

Statute on the Accompaniment of Fragile Communities and on the Suppression of a Monastery

Revised by the Law Commission, Dec 2024

Introduction

1. When a community is confronted with increasing fragility it is encouraged to face the situation honestly. Every community in the Order, in every continent, may have to face this fragility at a certain moment in its history. It is important in that case that the community not withdraw in isolation under the pretext of its autonomy, but see itself "as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance" (cf. VDQ 29). The *Charter of Charity* also teaches us to look for and to accept concrete assistance "that we may live by one charity" (CC III.2).

2. "In a spirit of docility to the voice of the Holy Spirit" the community discusses the situation "humbly and forthrightly" (cf. C. 36.1). Everyone is called to mutual care, collaboration and obedience. "The light of faith is especially necessary in these times in order to see that, through these difficult periods, one's heart is being formed by the personal and communal experience of Christ's cross, death and resurrection" (*Ratio* 54).

Creative solutions are needed in these situations.

I. Awareness of Fragility

3. In the first instance it is the responsibility of each community, under the leadership of its superior, to look realistically at its situation, not only from a human point of view, but especially from the point of view of faith. An experience of fragility should be accepted as an invitation of the Lord to choose life by entering into the Paschal mystery.

4. In the spirit of the Gospel, communities should ask for and accept help from the Father Immediate, the Region, the Abbot General, the General Chapter, or others. Elements to be considered in the evaluation and discernment can include

- the number of monks or nuns;
- the age profile of the community;
- whether it has the vitality needed to live the monastic life;
- the capacity of the community to provide for formation and governance;
- the dignity and quality of the liturgical, fraternal, and spiritual life of the community;
- the community's witness value and its communion with the local church;
- whether its economic structure is healthy;
- whether the buildings are suitable for the present community.

These elements should be considered comprehensively, in an overall, balanced perspective and in the context of the particular community.

5. In a situation of increasing fragility in his daughter house, the Father Immediate must have the courage to help the superior and the community to face this reality. The regular

visitation is the most suitable instrument for this purpose (Stat RV 15).

II. Pastoral Measures and Collaboration

6. In helping the community to face its situation, the Father Immediate proceeds with great tact and charity, trusting in the work of the Holy Spirit in each person and in the community. Together they will search for ways to help the community to live the fullness of Cistercian *conversatio*.

These could include:

- becoming aware of changes in society, of the reality of the young, and of the necessity of changing methods of formation;
- adapting buildings, liturgy, horarium, work, and economy to the size and capabilities of the community;
- changes of officers; help through personnel from other communities or from outside the Order (e.g. for health care, economy);
- work to promote better communication in the community or to promote reconciliation among its members;
- searching for other forms of help within the filiation or from the Region;
- creation of a Commission for the Future.

7. The success of these measures depends to a large extent on the cooperation and good will of all involved (community, superior, Father Immediate).

III. Advanced Fragility: Special Measures

8. If, after all these efforts, the situation of fragility persists, the superior or the Father Immediate, or a Commission of the General Chapter, or the Abbot General, will bring the situation to the particular attention of the General Chapter. If the Father Immediate judges that the community can no longer form new aspirants, he requests the General Chapter to suspend its right to receive aspirants, in accordance with St. 79.B.

9. A Commission for the Future will be established by the General Chapter, which will include the Father Immediate and will replace any existing Commission. The purpose and mandate of this new Commission will be specified by the General Chapter. It will include ensuring that the temporal goods of the monastery are well managed, in accordance with the Constitutions and the civil law of the place, and safeguarded in the light of the possible future closure of the monastery.

10. If the situation of the community still does not improve, the General Chapter, at the request of the Father Immediate, may proceed to the suspension of the exercise of autonomy of the community. This vote of the General Chapter requires an absolute majority. **The General Chapter then appoints** a Monastic Commissary who will oversee the care of the members of the community so that they can continue to live life together in the fullest way possible. This Commissary, who may be from within or without the Order, is a major religious superior with limited authority as defined in the letter of appointment. He or she will report regularly to the

Father Immediate. If this person is not already a member of the Commission for the Future, he or she becomes so at the time of appointment as monastic commissary. In some exceptional or urgent cases, the General Chapter can appoint the Father Immediate as a Monastic Commissary.

11. The Monastic Commissary does not need to live at the monastery. He or she can appoint someone else to take care of the daily needs of the community; this latter could be a member of the community, another member of the Order, of another religious institute, or a lay person.

12. The Monastic Commissary chooses at least two people as advisors, who may be from within or from outside the community. When necessary, these advisors function as council of the monastic commissary. The conventual chapter is suspended except for acts of extraordinary administration and for the vote mentioned in no. 19 below. The Monastic Commissary keeps the members of the community informed and listens to their opinion on matters of importance. **The monastic commissary keeps the Father Immediate and the Abbot General informed about the evolution of the situation of the community.**

13. Suspension of the exercise of autonomy does not change the relationship of filiation. The Father Immediate continues to help and support the monastic commissary of his daughter house in the exercise of his/her charge (cf. C. 74.1). All the rights and obligations of the Father Immediate towards the daughter house remain intact, including that of the regular visitation.

14. If the community whose exercise of autonomy is suspended has daughter houses, the Father Immediate, in consultation with the daughter houses, will decide how the exercise of paternity will be carried out.

15. If the situation of the community improves and the community and/or the Father Immediate is of the opinion that the exercise of autonomy can be resumed, either or both of them advises the General Chapter of this. The General Chapter enquires into the matter and judges whether or not to lift the suspension, which requires an absolute majority vote of the General Chapter.

16. Between General Chapters in cases that cannot be postponed the Abbot General with the consent of his Council has the authority to act in the name of the General Chapter in all that is stated above in relation to the suspension of the exercise of autonomy of a community (C. 82.2).

IV. The Process of Suppression

17. When due to particular and long-standing circumstances a monastery no longer offers any basis for hope of growth (cf. PC 21), careful consideration is given to whether it should be closed.

18. The bishop of the place is consulted.

19. When the community has reached the awareness that it must be closed, the Father Immediate invites the conventual chapter to express its acceptance of this reality through a vote **which requires an absolute majority.**

20. To consider the suppression of a monastery, the General Chapter requires a written report from the Father Immediate and the **major superior**, together **with the result of the vote mentioned in par. 19.**

21m. Only the General Chapter, by a two-thirds majority, can decide on the suppression of an autonomous monastery.

21f. Only the General Chapter, by a two-thirds majority, can petition the Holy See to suppress an autonomous monastery (CIC 616 §4).

Once the General Chapter votes to suppress a monastery of monks or to ask the Holy See to suppress a monastery of nuns, the Superior (whether Abbot/Abbess, Superior ad nutum, or Monastic Commissary) ceases to have any canonical authority. The conventual chapter ceases, and the function of the Father Immediate ceases. If there are daughter houses, they lose their Father Immediate and a new one must be found.

22. After the General Chapter has voted to suppress a monastery, or, in the case of a monastery of nuns, to ask the Holy See to do so, it names a Commission of Closure composed of at least five persons to implement the suppression. **More than half the members should belong to the Order.** This Commission, which replaces the Commission mentioned in par. 9 above, gives great pastoral care to the members of the suppressed house, and ensures that each one finds a community of the Order which will accept him or her with a view to making stability. Every member of the Order has the right and the duty of having stability in a monastery of the Order, with all the related rights and obligations.

23. The community that accepts such members coming from a suppressed community will express its willingness and commitment through a vote. This vote, requiring an absolute majority, **may be** taken at the moment of acceptance, not after a period of probation. Such new members of a community will be invited to exercise prudence in using their newly acquired voting right. **If he considers it necessary, the Abbot General names a superior of the Order to be the canonical superior of the individual members of the community until each one's change of stability takes place.**

24. When an aged or sick member of a suppressed monastery must live permanently in any type of nursing home, a community of the Order must accept to care for him or her until death. He or she acquires stability in this community but, taking their physical absence into account, the exercise of their voting rights may be suspended.

25. The financial assets of the suppressed monastery, respecting the civil law of the place and the will of the founders and donors, follow the surviving members of the community and go, in proportion, to the monasteries that receive them. If these assets are significant, a portion of them is reserved to help other monasteries of the Order, and to respond to the needs of the locality where the monastery is situated. The management of this distribution of assets, and of other elements of the patrimony of the monastery (e.g. archives, library) is confided to the Commission of Closure which supervises the **process of suppression.** It may be helped, if necessary, by competent persons who need not be members of the Order.

If the community has debts, the same Commission will repay them by drawing on the financial assets of the community prior to dividing them, and by appealing, if necessary, to

other communities or to the organs of the Order such as the Commission of **Solidarity**.

26. This Commission gives a report on its work to the following General Chapter, and in the meantime keeps the Abbot General and his Council informed of the progress of events.

27. When the process of **suppression** is entirely concluded, **the Abbot General issues a Decree of Suppression (monks) or asks the Holy See to do so (nuns)**. The work of the Commission of Closure then ceases.

