



# AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

## Bishops' Committee for Clergy and Religious

### GUIDELINES FOR THE ROLE OF VICAR FOR MEMBERS OF CONSECRATED LIFE

#### PREAMBLE:

Consecrated life<sup>1</sup> has been an integral part of the Church since its very early history. Nevertheless, it was not until the Second Vatican Council that it was recognised as a structure in the Church. *Lumen gentium* 43 situates consecrated life precisely as a structure in the Church with its own place in relation to the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church. However, *Lumen gentium* 44 stresses that, while consecrated life does not enter into the hierarchical structure of the Church, it belongs undeniably to its life and holiness. Consecrated life belongs in the Church not simply in the sense that it operates within the Church, receives grace from the Church and is legally sanctioned by the Church, but in the sense that it shares in a special way in the mystery of the Church, and is one of the organs through which the Church perfects her own life.

The Church charges the diocesan bishop with the pastoral care of all members of his diocese. It sets out especially his right and responsibility to care for members of consecrated life so that some form of co-ordination can renew, create and perfect the many pastoral means of service and animation provided by members of consecrated life within the diocese. This co-ordination can assist in manifesting the gifts of the Spirit in the diocese (see *Mutuae relationes* 52) and in being a living witness to *communio*.

“The word *communio* refers to the essential ‘concern’ from which the Church comes and for which it lives. *Communio* does not designate the structure of the Church but its essence, or as the Council says: its mystery”.<sup>2</sup> Since consecrated life belongs to the mystery of the Church, it therefore actively participates in *communio*. While this implies that the focus is not on structure in the Church it challenges religious institutes to find creative ways to interact with the existing structures to proclaim the Kingdom and spread the Good News of Jesus.

Jesus entered our world and accomplished salvation for all in a unique way in a particular historical moment. He established a relationship of peace and communion with himself in order to bring about a fraternal union among persons. He took all to himself and then, having risen from the dead, sent his Holy Spirit and, through him, set up his Body, which is the Church, to be the sacrament of salvation. Gifted, from Jesus, by the Spirit, we are called to community with the Father and are thus united one with the other and drawn into the Trinitarian mystery. This sense of *communio* is the foundation of order in the Church but also calls for a right relationship between unity and pluriformity. The universal Church exists

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The term “consecrated life” is used in this document rather than “religious” because there are now more new forms recognised in the Church as well as some that are emerging.

<sup>2</sup> W. KASPER, “Church as *Communio*”, in *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 13 (1986), p. 103. For a fuller discussion of *Communio* see CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, paragraphs 9-10. See also POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation VITA CONSECRATA to the Bishops and clergy, religious and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes and all the faithful on the consecrated life and its mission in the Church and in the world*, Chapter II, especially paragraph 46. (Both documents available on the internet. The extracts are attached as an Appendix).

in and through the local Church, that is, the dioceses. Links are forged between the local churches and the universal Church, the Petrine Church (the Church of Rome). *Communio* is the expression of unity among people and between all peoples. Participation in the intra-Trinitarian life is not a private affair but demands external expression in the Mission of Jesus. It is against this understanding of *communio* that the office of a vicar for consecrated life can be seen as one more element in the promotion of unity of consecrated members with the priests, the People of God and, above all, with the bishop as chief pastor in his diocese.

*Mutuae relationes* suggests the advisability of each diocese having an office of Vicar for Religious with duties that could enhance the relationship between the bishop and members of consecrated life. *It is for each diocesan bishop to define clearly the specific functions attaching to the office ( Mutuae relationes 54).*

**TITLE OF THE OFFICE:** The term “consecrated life” has been used in the Code of Canon Law since 1983 to include all forms of consecrated life and their members – religious, secular institutes, hermits and consecrated virgins, as well as new forms which have pontifical approval. Thus the suggestion is that the office now be called Vicar for Consecrated Life. Whether the incumbent is called a “vicar” or not could be decided by each bishop.

**PRINCIPLES:** The following principles would guide and preserve the office of Vicar for Consecrated Life:

1. The office is a tangible sign of *communio* between the bishop and members of consecrated life.
2. The office signifies collaboration between the bishop, the institutes of consecrated life and all members of consecrated life.
3. The office is one of service to the bishop and institutes of consecrated life and the individual members of all forms of consecrated life.
4. The office assists in promoting consecrated life in the local Church both as a possibility for a life choice/vocation and as a sign of the Providence of God in caring for His people.
5. The office provides for a leader, a member of an institute or other form of consecrated life the freedom to make an approach when appropriate, with the assurance of confidentiality and privacy.
6. The office is available to all members of consecrated life who seek its assistance.
7. The bishop appoints to the office after suitable consultation.
8. The office is guided by the appropriate canons in the Code of Canon Law.

**POSITION DESCRIPTION:** The following general duties and responsibilities would form part of a role description for a Vicar for Consecrated Life. Other duties would be determined by each diocese according to its needs and situation.

1. To promote collaboration in the Mission of Jesus between the bishop, the leaders of institutes and all members of consecrated life, including consecrated virgins, hermits and new groups of consecrated life.
2. To promote *communio* between members of consecrated life, priests and lay people for the sake of the Reign of God.
3. To assist in the integration of consecrated life in the pastoral life of the diocese.
4. To maintain an up-to-date mailing list of all consecrated persons ministering or residing in the diocese.
5. To provide assistance to members of consecrated life when requested by the bishop or the members either individually or in groups.
6. To assist in providing canonical advice for members of consecrated life when the need arises.
7. To communicate regularly with institutes and all members of consecrated life especially on issues pertaining to their life in the diocese.
8. To represent the bishop and/or act as his delegate in giving support at celebrations or in times of need when the bishop is not available and when he requests it.
9. To be aware of new groups emerging in the diocese, to support them and assist the bishop in his duty of discernment of new charisms.
10. To act as the Bishop's consultant to persons seeking canonical status in a form of consecrated life
11. To assist new institutes and their members arriving in the diocese and to support members who are withdrawing from the diocese.
12. To be aware of the special needs of members whose institutes have few members in a diocese and of monasteries whose numbers are declining.
13. To attend, as appropriate, diocesan, state and national meetings which promote the wellbeing of institutes of consecrated life and their members.

**REPORTING:** The person in the office will report to the bishop at times that are agreed upon having great respect for the privacy of individuals and the confidentiality demanded in certain situations.

**APPOINTMENT:** The bishop will, in accord with the suggestions in *Mutuae relationes*, consult widely with the institutes to arrive at a suitable appointee for the office. The appointment is the prerogative and responsibility of the bishop.

**REVIEW:** There would need to be a review of the role and the performance of the person in the office at a time agreed to in the contract/agreement of appointment.

**SOME COMMENTS:**

1. The name for the office would be **Office of Vicar for Consecrated Life**. Whether the incumbent is called a “vicar” or not could be decided by each bishop. The office and the role are what are essential.
2. Each diocese would desirably have an Office of Vicar for Consecrated Life. However, this role could be combined with another function in the diocese, that is, it is not necessary for the vicar to be full time. Moreover, several dioceses could combine to share the services of one appointee.
3. The appointee would desirably have a good understanding of Theology and Canon Law as they relate to consecrated life.