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Explanatory Note

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1. The General Decree “*The Associations of the Faithful*” disciplines the internal government of the international associations of the faithful, private and public, and of the other bodies with juridical personality subject to the direct supervision of the Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life. The decree is to be read in the context of the mission entrusted to the Dicastery and with reference to Magisterium concerning the associations of the faithful and the ecclesial movements.

2. In the context of its own competence, the Dicastery has the task of accompanying the life and the development of associations of the faithful and lay movements (cf. Statutes, art. 7). The Dicastery’s activity is animated by the desire to promote growth in the ecclesial entities entrusted to it, and to help Bishops to adequately fulfil their own role in guiding and accompanying these entities.

3. Following on from Vatican Council II, which recognised the lay apostolate as an expression of the vocation and missionary responsibility of the lay faithful (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 1, 18-19), Saint John Paul II saw the essence of the Church itself realised in the associations of the faithful: “make the mystery of Christ and his saving work present in the world (*Message for the World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, May 27th 1998). With prophetic intuition, addressing the ecclesial movements during the Pentecost Vigil in 1998, he set them a new challenge: “Today a new stage is unfolding before you: that of ecclesial maturity. This does not mean that all problems have been solved. Rather, it is a challenge. A road to take. The Church expects from you the ‘mature’ fruits of communion and commitment” (*Meeting with Ecclesial Movements and New Communities for the Vigil of Pentecost*, May 30th 1998).

4. Benedict XVI explored the implications of this new phase of ecclesial maturity pointing, as a path for adequately understanding the associations of the faithful in the light of God’s plan and the mission of the Church, to a more mature communion of all parts of the Church “so that all the charisms, with respect for their specificity, may freely and fully contribute to the edification of the one Body of Christ” (*Address to Bishops participating in a Seminar organised by the Pontifical Council for the Laity*, May 17th 2008). He also invited the ecclesial movements to submit with prompt obedience and adherence to the discernment of the ecclesiastical authorities, indicating this availability as the guarantee of the authenticity of their charisms and the evangelical goodness of

their actions (cf. *Message for the Second World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, May 22nd 2006).

5. Pope Francis, in line with his predecessors, suggests understanding the demands that the path of ecclesial maturity makes upon the associations of the faithful in a perspective of missionary conversion (cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, 29-30). He indicates as priorities respecting personal freedom; overcoming self-referentiality, unilateralism and absolutisation; promoting a broader synodality, and the precious gift of communion. Indeed “real communion cannot exist in Movements or in New Communities unless these are integrated within the greater communion of our Holy Mother, the hierarchical Church” (*Address to the Third World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, November 22nd 2014).

With reference to ecclesial maturity, Pope Francis exhorts: “Do not forget, however, that to reach this goal, conversion must be missionary: the strength to overcome temptations and insufficiencies comes from the profound joy of proclaiming the Gospel, which is the foundation of your charisms” (*Address to the Third World Congress of Ecclesial Movements and New Communities*, November 22nd 2014). This is the interpretative key that allows us to understand the ecclesial meaning of this Decree, aiming, as it does, to overcome ‘temptations and insufficiencies’ encountered in how government is exercised within associations of the faithful.

6. In its service of accompanying the more than one hundred international associations and other entities over which it exercises direct supervision, the Dicastery has been able to observe a broad variety of methods in carrying out the responsibilities of government. This experience has led to study and discernment on good government within these associations.

7. Within associations of the faithful, authority is attributed by the free will of the members as set out in the statutes, and is exercised as a service for the good government of the association, with reference to specific purposes, in the fulfilment of an ecclesial mission. Indeed, the charisms that are at the origins of many associative entities have been given by the Holy Spirit for the benefit not only of those who receive them but of all the People of God (cf. *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 5-7). Consequently, the backdrop against which all dimensions of the life of these associations is to be understood remains the Church itself, and not the more limited sphere of the international association or, even less so, of its local groups. Therefore, government in an association of the faithful is also to be understood in a perspective of ecclesial communion, and is to be exercised according to the norms of universal law and the association’s own norms, under the supervision of ecclesiastical authority (cf. cc. 305, 315, 323 *Code of Canon Law*; *Lumen gentium*, 12 b; *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, 8).

8. In the context of its role of supervision, the Dicastery – after an attentive study of Magisterium and of the law of the Church, and after prudent inter-dicasterial consultation – has identified several reasonable criteria concerning two necessary aspects of good government: regulating the terms of office in governing bodies at international level, and the representativeness of these bodies. The General Decree promulgated today – which has been approved *in forma specifica* by the Supreme Pontiff – disciplines the length and number of these terms of office and, for the associations, the participation of its members in the constitution of its central governing bodies.

9. Not infrequently, for those called to govern, the absence of limits in terms of office favours forms of appropriation of the charism, personalisation, centralisation and expressions of self-referentiality which can easily cause serious violations of personal dignity and freedom, and even real abuses. Furthermore, bad government inevitably creates conflicts and tensions which injure communion and weaken missionary dynamism.

10. Equally, experience has shown that a change in generations inside governing bodies through a rotation of responsibilities benefits the vitality of the association. It provides an opportunity for creative growth and stimulates investment in training. It reinvigorates faithfulness to the charism, breathes new life and efficacy to the interpretation of the signs of the times, and encourages new and updated paths of missionary action.

11. The decree abrogates any norm contrary to it, contained in the statutes of the associations and entities

concerned.

12. With regard to representativeness, the decree provides that *pleno iure* members of an association are to participate, at least indirectly, in the process of electing the central governing body at international level (art. 3).

13. With regard to the renewal of positions in government, the decree limits to five years the maximum length of each term of office in the central governing body at international level (art. 1), to a maximum of ten consecutive years the exercise of all positions in this body (art. 2 § 1), with the possibility of re-election only after a vacancy of one term (art. 2 § 2), except for the case of the moderator, whose functions can be exercised independently of the time already spent in other positions within the central governing body (art. 2 § 3). The position of moderator can be held for a maximum of ten years in total, after which it is not possible to access this position again (art. 2 § 4).

14. Acknowledging the key role played by founders in many international associations or entities, in approving statutes, the Dicastery has often granted stability to the positions in government exercised by these founders. In doing so, the Dicastery has sought to allow sufficient time to ensure that the charism received by them might be appropriately received in the Church and be faithfully assimilated by members. By virtue of this decree, the Dicastery reserves the power to dispense founders from the limits set out in it (art. 5), if it considers this opportune for the development and stability of the association or entity, and if a dispensation corresponds to the clear will of the central governing body.

15. The Dicastery is confident that this decree will be received in the appropriate spirit of filial obedience and ecclesial communion that so many international associations of the faithful and international entities demonstrate in exemplary fashion, and that the pastoral motivation for this decree will be fully understood, born as it is from the desire of Mother-Church to help its children progress towards full ecclesial maturity. The Dicastery gives thanks to the Lord for the precious gift of these international entities, committed to announcing the Risen Christ and to transforming the world according to the Gospel.
