious Government,” edited by David L. Flaming, Elizabeth McDonough, *The Church and Consecrated Life*, USA: Review for Religious, 1996, 150-177, at 151.

¹⁸The statutes of an institute of diocesan/eparchial right is approved by the diocesan/eparchial bishop...

¹⁹Sharon Holland, “What is Meant by the Personal Authority of Religious Superiors,” in *Selected Issues in Religious Law*, edited by Patrick J. Cogan, Washington: Canon Law Society of America, 1997, 10-11, 10.

the Church and is being exercised in the Church. Its reception and exercise require as well as enjoy the sanction of the laws of the Church.

2.3. Exercising the Authority in the Spirit of Service

The Latin Code reminds that the religious superiors must exercise their authority “in a spirit of service” (CIC c. 618). The Christological element inherent in every authority exercised in the Church inevitably brings forth the ministerial/service (*diakonia*) dimension. “There is no authority in the Church which is not service.”²⁰ The powerful clarifying statement of Pope Francis is applicable to all those who have some leadership role in the Church:

Let us never forget this! For the disciples of Jesus, yesterday, today and always, the only authority is the authority of service, the only power is the power of the cross. As the Master tells us: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave” (Mt 20:25-27).²¹

First of all, superiors’ authority is a service to God: service which obliges them to discover the will of God in order to communicate it to their brothers and sisters. Secondly, their authority is a service to the Church. Superiors, acting as a representative of the Church, are to keep themselves in communion with the Church, to be visible signs uniting the religious to the Church, and expressing the maternal care of the Church to them. Thirdly, the authority of the superiors is a service to the religious institute, to their brothers and sisters. They are invested with duties more than with rights. It is a matter of serving their brethren in the design of father’s love. They are responsible before God, the Church and the institute for the souls of the brethren entrusted to them (cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 14).²²

2.4. Being Docile to the Will of God (CIC c. 618)

Superiors fulfil their leadership ministry as a faithful servant of God by seeking the will of God always and everywhere. The Latin

²⁰According to Elio Gambari, this statement is made by Pope Paul VI on 25 February 1965. However, he does not give the exact source of this statement. See Elio Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, Boston: Daughters of St Paul, 1986, Daughters of St Paul, Boston, 1986, 507.

²¹Francis, Address in Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops, 17 October 2015, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed 27.02.2020).

²²Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, 508.

Code exhorts them to be “docile to the will of God in fulfilling their function” (CIC c. 618). Consecrated life itself is a pilgrimage of *Vultum Dei quaerere* (“to seek the face of God”).²³ Every religious is to inflame within him or her the “longing to find and contemplate God in the heart of the world” (VDQ 2), which would enable him or her to discern the will of God and to be docile to it. Seeking the will of God in a collective manner, that is, together with the brothers or the sisters, is the *raison d'être* of the religious institutes. It is properly that which unites the religious and “make them a family united to Christ.” Superiors “are at the service of this search to ensure that it occurs in sincerity and truth.”²⁴ They are entrusted with the mission of leading the members according to the will of God, of interpreting it to them, and of implementing it in the life and mission of the institute. Therefore, they should be all the more docile to the will of God.

2.5. Governing the Subjects as Children of God and Respecting Their Human Dignity

Vatican II exhorted that the superiors should govern their subjects “as sons of God, respecting their human dignity” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). This conciliar teaching is reiterated in the canonical legislation, which directs the superiors “to govern those, subject to them as children of God” (CIC c. 618). Since all are created in the image and likeness of God, everyone is worthy to be treated and respected well in the community as brothers or sisters. It is all the more expected in the religious communities. Being placed as the head of the community, a superior is to show this love and respect in a praiseworthy manner. Moreover, he or she is also called to promote it. The document on the *Service of Authority and Obedience* clearly states that superiors have to respect the dignity of the members of the community.

Persons in authority are called to promote the dignity of the person, paying attention to each member of the community and to his or her growth, giving to each one the appropriate appreciation and positive consideration, nurturing sincere affection towards all and keeping reserved all that is said in confidence.²⁵

²³Francis, Apostolic Constitution on Women Contemplative Life, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 29 June 2016, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2016/07/22/160722a.html>, hereafter quote VDQ.

²⁴CICLSAL, Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 5 May 2008, Introduction. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsclife/documents/rc_con_ccsclife_doc_20080511_autorita-obbedienza_en.html (accessed on 25/06/2020) 12.

²⁵CICLSAL, Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 13.

Superiors should be ready to accept the members with their uniqueness and limitations. At the deepest level of lives, everyone needs acceptance, recognition and affection. Everybody desires to share success and failures and needs stimulus and support for moulding a better community and a life together.²⁶ Understanding the person and endorsing his or her personal dignity should be part of the religious ideal. Fundamentally the superior should have the courtesy to feel respect for the subject the way he or she is as a human person.²⁷ They have to respect the self-esteem of their subjects in taking decisions about their life, especially when there involve some risky decisions about the member for the good of the whole institute and for the growth of the Church as a whole. Respect for persons would create a climate of trust, docility and openness. Superiors have to respect the personality, freedom and privacy of each member under his/her care. For example, they have to respect the right of privacy of the members regarding the letters to and from the ecclesiastical authorities and superiors (CCEO c. 429).

2.6. Listening to the Subjects as an Effective Way of Exercising the Authority

Vatican II required the superiors to “gladly listen to their subjects” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14). The Latin Code reinstates that requirement as an effective and significant style in administering the office of the superior and states that the superiors “are to listen willingly to their subjects” (CIC c. 618). Listening to the other is a great virtue that one can have and nurture in the social or community life, and especially in the religious life. As a social being, every person desires to be heard and to be understood. Persons in authority will have to cultivate first in themselves an openness for listening to others. They have to listen to their subjects and try to understand them, which is very important to create a peaceful and elated community life. So, the superiors must be a close friend of his or her subject as far as possible so that the subject may feel the openness to share his or her anxieties with the superior. According to Elio Gambari, “an attitude of listening allows the superior to grasp the voice of God in the various ways in which he speaks and especially through the community.”²⁸ Therefore, the superior should listen willingly to his or her subjects and encourage

²⁶Charles Serrao, *I have Come to Serve: Leadership and Growth in Community Living*, Bangalore: Dhyavanava Publications, 2008, 86.

²⁷Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, 509.

²⁸Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, 510.

them to make a personal contribution to the welfare of the community, of the institute, and of the Church.²⁹

Both codes suggest the means, that is, the visitation, to assure the listening (CCEO c. 420, CIC c. 628).³⁰ Visitations are an opportunity for establishing, strengthening and encouraging right relationships within communities and among them in provinces and within the institute as a whole.³¹ However, the dialogical task of the superiors should go beyond the borders of official canonical visitations, which is done purely in accordance with the norms and conditions of the law. They must be so gentle in dealing with personal matters of the members. It should be done with lot of care and warmth so as to ensure maximum cooperation and togetherness in the community especially on matters connected with confidentiality.³² Superiors shall not reveal any confidential matters of a subject to another without his or her consent. This is concerning the public propriety of the common living. They must listen enthusiastically and endorse the union of the energies of all for the good of the institute and of the Church.

2.7. Fostering the Cooperation for the Good of the Institute and the Church

Vatican II and CIC teaches that the superiors are to foster the cooperation of their subjects for the good of the institute and of the Church (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 14; CIC c. 618). The role and duty of authority in the Church is to enhance and maintain unity in charity and to lead all the members of the community to the freedom of the children of God. As the servants of the people of God, those who hold authority in the Church have the obligation to promote the unity of love. In the same manner, keeping the community together is a constant part of the responsibility of religious superiors.

Superior is the one who skilfully and adequately arranges and shares the ministries of the members of the community in a way that will enable them to foster in their call and enhance the ministry of the Church.³³ At the same time, cooperating with the superior, the members of an institute should as far as possible avail themselves to the different ministries of the institute so as to take the charism of the same far and wide. All the members of the community should

²⁹Kochupurackal, *Religious Authority and Power in the Particular Law of the Little Flower Congregation*, 89.

³⁰Lobo, *New Canon Law for Religious*, 58.

³¹Sharon L. Holland, "Visitation in Religious Institutes: A Service of Communion," *CLSA Proceedings* 61(1999) 161-178, 177.

³²Lobo, *New Canon Law for Religious*, 58.

³³Jean Beyer, "Missioni Dei Superiori locali," in *Vita Consecrata* 4 (1983) 239-240.

consider the work for the good of the institute as a common responsibility. Superior should act for fostering the cooperation of the members in order to achieve this goal.

2.8. Striving to Build a Fraternal Community

CIC c. 619 states that together with the members entrusted to them, the superiors “are to strive to build in Christ a fraternal community, in which God is sought and loved above all.” One of the primary goals of the exercise of religious power is that of building a community of brothers or sisters in Christ in which God is sought after and loved before all else.³⁴ According to CIC c. 602, fraternal life means the communion of all the members of an institute as brothers or sisters, which unites them as “a special family in Christ,” which becomes a mutual support for all to fulfil their vocation, and which is rooted in charity. The role of authority is to guide, inspire and encourage the subjects, so that an environment of such a communion can be fostered, where every member can facilitate personal spiritual growth and the fulfilment of the apostolic mission. They are called to build a united community in Christ, to enhance family spirit and discernment in a community. In fulfilling the task of the building of fraternal life in community, religious authority becomes essentially pastoral by its nature.³⁵

In religious institutes, leadership is characterized as being at the service of fraternity. The document *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* describes the superiors’ task as the spiritual, communal and apostolic animation of the community.³⁶ Superiors with their leadership qualities and with the grace from God are to lead the community in a spirit of companionship.³⁷ Being a member of a community each one has to associate his or her personal charism along with the task of the community.

2.9. Nourishing the Members with the Word of God and Sacraments

In every religious community, it is God who is to be “sought and loved above all.” For that, superiors are “to nourish their members with the food of God’s word and lead them to the celebration of the liturgy” (CIC c. 619). It is the Word of God and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist that nourishes the religious with spiritual

³⁴CICLSAL, Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 14, c.

³⁵CICLSAL, Instruction, *The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 14, c.

³⁶CICLSAL, Instruction on Fraternal Life in Community, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, 2 February 1994, 50 a. http://w2.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_02021994_fraternal-life-in-community_en.htm (accessed on 05/06/2020).

³⁷Serrao, *I have Come to Serve: Leadership and Growth in Community Living*, 7.

gifts. Every religious is called to listen conscientiously to the Word of God and live a life worthy of it.³⁸ In responding to this call in a worthy manner, the superiors can guide and help the religious. While respecting their individual freedom in building up their inner spiritual life, superiors have a moral obligation to correct and encourage the subjects in their attempts to attain spiritual maturity, by facilitating the reception of sacraments, providing sufficient time for prayer life and spiritual exercises and offering personnel and material for spiritual learning.

Superiors of religious institutes have to arrange for the members, the opportunities to study and deepen into the Word of God and encourage them to live the gospel values. Liturgical life is the centre of the religious life and the sublime manifestation of common life. Superiors are called “to guarantee to the community the time for and the quality of prayer, looking after the community’s daily faithfulness to prayer.”³⁹ Both Codes are very clear in this regard that superiors are to take care and make sure that, all members are participating daily in the Divine Liturgy (CCEO c. 473; CIC c. 663), which will nurture their spiritual life more effectively and will strengthen their souls with ever new energies.⁴⁰ It is the duty of the religious superior to make all necessary arrangements in the community in order to facilitate liturgical celebrations in the community and animate the members for the meaningful and effective participation in it.⁴¹ Hence the good example and encouragement from the part of the superior in the liturgical services becomes an inspiration and animation for the whole community to seek God in the liturgical celebrations.

2.10. Being a Model to the Members

Superiors “are to be an example to the members in cultivating virtue and in observing the laws and traditions proper to the institute” (CIC c. 619). According to the Eastern Code, the superiors “are to help the members by example and encouragement in attaining the purpose of the religious state” (CCEO c. 421). Superiors are urged to become a living example of Christian virtues and religious discipline to inspire and motivate their subjects. They should be regular and exemplary. Their actions and lifestyles are offered as example of integrity and commitment.⁴² It is important to

³⁸Serrao, *I have Come to Serve: Leadership and Growth in Community Living*, 16.

³⁹CICLSAL, *Instruction, The Service of Authority and Obedience*, 13b.

⁴⁰Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, 362.

⁴¹Paul Marie de la Croix, *The Superior and the Sanctification of her Religious in Religious Life I: Religious Sisters*, West Minister: The Newman Press, 1962, 101-146, 106.

⁴²Serrao, *I have Come to Serve: Leadership and Growth in Community Living*, 68.

see that the head of a religious institute or community is credible, transparent, humble, considerate, approachable, respectful and most importantly one who is spiritually, intellectually and psychologically balanced and who will lead others by exemplary religious life according to the spirit and charism of the institute.⁴³ To be in the position of promoting religious life, the superiors have to cultivate in themselves the virtues of true Christian life and lead their life in accordance with the rules and other norms of religious life.

2.11. Meeting the Personal Needs of the Members and Caring for the Sick

Both Codes ask the superiors “to give the members opportune assistance in their personal needs” (CIC c. 619; CCEO c. 421). This appeal reminds the superiors the pastoral character of their office. A good superior must focus on what needs to be done for others ahead of their personal preferences. His or her subjects may have different kinds of needs and desires that are both spiritual and physical. Superiors are obliged to supply those needs which are necessary to fulfil the purpose of their vocation as claimed in CIC c. 670, that is, the assistance given to the members to facilitate the duty of fidelity to the vocation.⁴⁴ The superior is also to learn the spiritual and temporal needs and desires of the members and to grant these according to the sound principles of the religious life, the common good and that of the individual. Members of the community should feel the freedom to speak openly about their needs to the superiors and the superiors must understand them and do what is necessary for them.

Both the Codes also direct the superiors that they are “to be solicitous in caring for and visiting the sick” (CIC c. 619; CCEO c. 421). This is also a part of the pastoral function of the superiors and is an important obligation. Superiors are to exhibit paternal care and should become a force for all those who are weak in the community especially the sick. The sick always need more and special care from others. Being solicitous in caring for and visit the sick especially those who are particularly in need, is an urgent necessity, since the percentage of elderly consecrated persons are increasing (*Vita Consecrata*, 44). The members owe a great deal of care and concern

⁴³Agnes Okoye, “The Office of Religious Superior in the Light of the Universal Law and the Proper Law of the Congregation of the Daughters of Divine Love,” *Commentarium pro Religiosis et Missionariis* 94 (2013) 219.

⁴⁴D.J. Andres, “Superiors and Councils cc.617-630,” in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, edited by Angel Marzoa & Others, vol II/2, Canada: Wilson& Lafleur, 2004, 1616-1661, 1627.

from the superior and institute since they sacrificed their life for the greater glory of the Church and growth of the institute.⁴⁵

2.13. Correct the Restless and Console the Faint Hearted

The superiors are instructed, in both Codes, “to correct the restless” and “to console the fainthearted” (CIC c. 619; CCEO c. 421). These functions reinstate the spiritual and pastoral role of the superiors in religious communities. Correcting the erring member is the fundamental task of the superior, which can be found traditionally in the religious life.⁴⁶ It is a personal duty of the superior and it can be carried out in private or in public, but always with the highest caution and discretion, respecting the dignity of the person and observing the norms of law. The integral well-being of the institute and the Church as well as of the members as consecrated people is one of the superior’s top priorities. Had superiors evaded this difficult role of fraternal correction then they have no right to remain in office because they have failed in their fundamental duty of working towards the well-being of the congregation and the Church.⁴⁷ CCEO c. 420 gives the provisions to the superiors to hear the members individually and suggest corrections to those who are restless during the time of canonical visitation. Before taking any action against any of the members, superiors should take the initiative to meet them personally and hear their problems and only if it is needed correct them by imposing some penal remedies or penances.

Console the fainthearted is another duty of the religious superiors. It demands that the superiors should have personal knowledge about their subjects. They must know each member personally and give support to those who are weaker.⁴⁸ There could be some members who are so weak so to the extent that even at small difficulties they lose the temper of their life. Superiors must take extra care for those souls. Such feeble persons need more self-confidence and also encouragement and comfort by the superiors.⁴⁹

2.14. Being Patient with All

Both Codes stipulate that the superiors are “to be patient with all” (CIC c. 619; CCEO c. 421). It is expected from the superiors that they

⁴⁵Andres, “Superiors and Councils cc.617–630,” 1626.

⁴⁶Andres, “Superiors and Councils cc.617–630,” 1627.

⁴⁷Vimanl Tirimanna, “Are Religious Superiors Called to be Politically Correct?,” *Review for Religious* 65 (2006) 166–176.

⁴⁸Andres, “Superiors and Councils cc.617–630,” 1627.

⁴⁹Ignaz Watterott, *Ordensleitung*, trans by A. Simon, *Guidance of Religious: Considerations on the Duties of Religious Superiors*, St Luis: Herder, 1950, 123.

should be tolerant, patient, and thoughtful with everyone, especially with the most restless, fainthearted, critical and disloyal. First of all, a superior has to understand his or her authority as a means to serve his or her brethren which will help him or her to be a person of understanding and tolerance. It leads the community to be in love and companionship.⁵⁰ The superior is obliged to exercise authority according to the mind of God since he or she is God's representative. They have to deal with the members with tender care, mercy, patience and respect for their freedom.⁵¹ Success of religious communities depends mainly on the ability of the superior to understand and to be patient with all the members.

Pope Francis in his meeting with Superior Generals advised in this regard:

In any case, we must never act like managers when faced with a brother's conflict: but our charity must reach out like a gentle touch. When faced by conflict we mustn't react like the priest or the Levite in the parable of the Good Samaritan who simply ignored the problem: we can't avoid conflict but we mustn't remain stuck in it either: we need to tackle it and behave like wise people trying to find possible solutions. Patience and tenderness are the virtues we need. It is painful but it's the only way forward.⁵²

2.15. Help to Attain the Purpose of Religious Life

As the leader of the entire community and of the individual religious, the superior must be a person of holiness and promote others to attain the purpose of religious life. The task of religious superior is more of spiritual and pastoral perspective than administrative. The successful use of authority in the life of religious is understood more by ability of the superior to help the members to attain union with the will of God, which is purpose of religious life. The superior also has an additional responsibility as a spiritual director (CIC c. 630 §5), always protecting the full freedom of religious to open themselves.⁵³ He or she is not merely a caretaker of power, but with the power or authority they are at the service of the purpose of the institute. Religious superiors have to provide the means and favourable conditions for the members to

⁵⁰Andres, "Superiors and Councils cc.617-630," 1627.

⁵¹Agnes Okoye, "The Office of Religious Superior," 218.

⁵²Pope Francis, *Message to the Union of Superiors General held its 82nd General Assembly in the Salesianum in Rome from 27th to 29th November*, Vatican City, https://cppsmissionaries.org/general_curia/news_docs/2013/Pope_Francis_meets_Superiors_General.pdf, accessed on 25/06/2020.

⁵³Gambari, *Religious Life according to Vatican II and the New Code of Canon Law*, 504.

reach the goal of their religious vocation (CIC cc. 610, 670) for superiors have to try to make the community or institute a spiritual family.

Conclusion

I have been trying to explain the spiritual and pastoral nature of the authority of religious superiors. It was an attempt to place the role of the superiors from a reverse perspective, which means to understand the religious authority from the point of view of the superior's duty and obligation towards his or her subjects. Religious obedience from the part of the subjects is being understood as the total submission of the will of the subjects on account of his or her religious profession to the superior. Hence, it is normally being perceived as the sheer and mere responsibility of the subordinate to the superiors. But in reality, both the Codes have designed religious obedience as an act of mutual respect and total offering for the greater glory and growth of the religious institute in particular and Church in common. So religious authority is not merely demanding obedience from the subjects but it is really trying to understand and love the subjects as they are and serve them. A rather compassionate, spiritual and pastoral approach is expected from the superiors towards the subjects and a loving loyalty of the subordinates to their superior. When these reciprocal attitudes and aspects are active and operative, religious life will glitter like gold and shine like a jewel.