

PONTIFICAL COMMISSION
FOR THE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE CHURCH

Vatican City, 15 September 2006

Prot. N. 14/06/4

Reverend Father,
Reverend Mother,

it is a well established fact that the goods of cultural value in the care of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life constitute a significant share of the remarkable historical-artistic patrimony of the Church. They encompass “*first of all, the artistic wealth of painting, sculpture, architecture, mosaic and music, placed at the service of the Church’s mission. To these we should then add the wealth of books contained in ecclesiastical libraries and the historical documents preserved in the archives of ecclesiastical communities. Finally, this concept covers the literary, theatrical and cinematographic works produced by the mass media*” (John Paul II, *Address to members of the Pontifical Commission of the Cultural Patrimony of the Church*, 12 October 1995, n. 3: L’Osservatore Romano. Weekly Edition in English, 25 October 1995, p. 5).

From the beginning of its foundation, this Pontifical Commission has made every effort to instill among the Institutes and Societies a sense of responsibility and vigilant attention to their own historical and artistic patrimony; in particular by way of the circular letter *The Cultural Heritage of the Church and Religious Families* on 10 April 1994. In that letter and in other documents the **inventory of goods of cultural value** has been singled out as being primary and essential in assisting the work of judicial guardianship, of protection against the crimes of theft; alienation; or expropriation, of maintenance of cultural items, and also for ecclesial improvement. Such an inventory was also the object of a previous document of the Pontifical Commission, *The inventory and Catalogue of the Cultural Heritage of the Church: A Necessary and Urgent Task*, 8 dicembre 1999, which while being addressed to diocesan Ordinaries, it is also valid for Religious.

However, notwithstanding the positive response and collaboration on the part of various Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life – some of whom have developed thorough internal provisions – many others have not yet been able to take the task in hand because of the lack of suitable personnel and funds intended for this purpose.

The risk that arises from such a situation is easy to imagine. If one considers, among other things, the more frequent closure of Religious houses, a dilemma occurs regarding the destination not only of works of art and liturgical furnishings, but of whole libraries and archives. In more than a few cases, this situation is resolved via an irretrievable diffusion of these goods of cultural value on the antique market, which causes great harm to the patrimony of the Church and is in direct violation of both canonical and civil regulations.

**Reverend Major Superiors
of the Institutes of Consecrated Life**

and of Societies of Apostolic Life

It is hoped, therefore, that with a sense of responsibility, Major Superiors will in a timely manner take the necessary steps to arrange for an inventory of archival items, libraries and artworks in their possession, located either at the Mother house or in regional houses. Particular attention should be given to goods of cultural value from suppressed Religious houses. The importance of such an inventory is highlighted in can. 1283, 2° *CIC* and can. 1025 *CCEO*.

For Religious communities with the General house in Italy, it is necessary to follow the directions given by the Italian Episcopal Conference (*CEI*). So as to facilitate communication between these two groups, before writing this letter this Pontifical Commission consulted the *CEI*, which in collaboration with the *Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo e la Documentazione (ICCD)* initiated, some years ago, a programme of inventory for Ecclesiastical furnishings of artistic and historical value.

With reference to the protection of sacred art, the participation of Religious Superiors is expected according to the 1974 norms *Tutela e conservazione del patrimonio storico artistico della Chiesa in Italia* (cf. n. 6) (*Enchiridion della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana*, II, Bologna 1985, pp. 448-460). This is outlined further in the agreement between the Minister for Goods and Activities of Cultural value and the President of the *CEI* (18 April 2000) which pertains to the conservation and consultation of the archives of historical interest and libraries of Ecclesiastical Agencies and Institutions. Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are included in this agreement (*Enchiridion CEI*, cit., pp. 1419-1441).

Therefore, on the basis of these directions, the *CEI* guarantees that the computer software prepared by the Offices and Services of the General Secretary for the purposes of the inventory of Ecclesiastical goods of cultural value is freely at the disposal of those Institutes and Societies who request it.

Together with the inventory software for historical and artistic goods and archives, the National Office for Ecclesiastical goods of cultural value, where possible, would like to offer the above-mentioned Institutes and Societies, formation of personnel, technical assistance and the possibility of a continuing renewal by way of the *Forum sui beni culturali ecclesiastici*. Moreover, a programme relating to Ecclesiastical libraries is already available on the *Ufficio Nazionale Beni Culturali Ecclesiastici* website.

Economic provisions are provided for by the terms of Art. 1, § 3, c) of the *Disposizioni concernenti la concessione di contributi finanziari della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana per i beni culturali ecclesiastici* and Art. 1, § 2 of the relative executive *Regolamento* (“Notiziario della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana” 9/2003, pp. 279-295). Civilly recognized Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life are able to allocate donations for the conservation and consultation of General and Provincial archives as well as libraries of particular importance that are open to the public. Regarding requests for grants, applications must be made by the Major Superior to the Ordinary of the Diocese in whose territory the Religious house is located.

The General Secretary of the *CEI*, and particularly the *Ufficio Nazionale per i Beni Culturali Ecclesiastici* are available to the above-mentioned Institutes and Societies which may require assistance. For more detailed information contact the *Centro Servizi Progetti Informatici dell’Ufficio Nazionale per i Beni Culturali Ecclesiastici* of the *CEI* on (green number) 848.580.167 (Dott.ssa Francesca M. D’Agnelli). The principle contact person is Rev. Don Stefano Russo, Via Aurelia 468, 00165 Roma, e-mail: unbc@chiesacattolica.it

In the event that the General house is not located in Italy, but is connected to Italy by way of Provinces or recognized houses, the *CEI* also offers Institutes and Societies access to computer software. As a rule, it is appropriate to adopt the system of inventory in use in the country in which the General house is located or in which the Institute has a major presence. Taking into consideration, however, that not all countries have an available system of inventory, particularly with reference to computer technology, it would be preferable to resort to those who have reliable and trusted systems.

Finally, in the case of insufficient domestic funds or the impossibility of civil grants, it is recommended to apply to International Corporations or Foundations for economic assistance.

Thank you for the work you assume in protecting the historical and artistic patrimony of your Institute and for taking into consideration the recommendations in this letter. Reassuring you of the availability of this Pontifical Commission in the event that assistance or clarification is needed, I remain

Sincerely yours in Christ,

✠ Mauro Piacenza
President

Prof. Don Carlo Chenis, SDB
Secretary