

History

The custom of holding chapters in religious congregations is an ancient and originally monastic practice. It can be linked back to the sixth century when St Benedict gathered the monks in his monastery each week to read and discuss a chapter of the Benedictine Rule. It is interesting that Benedict held to the importance of each monk's opinion being heard and especially that of the youngest monk. The room where they met became known as the chapter room and the gatherings themselves were called 'chapters'. By the early thirteenth century, church authorities declared that the custom of representatives gathering regularly to review their life was mandatory for all religious institutes.

General Chapters in Canon Law

The general chapter has *supreme authority* in accordance with the constitutions. It is to be composed in such a way that it *represents the whole* institute and becomes a *true sign* of its unity in charity. Its principal functions are to *protect the patrimony of the institute...and to foster appropriate renewal* in accord with that patrimony. It also *elects the supreme Moderator* and *deals with matters of greater importance* and *issues norms* which all are bound to obey. (canon 631.1)

Supreme authority: The chapter body in session is the highest authority in a religious congregation. It has greater authority than a congregational leader when dealing with chapter business. It is a communal act of leadership, discernment and decision making.

Represents the whole institute: Participants should be drawn from a variety of ministries, cultures, and ages; there is to be a balance of elected members and ex officio members. It calls for an investment in the institute's diversity---making space to engage in a variety of perspectives. In addition, a deliberative member does not represent a particular cohort or ministry or geography. She brings her gifts, experience, and insight to the needs/ issues that concern the whole (common good, common life and common mission).

Becomes a sign of unity: A chapter needs agreements about how they will work together; more importantly each chapter participant needs to be aware of the times she has an open heart, open mind, and open will, and aware of the times when the voice of judgment, cynicism or fear appears. Discernment, and contemplative dialogue and working toward consensus are essential processes for the work of unity.

Five responsibilities of a general chapter

1. ***Protect the patrimony of the congregation:*** This refers to faithfully protecting and strengthening what the founder intended and designed in regard to the nature, purpose, spirit and charism of the congregation. As a diocesan or pontifical congregation, the members are guardians of this ecclesial charism.

2. ***Promote suitable renewal:*** Chapters need to be grounded in reality---the reality of the congregation, the Church, and society. It is to make meaning of solid data so it can discern the changes needed at this time in history. The pre-chapter process chooses the discerning questions/issues that will be transformative for the life and mission of the congregation. This work considers the communal question: how are we called to be transformed and why?
3. ***Elect the Leadership Team:*** Chapters elect the congregational leadership team and moderator, who will implement the decisions/direction of the chapter, as well as attend to the ordinary administration of the congregation. The election is to be in the context of the chapter and not a main focus of interest and energy of the congregation or of the chapter members outside this context.
4. ***Treat matters of greater importance:*** Most congregations in the United States are working with issues like finances, property, elder care, and passing on the charism beyond their members. There may also be constitutional and directory changes or matters designated by the constitutions that are agenda for the chapter. A variety of decisions could be needed at the time of the chapter. Yet, it is also true, that some important decisions could be made in another forum: through the ordinary decision making process in place in the congregation or through an extra-ordinary chapter. Chapter issues need to be relevant to the whole congregation.
5. ***Issues norms binding on all members:*** Decisions of the chapter are to be accepted by all members of the congregation. These decisions identify what is expected of all members. The acceptance and implementation of decisions and directions is most effective when there are good pre-chapter processes involving all members.

Emerging context relative to Chapters

- From event to an on-going process
- From proposals from individuals to questions and emerging issues from the contemplation, dialogue, and communal discernment of all members
- From problem solving to creative possibility
- From key decisions being made in “chapter” to decision making moving with the demands of life in the congregation
- The tendency toward politicking in elections to communal discernment; identifying not only elected leaders but the contribution of all members for the congregation
- Complexity and new realities in religious life

Resources: [Code of Canon Law](#); [Commentary of the Code of Canon Law](#); [General Chapters](#) by Dairne McHenry, RSCJ

Prepared by Mary Jo Nelson, OLVM—2017