Roles and Responsibilities of the General Administration

Introduction

Chapter provides us with the opportunity to re-engage and embrace more fully our understanding of Faithful Witness. During our Pre-Chapter sessions, the Spirit has invited us to reflect on the roles and responsibilities of the General Administration. This reflection directs us to the governance portion of Faithful Witness, titled “Service to Witness.” In essence, as Faithful Witness tells us, authority, especially in governance of a religious institute, is intended to direct its members toward union with God and all people. This authority lies within each member. Let us not forget that we are all human with gifts, talents, needs, expectations, and limitations. One thing is certain: no one is perfect. However, this humanity, with God’s Providence, provides the fertile soil for transformation and grace in the exercise of leadership at every level. It is with this understanding that we look at the framework which Faithful Witness provides.

Individual Sister

Every one of us is called to service; it is inherent in our religious title: “Sisters, Servants.” No matter what responsibilities we are entrusted with, they are all in service to one another and to the people of God. The various governmental structures provided in our Constitutions build on this foundational reality of service. Leadership, as a ministry of service, implies relationship.

As we review with you the structure of Government as it is laid out for us in Faithful Witness, we have chosen to begin with the root and foundation of all relationships in community: us; that is, each individual sister. We read in Faithful Witness that, “Each sister, in her own way, utilizes her gifts to build up the Kingdom of God in the Congregation. Moreover, each sister shall consider it, not only her right, but also her duty to work for the common good” (Government/101).

Each one of us is called to be in relationship with one another with a mindfulness that elicits trust, support, and acceptance which brings about a “unity of spirit.” Every sister is called “to accept the responsibility for the welfare of the Congregation” (FW 163). This is our individual call to leadership.

With each individual sister doing her part to actively assume responsibility for the common good, an atmosphere of love, trust, and unity is established at the local level.

Local Superior

This environment provides a framework in which the local superior can serve as spiritual leader. The local superior is called to be “a prayerful, spiritual leader who consistently promotes love and unity among her sisters” (FW 146).

She “creates, with the help of her community, an atmosphere of love and trust” (FW 150). In her role as spiritual leader, she:

- works collaboratively with her local councilors;
- respects the responsibility of each sister;
encourages and listens willingly to the sisters;
uses her authority in a spirit of loving service;
fosters discussion and dialogue among the sisters;
consults with the regional superior regarding the affairs of the convent and the welfare of the sisters (FW 150, 150.1).

**Regional Government**

The Regional Government is the bridge that facilitates information and communication from the local level to the General Administration and vice versa in our governance model.

In keeping with the principles of subsidiarity and decentralization, the Congregation is divided into regions. The regions are governed by regional superiors, whose authority is delegated by the General Superior. Whereas the General Administration is responsible for the bigger picture: the visioning, the inspiring, the moving forward of the Congregation, the regional superior is responsible for the pastoral care of the sisters in her region, including the spiritual and ministry needs of the individual sisters and of local communities. Each regional has direct contact with the sisters, pastors, administrators, and anyone involved in the ministries of the sisters. Collaborative sharing with the regional superior enables the concerns and needs of the sisters at the local level to be heard. Regional superiors directly address these needs.

**Regional Superior**

The regional superior:

- assumes primary responsibility for the yearly visitation of each local community in her region as mandated in *Faithful Witness* and reports on this visitation to the General Administration;
- follows up on situations that were presented during visitation and at times responding to unexpected events;
- shows compassion in her care of a sister, during the illness of sister, a death in the family and/or in delicate family situations;
- attends the funeral of any sister’s parent or sibling, within a reasonable distance;
- cares for the sisters in her region in Camilla and attends the funerals of sisters in her specific region;
- prepares for Regional Meetings and RCA meetings in conjunction with regional councilors;
- plans the annual Memorial Mass at Camilla for the Congregation with her region;
- prepares the summer letter and retreat offerings for her region;
- acts as a community liaison for a sister and a therapist at times;
assists in the summers at various retreat sites and Camilla;

participates thoroughly in the missioning process of the sisters with the General Administration, assuring the good of the sisters and the ministries in her region.

In addition to these responsibilities, the regional to South America is the legal representative of the Congregation, assuming the responsibilities that this entails.

**General Administration**

We have been speaking about leadership as a *ministry of service* at the various levels of our Government structure. We now want to share with you the role and responsibilities of the General Administration as they serve the needs of the Congregation.

_Faithful Witness_ speaks of the powers and duties of the General Administration: “No aspects of authority are to be more thoroughly emphasized than those of service and responsibility, both of which constitute for the one exercising authority, a sacred duty before God and community” (Government/82).

Leadership as prescribed in our Constitutions involves a group of sisters working together. The gifts, roles, and responsibilities of leadership we discuss today are rarely found in a single person. It is in community that we fully live religious life and it is through the combined gifts of our community leadership that God moves us forward.

As a General Administration comes into office, the sisters meet multiple times to discern how to organize themselves to best carry out the responsibilities entrusted to the Administration. Traditionally, administrative responsibilities have been organized mainly by ministry. Today, administrative responsibilities are becoming increasingly varied and complex which may lead our next administration to discern a different structure for organizing administrative tasks.

The General Administration meets weekly to share information and discuss matters of current importance, bringing each Sister Administrator’s insights to visioning and decision-making. It is significant to note that _Canon Law_ and _Faithful Witness_ set parameters for congregational decision-making, including which matters are consultative and which are deliberative. The General Administration works as a team, with each member sharing what is happening in her particular area. The team engages in discussion on all matters before decisions are made together.

The Congregation is both a legal and a canonical entity. The General Administration is responsible for all matters concerning the Congregation. It is important to remember that in each area of responsibility there are sisters, lay personnel, or committees given responsibility for advisement and day-to-day operations. With this support, the General Administration can make wise and informed decisions on the wide range of matters that affects the Congregation, including:

- All legal, financial, and canonical matters related to the Congregation and its members;
- All matters pertaining to property owned by the Congregation both in the States and in South America;
Strategic planning and visioning for the future; consultation with advisers of various expertise to gather needed information and suggestions on topics under consideration by the Administration;

All Sponsored Works such as Immaculata University, our Academies, the Spirituality and Conference Centers and the Literacy Centers, and institutions such as Camilla, Stone Harbor, and Villa Maria House of Studies;

Representing the Congregation on Boards and organizations such as: LCWR, OSP IHM, Cristo Rey High School, Mother of Mercy House, St. John Vianney Center;

Communication with bishops and other diocesan offices regarding either community members or congregational matters;

Assigning each sister to a local community and ministry; overseeing all ministries of our sisters and housing for our sisters;

Establishing relationships with each individual sister and being present to support her in any way possible;

Providing services needed by our sisters, such as annual retreats, and special care of senior sisters;

The Initial and Ongoing formation of our members; matters involved in exclaustration and separation of members and any allegations of misconduct;

Appointing regionals and using their advisement for administrative decisions; supervising all personnel who assist the administration in their tasks;

All congregational meetings, including Convocation and Corporation, Pre-Chapter and Chapter gatherings;

Liaison with Chapter committees and Implementation of Chapter directives;

Offering guidelines and giving approval for Mission Advancement initiatives; Overseeing Ministry Advisement efforts and the program for Companions in Prayer and Ministry;

Responding to unexpected events, Church directives, or civic responsibilities as they arise.

For a moment, let’s set aside the list of administrative topics and tasks and reflect on what it’s like to serve your sisters in these positions of leadership. Sometime during my first year in office, I began to realize the intensity with which we enter into each event of a given day. It’s difficult to put into words. A day can contain such vastly different experiences as sitting at a Board meeting, spending time at the bedside of a sister as she prepares to go home to God, and meeting with a young sister discerning her vocation. Leadership in the community isn’t like leadership in a business where there is a bottom line against which everything is measured. It isn’t like political leadership where you try to advance an agenda. Leadership in community means being totally available for whatever our sisters need whenever they need it. There are very few routine days for any member of the General Administration. As you grow into the job, you realize that it’s less and less about you
and more and more about how God can use you as an instrument. That understanding and the deep love for your sisters that grows from seeing their goodness and how God works through them is the element of leadership that can’t really go into a list. It goes so much deeper than just administering our resources. The privilege of serving in this way is a great blessing. Sisters who are chosen should not be afraid to accept this role since God will provide the grace needed.

In any era, congregational leadership calls for women who trust in Divine Providence and who love the IHM Congregation and each sister in it. Congregational leaders are persons who have lived this life well as members, have contributed to the quality of community life by giving of themselves in loving, supportive, and prayerful presence and service to their sisters, by joyful and generous engagement in mission, and loyalty to the IHM spirit. Focus is placed on the sister’s ability to bring her insights to the discernment and decision-making required in leadership rather than on specific jobs to be done.

In these times, leaders must be collaborative, working together as a team to bring forth the common vision and mission, each acknowledging her own gifts and limitations, while valuing others as they share their talents and insights. The leadership style of the General Administration should include delegating and empowering the members so as to foster shared leadership and collegiality. Leaders need to manifest a genuine support for every sister in all her endeavors, show respect and acceptance for diversity, have the courage to ask the difficult questions when necessary, set forth challenges and call forth personal responsibility, both in our community living and in ministry.

The ministry of leadership is ultimately God’s work. It is God who uses our strengths and weaknesses to continue the mission in many varied ways. We firmly believe that in God’s Spirit at work among us, God will call forth the leaders that we need for the present. Each community leader takes into her heart the dreams and sufferings, the hopes and worries of the sisters and absorbs them as her own, carrying them and all she learns about the sisters to God every day, knowing that “With God all things are possible.”