

PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CHURCH

Rome, April 10, 1994

PROT. N. 275/92/12

Dear Reverend Mother General,
Dear Reverend General Superior,

among the concerns proper to Church life to which the Holy Father John Paul II has directed His attention and that of those in charge of the various Religious Communities of the Church, You will have noticed a very particular emphasis regarding the Cultural Heritage of the Church for which special care and vigilant oversight is demanded.

For such collections, consisting of figurative and architectural works of art and every other kind of artistic and historic treasures, big and small - from archive documents, manuscripts and printed volumes to museums, archive and library collections - there should be "shown the utmost attention" insofar as they are vehicles of culture and evangelization and thus become eloquent witnesses of the faith of the Church.

In 1988 Pope John Paul II had wanted that among the organisms which help Him to serve the entire Church there should be one of a universal nature and acting as a "promoter" dedicated specifically to the above mentioned cultural heritage: The Pontifical Commission for the Conservation of the Artistic and Historic Heritage of the Church, established by the Apostolic Constitution "Pastor Bonus" (art. 99-104).

On March 25th, 1993, through the Motu Proprio "Inde a Pontificatus Nostri initio", the Holy Father decided to transform this first Commission, in order to show how the Cultural Heritage of the Church should not just be a heritage to be "conserved" but rather a treasure which should be known and used to carry out the process of "new evangelization".

To such a task the entire "people of God" and not just the clergy is called to lend its contribution. It is for this reason that the new Commission, now called the Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage of the Church, has been set up in the context of the vast work that the Church carries out for "Culture", giving it juridic and organizational autonomy. This is to re-emphasize the importance of a unified effort of promotion and coordination in the area of artistic and historic collections.

The first activity of the Commission has been to begin a cordial relationship with those Church institutions which have a direct responsibility for the protection, appreciation, education of such collections, as for example the dioceses, the Episcopal Commissions for the Cultural Heritage, the various international organizations working in this area.

The Cultural Heritage of the Church and Religious Families

In this spirit of awareness and collaboration, it seems my worthwhile duty to address myself to all the Religious Families of the Church, since they are also great promoters of culture and art placed at the service of faith as well as custodians of a very important part of the archival - library - liturgical - artistic collections of the Church.

Through this letter, I wish to express to Your entire Community my feelings of greatest respect and esteem for what it has done in the past and continues to do today to protect and enhance these collections.

This initiative and the text of this circular letter has received the most cordial support and approval on the part of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life. I consider it essential to turn to every Religious Family in order to ideally summon everyone to reply in an adequate way to the appeal of the Holy Father to "make themselves 'magis magisque', that is, conscious of the importance and the necessity to conserve, evaluate and enhance the artistic and historic heritage of the Church" for our present day and for the future.

I wish, therefore, to remind in an explicit way the responsibilities that Religious Families have in regard to the Cultural Heritage of the Church. Thanks to the community structure of consecrated life, members of Institutes for Consecrated Life and of Societies of Apostolic Life offer a significant and an ever new testimony to the particular charismas of their founders.

The life of the community, in its substantial faithfulness to the original plan, knows how to adapt itself to the signs of the times and to the characteristics of the people where it establishes its roots, whether in the country of origin or in far-away lands. The result is that many Religious Families enjoy a spiritual heritage which has progressively enriched itself and has undergone an harmonious integration of "nova et vetera."

In fact, one can observe inside these communities, with ever renewed interest, how the present moment can succeed in amalgamating all sorts of issues: those of the past and present, of local life, of models of other cultures and sensitivities which are all welcomed as a reciprocal gift, tightly joined to the evangelizing mission. The latter has always seen members of Religious Institutes and Societies dynamically and deeply. It's true that some realities have been perceived only in a superficial manner. However one can also be certain that there has been a widespread sensitivity within the religious environments to adapt themselves toward others and to welcome the values of others with the appropriate adaptations.

Cultural Goods are the privileged witnesses to this catholic and spiritual work. They are to be considered, thus, not only elements of anthropological and social interest, but above all significant expressions of a faith which grows within the Church and finds ever more fitting expressions to manifest its interior vitality. One must "re-read" the cultural heritage of the Church in this perspective: from majestic cathedrals to smaller objects; from the marvelous works of art of the great masters to the smaller expressions of the poorer arts; from the most penetrating literary works to the apparently arid financial registers which follow step by step the life of the people of God.

The Christian community knows that from the foundations of new Religious Families, have derived for the Church not only new expressions of spirituality or evangelization but also new humanistic contributions which have had splendid repercussions on the cultural, artistic, architectural, educational fields.

One only needs to think back to those centers of spirituality, culture, and art represented by the Abbeys and Monasteries.

But even those convents, more modest in shape and size, but present in city neighborhoods or city outskirts can become proof of how they have often become not only schools of spiritual life but also points of reference for culture, art, social life, civilization, and urban life.

The Church again today calls upon Religious Families and asks them not to neglect this aspect of their effort and their witness. This might, perhaps, seem secondary, in comparison to the absolute task of carrying on the evangelical life and the work of evangelization. However, we believe this to be an intrinsic corollary of this very task. When a religious community lives intensely its own charisma, it irradiates itself also in the visible forms of culture and art which become as if contaminated with the spiritual intensity of such witness.

The widespread diffusion of Religious Families and their way of life throughout the world which embraces also many generations of faithful who are witnesses of evangelical life, can pose

members of Religious Institutes and Societies some questions and can require them to explicitly assume some responsibilities.

Churches and Buildings

A careful intervention is required today in the complex area of cult buildings and those destined for community life. There are many countries where the decrease in vocations requires a new re-grouping of Religious members. Their diverse distribution, as a result, means the closing down and the abandonment of centers which at one time were particularly important for the Religious Family and for ecclesiastic life. On the contrary, in other countries the sudden expansion of the consecrated life, unforeseen up until a few years ago, finds members of Religious Societies and Institutes confronted with diverse situations. One can recall, for example, the necessity of constructing new churches and buildings for community life from scratch in regions where the Church has been present just recently, or the urgency of re-converting cult places and restoring religious houses in countries where for long decades such spaces were taken away from their legitimate owners, as it occurred in nations of Eastern Europe. Very diverse situations then require appropriate interventions.

In regards to the space which is becoming abundant because of the vocational crises, it would be good to plan a program to put into action which can take into consideration not only the economic factor (a sale at the best possible price) but above all which can justify the historical and spiritual significance of the individual constructions. It would seem urgent that some decisions regarding the alienation of the immovable heritage should not be taken in haste. Rather one should take into account the purposes assigned to each building in an effort to maintain integral its original aim, especially in the case of liturgical centers. The vast constructions which are found above all in countries of the old Christian tradition should be detracted from disputable speculations. They should be made available, if possible, for social and cultural activities in favour of the population with whose help these works were built in the past.

When we are dealing with recuperating buildings which have fallen for sometime in disuse, one should evaluate the real sense behind such an initiative. It should be conducted with great care according to a clear hierarchy of values which can help to establish the priorities of the interventions and the nature of the necessary effort involved. It is not a question of restoring at all costs what is in disastrous conditions in order to reaffirm a certain prestige within the power structures outside the Church. On the contrary, it should imply knowing how to affirm the primary aim of giving glory to God without forgetting the sufferings of His people which bear the visible scars of the violence undergone as seen also in the damaged churches and houses.

As wise administrators of the goods of the Spirit, members of Religious Institutes and Societies will know how to find many ways to launch a building and restoration program which will not provoke any further sufferings in the Christian people. So much more convenient will be the restoration of a cult building, so much more austere should be the recovery of the living quarters.

In the construction of new religious buildings they should know how to invest all the spiritual experience, the social sensitivity, and the aesthetic taste which have developed in the history of their community.

The constructions should carry the thumbprint of the essential which can bring together simplicity and dignity, the functional and beauty. The structures should not blur the Gospel message which these same constructions are able to transmit when they are built as witnesses to the spirit of the beatitudes.

Difficult economic conditions can at times impose giving up any type of intervention on the buildings under their custody. This condition of poverty should find members of Religious Institutes more trusting in Providence, which never makes anything lack from the necessity of everyday life. As poor people, they should help those who are in a condition of greater or more

suffered poverty. This way they can give also a credible witness to the supremacy of God and spiritual values in a world which easily lets itself be run over by other principles.

Museum Material: A challenge to find one's roots once again

Cult buildings and religious houses themselves, as time goes on, have become a space where numerous tokens of the faith lived out by the various communities have been gathered: furnishings and musical instruments used for the cult, paintings and sculptures, small and big objects of daily life which have gone through alternate events. In many communities, already for sometime, one has proceeded to find an adequate placement of this material in suitable locations. Extremely positive is the effort to insert such things in a didactic context which can help Religious members themselves and the visitors of such displays to review the history of the Religious Family through the events of everyday life inside the community and in their apostolic effort. A particular attention should be given to liturgical furnishings. Within limits and at the right opportunity, they should find a periodic use in celebrations. One should show the maximum care to protect them at least as much as it was the care to produce them.

All the material making up the museum collection should be gathered and conserved with care. After an initial survey one should proceed to conduct a general and detailed inventory according to the methodological criteria of today's museum related fields, without leaving out any important detail as, for example, a complete photographic documentation.

According to the concrete situations presented and with the aim, above all, to prevent irreversible deteriorations and the danger of theft and misplacement, it would be prudent to gather all the material dispersed in the various suburban houses in one single provincial or national center or centers. In this delicate operation one should nevertheless avoid to bring about damage to the suburban houses by taking away those relics particularly significant for their local history.

The conservation of museum material does not only imply a prevalent archeological interest, but, more so, it expresses the desire to be better acquainted with the roots of one's own human and religious history. In such a perspective, the care of hand-made objects and works of art makes consciences more aware of confronting today both the complex social conditions and the provoking evangelical needs. Only with a faithfulness towards one's own cultural and spiritual matrix can one open oneself to renewed experiences of humanity and faith which always require a creative contribution of the heart and mind.

Archive Material: The School of history

A lot of material, dispersed among the many Religious houses around the world, falls under the category of the archive heritage. The nature of this material, because it is made of paper, makes it particularly vulnerable and perishable. So much more, therefore, should be the attention given to this "sphere" which documents the vital history and the expansion of the Church, the mother of innumerable children whom She gathers in the unity of faith.

The nature of the material is differentiated from place to place according to the specific physiognomy of the individual communities - whether inserted in social centers with particular pastoral functions or situated in a cloistered environment of solitude. It must, however, always be inventoried, gathered, ordered, studied and made accessible to those who want to deepen archive research.

From personal documents to register books, from capitular acts to the recounts of individual houses, from financial registers to inventories of the collections, from demographical registers to meticulous and detailed entries of sacramental practices: archive material offers a lead which permits to follow concretely the events of an individual house and an entire Religious Family

through its growth and its crises, its geographical expansion and its contractions due to various factors.

Archive material lends itself, thus, to a whole series of inter-discipline analyses (from paleography to statistics, from sociology to social communications, from demographical studies to economy) which create an historical horizon on which religious life can orient itself today. It is at this school of history where members of Religious Institutes and Societies can re-discover the suggestions of the Spirit which always calls for the apostolate work of evangelization and silent adoration. Beyond the widespread impression, the archive of Religious Communities is not a place where one takes refuge in the past but rather the space where one opens up to the future.

In order that such a program can take place, one needs to examine closely the opportunity to concentrate the material in some appropriate headquarters and make it accessible even at a distance using the procedures of photographic or computerized reproduction.

Extremely profitable is the collaboration between various institutions involved in this area. It is a collaboration which embraces an ample range of possibilities: from the exchange of information to the set-up of a common data bank.

Library Material: The lymph of a new life

Another area of interest is the collection of library material of Religious Families. Such material constitutes another mirror which deeply reflects the religious and cultural efforts of the Church. This area includes a vast section of testimonials: from medieval codex to the more recent printed publications, from old school notes to collections of letters, from manuscript volumes of deep insight in the various fields of theological and scientific research to erudite compiled collections, from drawings and architectural projects to musical scores with music composed for large chapels and for more popular and simple places.

Library material, even in its so diversified expressions, can present the opportunity of putting to fruit the talents that God has bestowed upon His children who are in search of His countenance.

All of this constitutes a patient and secular work which distills human science to the point of transforming it in the knowledge of the things of God, in a profession of faith illustrated by intellectual speculation and sung by sacred music. Libraries not only gather dusty material destined to be forgotten. In them are hidden treasures of Christian experience lived out and communicated through the written word. It is not so much a matter of filling up shelves but of fulfilling the heart while dipping into the wisdom of the fathers and the mothers of the faith - the lymph of a new life - in an itinerary of cultural deepening which is an integral part of the path of individual and communal updating for the growth of the individual and the entire family.

Even library material must thus be adequately identified, inventoried, eventually restored and made accessible. Book collections of the oldest religious Orders need to be kept up to date and integrated with more recent analogous works which permit having the necessary renovation. One should favour central collections, as in the cases of archive as well as library collections. Even in regards to library material one should favour every form of collaboration between the houses of the same family and between the different ecclesiastical institutions.

Working Guidelines

On an immediate practical level, as was already mentioned, various perspectives open up which should become a reality, at least in part within the individual Religious Families and in part within inter-denominational organizations:

1) It would seem important and dutiful that the "mutuae relationes" between Bishops and members of Religious Institutes and Societies, and thus between Dioceses and Religious Families, might materialize efficiently in this area of the Cultural Heritage.

This will be able to take place by:

- searching the maximum convergency and harmony with the norms and the guidelines of the National and Regional Episcopal Conferences as well as the individual Dioceses;
- cordially offering to the entire Christian community the artistic, historic, cultural collections that are owned by Institutions run by Religious members, so that these goods might still supply the faith and culture of God's People - filling in a certain detachment which seems to contrast the man of today and the tradition of thought and art which connected him in the past to the Christian faith and culture of entire populations;

- inserting in the vital circuit of the promoters of thinking and the arts those members of Religious Institutes and Societies which have a particular tendency in this regard so as to re-build those ideal connections between those who from the faith derive the intonation of their knowledge, as members of Religious Institutes for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and those searching for the truth in their studies and in their artistic experience. In fact none of us should be allowed to close ourselves up in their particular area without opening ourselves to the total life of the Church and humanity.

2) Thus it seems to us important to resolve the question of persons directly involved in the Cultural Heritage. In this sense one should favor, above all, those artistic and cultural vocations which God arouses for the good of the individual Institutes and the entire Church. The true interest for the Cultural Heritage of the past is witnessed by the care with which today a renovated cultural tradition is promoted within the Church embracing all the areas of the cultural goods known throughout history. One must do everything possible so that faith and cultures of today's Christians and members of Religious Institutes can translate themselves in actual expressions of Christian art and in adequate historical testimonials.

3) In addition, one should professionally train all those individuals who take care of the Cultural Heritage of the past, not simply for an inert conservation, but rather for a conscientious and needed appreciation of this heritage. Such experts in the various sectors of the Cultural Heritage can then intervene in a positive way in the training and in the instruction of young members of Religious Institutes and Societies so that a vivid responsibility might mature in them for all the cultural expressions of the Christian faith.

4) As we had a way to write a couple of years ago to the Superior and Mother Generals whose General Houses are located here in Rome, an Advanced Studies Program for Training in the Cultural Heritage of the Church has been set up at the Gregorian University in Rome with the intention of making available to Priests, members of Religious Institutes, and lay people interested a program which can prepare them in this delicate and specific area of the conservation and promotion of the Cultural Heritage. Such a School is already undergoing its third year now. It seems possible to foresee not far in the future its transformation into a real and proper Faculty for the Cultural Heritage. It is also possible that, following this first experience, other schools similar to this can open up elsewhere in the Church.

But we would like to ask Religious members not to ignore this opportunity which can allow to send to Rome their Brothers and Sisters in Christ who are intended to be charged with this area of Sacred Art, Archives and Libraries or with the teaching of these fields or with the appreciation of the cultural heritage within their Order.

5) In the economic planning of Religious Institutes one can not ignore the problem of the Cultural Heritage. Its appreciation both on the level of conservation as well as its fruition often constitutes a secure financial investment. But the care of this heritage transcends the confines of economy and makes it participate the events of the works and their creators in a common and renewed experience of faith.

6) On this same level one can place all those programs necessary to give a space over to the Cultural Heritage; the coordination and the agreements within the Church among other diocesan and regional Institutes, as well as eventual accords with competent civil administrations; the common programming between members of Religious Families and with the local Church, on the level of research, protection, conservation and fruition of the heritage of the past and the production for current works. In any case, the collaboration should be seen as an active effort and not as a simple regulation of confines of competencies, jealous of every "interested part."

7) In particular:

- we recall the urgency of an up-to-date inventory, especially a photographic one, of everything owned by each individual religious house;
- one should draft the necessary documentation for a full understanding of the material owned (origin, provenance, use, socio-ecclesiastical context);
- every Religious Family should deepen and certify through appropriate means of research, its own historical itinerary in the context of the ample history of the Church and society with particular attention to the work of evangelization and in the presence of prayer which marks the supremacy of God in the life of the Church;
- every Religious Family should have one or more centers of documentation of its own artistic and historic heritage in such a way to make the best use of it and to continue its constant promotion.

Conclusion

As a conclusion to this fraternal letter, we dare ask You, Reverend Mother General and Superior General, as we asked and obtained from the Most Reverend Presidents of the Episcopal Conferences, to reply to us and help this Pontifical Commission, from which the Holy Father expects so much regarding what is being done in this area, the difficulties which are being encountered and what the desires have been as expressed in each Religious Family in terms of the themes presented here; and, above all, your suggestions, observations so that we can act more and more efficiently and concretely in our effort.

As we have done with the replied from the above mentioned Presidents, we can then communicate among ourselves, in the form of a final report, the replies received in order to share together the most significant points emerged.

We hope that this reciprocal communication between the Pontifical Commission and the Religious Families can mark an opportunity to deepen or to start a constant trustworthy dialogue which can not but influence a return toward a Christian inspired culture and art for which everyone seems to request a renewed effort.

In the hope that our considerations and this "appeal" can become object of reflection in Your Community, that our thought can reach a spirit of communion, it seems useful to recall again

the words of the Holy Father contained in the "Motu Proprio" with which He instituted this Pontifical Commission for the Cultural Heritage:

"Faith tends by its very nature to express itself in artistic forms and in historical witnesses which have an intrinsic evangelizing force and cultural value, before which the Church is called to lend its utmost attention."

With my feelings of personal esteem and heartfelt thanks for Your kind attention, I am

Fraternally Yours in Jesus Christ,

✠ Francesco Marchisano
President

Mons. Paolo Rabitti
Secretary