

THE OFFICIAL APPROBATION OF OUR NEW CONSTITUTIONS

June 27th, 1982 - Letter - Rome

Modifications that were made. - Our attitude in receiving the new Constitutions. - The Church's approval. - Time to act.

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When you read this letter, we shall likely have received the official decree approving our new Constitutions. On June 17, in fact, Father Michael O'Reilly, Procurator to the Holy See, after his last consultation with Archbishop Mayer, O. S. B., Secretary of the Congregation for Religious, was invited to send the revised and amended text to the Congregation for its final approbation. The text was sent yesterday.

The English, Spanish and French versions will be printed at the Oblate press in Richelieu, Canada. The versions in other languages will be produced in Europe. It is my hope that you will receive the book in early 1983.

At this point I would like to consider with you what it means for our Institute to have its Constitutions approved by the Holy See and what our attitude should be on receiving this grace. But first, on behalf of the Congregation, let me thank Fathers Michael O'Reilly and Paul Sion: since the Chapter and under the General Council's direction they have been unremittingly studying and revising the text to make it comply with the requirements of the Holy See, while staying faithful to the Chapter's decisions. They have succeeded with wonderful competence and patience. Our thanks to them both.

Modifications that were made

Later on, *OMI Documentation* will spell out in detail the changes requested by Holy See. Here and now, let me give you just an outline.

In regard to the content of the text, "the Congress of the S. C. for Religious and Secular Institutes appreciated the quality of the work accomplished, careful to emphasize the basic elements of religious life" (*Letter of Cardinal Pironio to Father Jetté*, March 25, 1982). No substantial changes were called for. On the other hand, some modifications were requested and a certain number of Rules have been inserted in the Constitutions, with the final result: 125 articles in the Constitutions instead of 110, and 154 Rules instead of 171.

Several of the changes improve the text, particularly when clarifying articles that had remained too vague; the changes are often closely dependent on norms of the new Code of Canon Law.

The most important points underscored by the Congregation – it proceeds in the same way with the other Institutes – are the following:

1. Our Congregation's special character as a clerical institute of pontifical right.

2. The communitarian character of the Congregation as an apostolic body and its strong bonds with the Church: whence the need to discern and to receive a mission for all activity which commits the Congregation and the Church.
3. The necessary stability for a certain number of spiritual exercises that characterize an Institute: whence the transfer of these exercises from the Rules to the Constitutions.
4. The essential exactness needed in government and formation structures, this to conform with the norms of universal law.

Our attitude in receiving the new Constitutions

Prior to writing this letter, I re-read Bishop de Mazenod's Circular of August 2, 1853. The first Constitutions had been modified by the Chapter of 1850. They had received Roman approval and the Founder was sending the new text to the Oblates.

In this Circular we do not perceive the Founder's enthusiasm of 1826; rather, we sense his spirit of faith and the will for renewal both characteristic of a mature person. "All I hope for", he wrote, "is that this second promulgation of our laws will kindle in the heart of each one of you new fervour, that it bring about a kind of renewal of your youth...". May this also be our attitude: a sincere acceptance in faith, with a firm will to renew ourselves and to face the future with a new thrust.

Outwardly such approbation may seem something very human, something like obtaining an indult: in a particular instance a desired objective may be reached more easily by means of one consultor than by another at another time.

This is one aspect. The Church is incarnated in persons, as are all religious families. We must go beyond this aspect. Faith assures us that Providence is at work through all these human mediations.

The Church's approval

It is essential for a religious family to be recognized by the Church, for it is the Church who "constitutes" us, as the Founder put it; it is the Church who gives us our "mission", who sends us as an apostolic corps to evangelize the world.

Father de Mazenod's diary and letters reveal that he greatly valued this Roman approbation. He prized it highly, to be sure, for whatever freedom it would give him in his dealings with diocesan bishops; but more so for a deeper reason: to have some sort of divine guarantee for the work undertaken and the form of life he was offering his confreres.

For a religious family the issues at stake are substantial; it invites men to leave everything, to give up establishing themselves in this world in order to commit themselves in a radical way and within a group to the following of Christ. In such a project, each one stakes his own life. Who will guarantee the Gospel authenticity of the way that is proposed? Furthermore, if new formulations and important changes occur within the Institute in the course of history, who will guarantee the authenticity of these changes?

Before one can offer men a particular way of evangelical life, it is necessary that there be signs from God, discernment and the Church's official confirmation.

Among these signs of God we can mention the success and development of an Institute over a sufficiently long period of time. That is the sign Gamaliel refers to in the Acts of the Apostles: "If their purpose or activity is human in its origins, it will destroy itself. If, on the other hand, it comes from God, you will not be able to destroy them..." (Acts 5:38-39).

Another sign is the virtue and holiness of the members. On various occasions the Founder came back to this point; for instance, after Father Arnoux' death: "We now have four in heaven, that's already a fine

community...; we shall receive our share of this fullness if we make ourselves worthy of them by our faithfulness in constantly practising this Rule that helped them to arrive where they are. I believe their saintly death to be a great confirmation of these Rules, which have thereby received the new seal of divine approval" (*Letters to Father Courtès, July 22, 1828; to the Bishop of Grenoble, July 21, 1828; to Father Courtès, November 15, 1841*).

On this score the beatification of an Institute's Founder is important, as well as the public acknowledgment of the holiness of certain of its members in various ministries: the foreign missions, preaching, commitment to justice, the life and activities of Brothers, etc.

Still another positive sign is unanimity in approving and receiving a text of the Constitutions, studied and voted on in an atmosphere of peace, prayer and freedom.

All these signs are conducive to discernment; they prompt us to recognize the hand of God in a foundation or in a text of the Constitutions; by themselves, however, they do not suffice for "constituting" a religious family or for giving official worth to its Constitutions. Still needed is the official confirming or approval from the Church by responsible authorities.

A religious Institute is more than a private affair. Within the Church, it is a public school of charity, a school wherein members employ themselves – by specific means such as the vows, common life, prayer and missionary activity – in the practice of evangelical love. A charism is incarnated in an institution, it commits the Church, its Constitutions commit the Church; that is why they must be approved by the Church.

A personal charism already benefits from receiving external verification from someone qualified and competent; all the more so do the charism of an Institute and its formulation in the Constitutions stand to gain from being verified and confirmed by the Church.

That is what prompted the Founder to write on the day after the first approbation, February 18, 1826: "No mere trifles, these are no longer simple regulations, no ordinary pious directions; they are Rules that have been approved by the Church after the most minute scrutiny. They have been judged holy and eminently capable of leading those who embraced them to their destination. They have become the property of the Church that adopted them... We are thus constituted... Be aware of your dignity... In the name of God let us be saints" (*Letter to Father Tempier, February 18, 1826*).

It is the Church therefore that "constitutes" us what we are. She vouches to the faithful for the Gospel authenticity of the life-project we offer them.

Time to act

With this approbation, one more step is taken in committing ourselves to a new phase and moving resolutely toward the future. The time of discussing the letter of the law is over; it is now time to act, "the time to apply calmly and perseveringly the revised and approved Constitutions is at hand" (*John Paul II to the Religious of France, June 2, 1980*).

Strengthened by this approbation, let us all renew ourselves in the spirit of our vocation, "a spirit of total dedication for the glory of God, the service of the Church and the salvation of souls" (*Letter to Father Tempier, August 22, 1817*). Let us head into the future filled with great desires, with unshakable hope and courage, eyes fixed on the vastness of the apostolic field opening up before us.

May Blessed Eugene de Mazenod, our Founder and Father, obtain this grace for us!