



Religious Law and Consultation Newsletter

Chapters, Councils and E-Participation

Use of web-conferencing and teleconferencing has greatly increased over the past decades as organizations, including religious institutes, seek to reduce cost, travel time and environmental impact associated with face-to-face meetings. Those who have used these tools successfully have found ways to balance the potential obstacles of decreased inter-personal contact and difficulties of full participation of those at a distance. It is generally helpful to have policies in place that specify:

1. Which meetings can be held by audio-conference and which by video-conference,
2. Verification of the identity of participants and speakers,
3. Tools used and the ability to hear and be heard by all,
4. Access to written materials,
5. Whether counsel or consent can be sought at a virtual meeting, and how this can be verified,
6. Minutes or recording of the meeting.

In time, councils and committees can gain sufficient familiarity with these tools to enable them to hold effective meetings. Due to the limited number of people present, the logistics of ensuring adequate equipment and orientation is more manageable for these groups than for Chapters. It is still important to



Upcoming Webcasts

Councils, Chapters and Virtual Participation
May 2018

Mission and Catholic Identity
August 2018

Mission and Catholic Identity
August 2018

Collaborative Governance
November 2018

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

[For more information and to register](#)

Format: Live, On-Demand or CD-ROM

Cost: \$65 for Live or On-Demand;
\$75 for CD-ROM

Past programs are available [here](#).

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periodically review the use and effectiveness of e-participation. In migrating these tools to assemblies and Chapters, the same concerns arise, but they are multiplied because of the relatively larger group of persons involved and the longer time for a Chapter. The benefits would include reduced cost, travel time and environmental impact, and increased participation, the challenges include decreased inter-personal contact and difficulties of full participation of those virtually present.

Parsing Canons 631-633 on Chapters in religious institutes, we find that Chapters exercise the supreme authority in the institute or for a provincial Chapter, for the province, and that they act according to the norms set out in the constitutions and in proper law. The composition of Chapters should “represent the entire institute” as “a true sign of its unity in charity.” Thus composed, it is responsible for 1) protecting the spiritual patrimony of the institute, 2) promoting renewal, 3) electing the supreme moderator, and 4) treating affairs of greater importance and issuing general norms (Can. 631 §1). The constitutions are to define the composition and power of the Chapter, while the proper law determines the order of celebration, particularly the procedure for election and deliberation (Can. 631 §2). Provinces, communities and members “can freely send wishes and suggestions” to the general Chapter (Can. 631 §3).

It is for proper law to determine the nature, authority, composition, way of proceeding and time of celebration of the Chapter. (Can. 632) Other forums of participation, e.g. assemblies or pre-

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Chapter gatherings should enable the participation of all the members for the good of the entire institute or community.

A Chapter is a spiritual event that lasts for days or weeks. In addition to the Chapter meetings, it includes liturgy and ritual, prayer, informal gathering and other means of building the solidarity of the capitular assembly. Unlike other meetings, presence at a Chapter or community assembly includes more than hearing and being heard. For this reason, it is hard to imagine how a member of the assembly could fully participate in the entire assembly through virtual means. Since the “way of proceeding” and “manner of handling affairs” is left to proper law, an institute may wish to indicate in its proper law the possibility for the inclusion of 'virtual' participants in assemblies and Chapters. It would be important that the entire event be planned to include virtual participation, rather than adding this element as an afterthought. Careful planning can enable the fuller participation of members in all aspects of the celebration, aesthetic and spiritual elements of the Chapter, not only in the meetings and deliberation.

In thinking through the use of teleconferencing at Chapters, one could draw an analogy to the participation of various language groups at a Chapter, necessitating simultaneous translation. While the translations may be far from perfect, they do allow the participation of members from various language groups, and a broader representation from the entire institute (Can. 631 §1). Here an effort must be made to ensure that the language groups have adequate opportunity to hear and be heard by others in the Chapter. The same situation arises when a member is sight-impaired

or hearing-impaired and requires special accommodation to enable them to participate in a Chapter. On the one hand the additional voices are valued as a fuller representation of the institute, on the other hand, there are challenges to the full participation of these members. In the same way, use of teleconferencing or video conferencing may enable a broader participation and better representation of the entire institute, enabling those prohibited from attending to be virtually present.

It may also be possible to incorporate partial participation in an assembly or Chapter. This may be accomplished by streaming some presentations or reports from the Chapter, or through inviting individuals or groups into dialogue with the capitular assembly for specific purposes. In each of these situations, the virtual participation changes the conversation and influences the outcomes of the Chapter.

1. Streaming presentations and reports is a way of allowing the Chapter or assembly to share its deliberation with the entire institute or community without a plan for those listening to provide any response or interaction. This might be an enhanced way of sending out periodic reports from the Chapter or assembly. This helps in one goal of the Chapter, namely renewal of the institute, it also helps make the Chapter participants more conscious of the various members of the institute for whom and in whose name they are deliberating.

2. Inviting individuals and groups into dialogue with the Chapter or assembly through tele- or video-conferencing might be a way of enhancing the reporting from different areas or regions of the institute. It broadens the information and participation without actually making those at a distance

members of the Chapter or assembly. In this way it may also be possible to bring in individuals or groups with particular perspectives or expertise.

3. Unavoidable absence. Another option for use of virtual presence would be the case of a member of the Chapter who is unavoidably absent for some part of the time. For example if someone is unable to arrive until a day or two after the beginning of the gathering, it may be possible to ameliorate their absence by providing teleconferencing for the time of the absence. It is presumed here that the individual would be present for a majority of the Chapter and would be able to fully participate in those segments.

In each of these cases, there are several important technical considerations:

1. Ensure that the technology is adequate and technical difficulties do not unduly interrupt the flow of the event; have a back up plan.

2. Ensure that reasonable security measures were taken to ensure that proper persons were involved in the teleconference or video-conference and that confidentiality proper to the Chapter or assembly be maintained.

In conclusion, teleconferencing and video-conferencing can be used to enhance Chapters and assemblies of religious institutes. Participation in the entire event through web-, tele- or video-conference presents significant challenges. If this is to be carried out, these challenges must be foreseen and addressed in the proper law of the institute and in the planning and celebration of the Chapter.

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For more information on this topic, consider registering for May's webcast exploring these issues in further detail. Register here.

Please let me know if I can be of assistance to your community.

Sincerely,
Amy Hereford