



# Religious Law and Consultation Newsletter

Upcoming Webcasts:

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**Associates of Religious  
Institutes**  
November 15

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**Basic Taxation of  
Religious**  
February 15, 2012

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**Rights and Obligations of  
Leadership**  
May 15, 2012

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**Social Media, Religious  
and the Law**  
August 21, 2012

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## Associates of Religious Institutes

### Background

From the very beginning of religious life in the early centuries of Christianity, there have been men and women who have associated to religious orders. In the Egyptian deserts, individuals would go out to converse with the hermits living there, receiving their guidance and blessing. In medieval monasteries, individuals sought to live in close association with the monasteries, without joining as vowed members. Some of these were formally organized into tertiaries or oblates who made a specific commitment and took on certain obligations and spiritual practices, receiving in exchange the pastoral care of the orders. In many of the apostolic communities beginning in the 17th century, the foundation includes both the assistance of lay Christians and some interest in involving these men and women in some way in the ongoing life of the institutes.

### Developments

All on Tuesdays at 2pm ET

While association with institutes has a long history, in the last several decades, there has been a new interest in associates, particularly among women's institutes. The number of associates has grown from a few thousand in the 1980s to tens of thousands by the year 2000 and the numbers continue to grow. Many religious institutes have associates, though the level of organization and clarity of roles and responsibilities vary from one institute to another. Nevertheless it is clear that the programs answer a need that many people feel. Many express the desire to develop their spiritual life and to share in the mission of the religious institutes.

This growth in the associate movement is happening at the same time that there continues to be a steady decrease in the numbers of vowed members in most religious institutes. If these trends continue we may see the number of associates exceed the number of vowed members in the near future, if this has not already occurred in some institutes. This phenomenon will call for careful attention to the identity, the purpose and the organization of the members and the associates. As this matures, many recognize the need to clarify roles and relationship and develop an organized structure for the protection of both.

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## **Participation**

The more recent growth of the associate movement builds on the long history of association and brings some new elements to the movement as well. Throughout history, the most common form of association with religious institutes has been sharing in the spirituality of the institute, and receiving guidance in the particular spiritual insights of its founders. This instinct for seeking spiritual guidance goes back to the Egyptian deserts, is repeated through the history of monasticism, and is even found in the non-christian tradition.

Another common mode of participation has been sharing in the apostolic works of the institute, working or volunteering in institutions run by the sisters or brothers. Along side the religious who built schools and hospitals are countless lay collaborators, without whose time, expertise and resources these projects could never have succeeded.

More recently there has been an effort by some to involve associates in the life of the community, sharing in its celebrations, receiving its publications and joining in assemblies, gatherings and meetings. Some associates have served on committees, attended chapter and some are wondering whether and how associates might participate in governance of the institute itself. These developments can blur boundaries and raise concerns for both members and associates.

## **Legal Issues**

The Code of Canon Law has some sections relevant to associations of the faithful (303-310), and in the canon on associations aggregated to religious life (677.2), but these do not seem to address the reality of associates of religious institutes as they have evolved today. This is because in many institutes, people associate with the institute as individuals. Often, they did not form a separate association with separate membership, organization and governance. The reason for this is probably historical. Associates came in small numbers in the 1980s when the programs were first started. At that time, informal organization seemed in order and met the needs of the fledgling movement. The number of associates grew somewhat slowly at first, and a practice developed of inviting associates to participate in more and more functions of the religious institute. In time, the associates were embedded in the life of their institutes. In an effort to be inclusive, some institutes can come to a point of including associates in nearly all meetings and communications of the institute, so that it is only by exception that the members ever gather for prayer and discussions of their particular life as vowed members.

The ongoing presence of the associates at meetings of the religious community changes both the associates and the members. It should be a blessing for both as they share the two distinct ways of living the charism of

an institute. However, if there are no boundaries, the specific identity of each becomes blurred and this presents challenges which need to be understood and addressed.

The difficulty with the embedded model with increasing associate involvement is two-fold. On the one hand, the institute has limited or no forum for the vowed members to discuss the future of the vowed life and to address the real challenges of diminishment as they face a tenuous and changing future. This discussion is important, even if it leads an institute to choose to come to the end of its life. On the other hand, the embedded model does not encourage the development of structures, policies and leadership within the associate movement that are appropriate to the needs of the associates and that will ensure growth and sustainability of the associate program.

Institutes are coming to see the need to clarify roles and relationships and perhaps to develop an alternative model which will ensure a future for both the vowed life and for associates. Such a model should foster a clarification of the identity and purpose of the associates, as well as fostering more clarity for the specific identity of the vowed members as well. In addition, it will provide a forum for the development of structures and policies to give a more solid footing to the associate movement, even as it ensures appropriate protection for the rights and legitimate expectations of the vowed members of the institute.

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For more information on this topic, November's webcast will examine Association in Religious Institutes and will explore the development of the movement and its current challenges and it will seek to discover a way forward, both for the institutes and for the associate movements.

Date: November 15, 2011

Time: Tuesdays, 2:00 pm ET, 11:00 am PT

Register: [www.ahereford.org/registration](http://www.ahereford.org/registration)

Format: Live, On-Demand, CD-ROM

Cost: \$65 / \$75 for CD-ROM

Past programs are available at [www.ahereford.org/recordings](http://www.ahereford.org/recordings). Register to view earlier webcasts on Aging Institutes – Issues and Options, Immigration for Religious, Establishing and Running Nonprofit Organizations, Taxation for Religious, Legal Issues for New Members, Member Legal Documents and Sponsored Ministries – Evolving Issues.

If I can be of any assistance to your organization, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Peace,

*Amy Hereford*