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THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE: FROM THE EARLY CHURCH TO THE 19TH CENTURY

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Abstract. This article is drawn from a broader thesis devoted to the Societies of Apostolic Life and presents a synthesized version of Part One, entitled "*Historical Profile: From Antiquity to the Second Vatican Council.*" Using the criteria articulated in canon 673 §1 of the 1917 Code of Canon Law—namely, life in common under the governance of superiors according to an approved constitution, and the absence of the three public vows of obedience, chastity, and poverty—the study seeks to reconstruct the historical development of Societies of Apostolic Life.

Beginning with the biblical and early Christian experience, the article traces the emergence and evolution of the principal Societies of Apostolic Life chronologically, alongside several lesser-known foundations. Particular attention is given to the historical contexts and concrete ecclesial circumstances that shaped their distinctive juridical configurations. The analysis highlights how these epochal contingencies contributed to the gradual crystallization of specific forms of apostolic life, which were later codified as *societates sive clericorum sive laicorum* in the 1917 Code and subsequently as Societies of Apostolic Life in the 1983 Code of Canon Law.

***Keywords*:** Constitutions; juridical form; Society of Apostolic Life; *Societates sive clericorum sive laicorum*; vows

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Introduction

A careful observation of the Church shows a heteroclite assembly composed of men, women, children, and adults gathered in various states of life. In addition to individual believers, there are also groups within the Church that come together in communities and associations. Among them are the societies of apostolic life. They are part of the architecture of the Church and more specifically of the Code of Canon Law that clearly states that:

> Societies of apostolic life resemble institutes of consecrated life; their members, without religious vows, pursue the apostolic purpose proper to the society and, leading a life in common as brothers or sisters according to their proper manner of life, strive for the perfection of charity through the observance of the constitutions.[1]

The *Annuario Pontificio*[2] lists around 50 societies of apostolic life of pontifical right, both male and female.

The present article aims to study their evolution from a historical perspective, presenting the historical context and the reasons why they took on a different form, which subsequently led to what is now called the society of apostolic life. In this regard, the criteria of can. 673 §1 CIC 17 is used, since CIC 17 had the merit of grouping them for the first time under a single terminology. The criteria of can. 673 §1 CIC 17 are essentially two: living in common under the governance of superiors and the absence of the three usual public vows.

1. Prehistory of the Apostolic Life

1.1 Jesus and the First Christian Communities

The historical profile of societies of apostolic life necessarily begins with a prehistoric background. Two things must be taken

[1] Can. 731 §1.

[2] *Annuario Pontificio 2021*, 1406-1416; 1626-1627.

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into consideration: life in common and the diversity of status among Christians. The biblical icon to which they could be linked is the style Jesus adopted with his disciples. It is a communal lifestyle dedicated to the apostolate without recourse to any legal constraints. Jesus gathered around him a community of apostles with whom he shared his life, without this being preceded or conditioned by any particular legal bond.[3] They all devoted themselves essentially to preaching the kingdom of God. Subsequently, this lifestyle is found in the early Christian communities led by the apostles and, after them, by their successors. The same life in common is found with a certain consistency in the first two centuries of the Church. It is interesting to note that community life and the apostolate did not change the status of those involved.

If the example of life in common, with dedication to apostolic activities, is relevant to the prehistory of societies of apostolic life, further elements to be considered are the structure and organization of the Church as desired by its founder. From the beginning, the early Christian communities were quite heterogeneous, with various ministries and states of life. Experiences of life in common for greater evangelical perfection, as well as for a specific apostolic purpose, were frequent in them. However, this did not change their state of life or legal status. If at the beginning of the Church there were states of life such as clerics, virgins, widows, and so on, it cannot be said that such a life in common for a specific apostolate constituted a state of life in itself.

1.2 Community Life of the Clergy

Another prehistoric background of the societies of apostolic life is the experiences of life in common among the clergy promoted from ancient times until the end of the first millennium. The legitimacy of

[3] The Bible considers various bonds such as covenants, oaths, and vows. Cf. John L. McKenzie, *Dizionario biblico*, edited by Bruno Maggioni (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice, 1981), 39; 445; 1047. As a further example, it is reported that in the Essene sect, candidates had to take solemn oaths. Cf. Flavio Giuseppe, *La guerra giudaica*, edited by Giuseppe Ricciotti (Turin: Società Editrice Internazionale, 1963), lib. 2, cap. 8, vers. 7.

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such a statement is based on the fact that the main elements of societies of life in common without vows of canon 673, CIC 17, are identical to those of life in common of the clergy that we find, for example, with Eusebius, Augustine, Gaudentius, Gregory the Great, and so on.

As bishop of Vercelli, Eusebius' first concern was preaching among the pagans and rural populations. This evangelization required a clergy prepared to assist the bishop. Consequently, he set himself two objectives: adequate preparation of his priests through the study and meditation of scripture and their sanctification through a life of prayer, chastity, and poverty. To achieve this goal, he conceived of a communal life for the clergy that would later be called *the episcopal coenobium*. From certain documents,[4] it can be inferred that it was a mixture of clerical and monastic life, in which the monastic character was intended to support the personal lives of the clergy, enabling them to be more effective in their pastoral work.

When he became bishop, Augustine gathered the clergy of the diocese in the bishop's house to live in common with them. He named this new foundation *monasterium clericorum*. In addition to the clerical status and the apostolate, one of the characteristic elements of the *monasterium clericorum* was the fact that no one was to own anything of their own, but everything was put in common and then distributed according to the needs of each individual.

Following the model established by Eusebius and Augustine, there was an expansion of community life among the clergy in various particular churches. Many other bishops, such as Fulgenzio of Ruspe, Caesarius of Arles, and Zeno of Verona, adopted the practice of communal life with their clergy.

The institution of life in common spread to England under the initiative of St. Gregory the Great. Having sent missionaries to convert

[4] It is essentially a letter from Saint Ambrose to the Church of Vercelli dated 396. Cf. Ambrose, *Epistola 63, Patrologia Latina* 16 (hereafter PL). In addition, there are several sermons by unknown authors. Cf. *Sermo* 20, *Ad S. martyris*, PL 57; Sermo 21, *Dum ad obsequia*, PL 57; *Sermo* 22, *Licet me fratres*, PL 57; *Sermo* 23, *Quamquam dilectissimi*, PL 57.

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the English, he issued a decree requiring the bishop and clergy to live in common and share their possessions, as in the early Church.[5] Over time, this peculiar initiative from a few bishops began to take on a much more binding legal dimension through episcopal or conciliar laws that established the obligation for secular clerics to live in common. From the sixth century onwards, the various councils that addressed the issue indicated life in common as the lifestyle of the clergy.[6]

Around the seventh and eighth centuries, life in common for the clergy began to experience a period of progressive decline. Reform in this area came about with the reform of Chrodegang through the *Regula canonicorum*. This rule established a life in common centered on the divine office, communal meals, and shared sleeping quarters, as well as mutual charity and the assiduous practice of spiritual life.[7] The principle of life in common promoted by Chrodegang was taken up and made almost mandatory by the Council of Verneuil.[8]

The canonesses provide another example worth mentioning. The term canonesses derives from the word canon in the feminine form,[9] Basically, they were women who lived in common like nuns and who, in some churches, devoted themselves to the divine office. However, they were different from the nuns. Basically, the nuns took their vows according to the rule of St. Benedict and lived according to that rule, while the canonesses were those who "*pleniter canonice vivant.*"[10]

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[5] Bede the Venerable, *Historia Ecclesia Gentis Anglorum*, lib. 1, cap. 27.

[6] Joseph Deroux, *La vie commune du clergé séculier* (Nîmes: Éditions Notre-Dame, 1937) 30, note 25.

[7] Chrodegang, *Regula canonicorum*, 313-332.

[8] Council of Verneuil (755), can. 11, in J.D. Mansi, ed., *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, 12, 582. Hereafter Mansi.

[9] Basil the Great, *De vera virginitate, Patrologia Graecae* 30 (hereafter PG), 796.

[10] Council of Magonza (813), can. 13, Mansi 14, 68-69.

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2. *Societates ante litteram*

2.1 Beguines and Beghards

Beguines were women, and Beghards were men. Their names refer to the followers of *beguinism*, a movement that, according to ancient sources, arose in the diocese of Liège during the 12th century. The era in which it was born was marked by great economic, cultural, and scientific change. The downside was the collapse of much of the religious fervor, which urgently required reform. The monastic renewal initiated by various monasteries was the gathering around them of various communities of the faithful animated by the desire for Christian perfection. The attempt by religious orders and the secular clergy to organize all these Christians gave rise to certain movements, including the Beguines.

Eager to fully live out the evangelical continence that was one of their fundamental characteristics, they gathered in small houses of communal living called beguinages. Beguinism was also an option for people who had decided to leave their family home with the desire to observe continence but could not live with the severity of monasteries, or could not find a place in them due to the large number of vocations. Some people still wanted to devote themselves to charitable works and pursue evangelical perfection without having to submit to any monastic rules[11]. The Beguines lived together in small houses near churches, chapels, and hospitals, leading a life in common without religious vows. They also had the option of living alone while maintaining a bond of charity with the other members of the community. The Beguines were not required to live in seclusion like nuns, but they had to remain within the beguinage.[12]

[11] A. Mens, "Beghine, begardi, beghinaggi," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, directed by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 1 (Rome: Edizione Paoline, 1974), 1168-1169.

[12] Zeger Bernard Van Espen, *Jus Ecclesiasticum universum*, I, 743-747.

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One of the most significant differences between them and religious life was the fact that the members did not take vows. They committed themselves to chastity and obedience to ecclesiastical authorities for as long as they lived in the beguinage.

2.2 Brethren of the Common Life

The brothers and sisters of the common life are closely linked to the *devotio moderna*, a spiritual movement that originated and spread throughout the 15th century in the Netherlands, Germany, and almost all of Europe. They wanted to make the evangelical counsels accessible to those who could not or did not want to enter a monastery. Their main characteristic was their desire to detach themselves from the world through a devout life in common and apostolic work. However, they lived in ordinary houses, forming small communities composed of clerics and individual laypeople with equal rights and duties. They led a life of prayer, study, and work. There were no religious vows or obligation of stability; therefore, one could leave whenever one wanted. Throughout their time living in community, they had to observe chastity and poverty, placing their possessions at the community's disposal.

The livelihoods of the brothers and sisters living in community were ensured by the proceeds of their work and by the sharing of goods.[13]

2.3 Oblates of the Monastery of Tor de' Specchi

The monastery of Tor de' Specchi is a unique foundation. Its origins recall the figure of Saint Frances of Rome. The history of the Oblates began when Francesca made her Benedictine oblation together with some of her Roman friends, who, although they wanted to be united by their love for Jesus, could not leave the world to retire to a monastery.

[13] M. Dortel-Claudot and G. Rocca, "Sorelle della vita comune," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, compiled by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 8 (Rome: Edizione Paoline, 1974), 1927.

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The formula used for the oblation was a reworking of St. Benedict's formula. Instead of the word *profiteor* used by monks, the Oblates used the verb to offer: *offero,*[14] that is, they intended to participate in the merits and suffrages of the monastic congregation without the desire to bind themselves.[15]

This initial group was given the name Oblates of Saint Mary, the nucleus of the future congregation of the Oblates of Tor de' Specchi. This led to the creation of secular oblates, essentially associations of women who, to live their faith more intensely, devoted themselves to spiritual and temporal works of mercy while remaining with their families. A further development occurred when, at the request of some widows in the group, it was decided to adopt a communal lifestyle. However, unlike monasteries, which were the only recognized form of communal life for women at that time, these communities had a very flexible organization and were free from legal bonds. Unlike monastic life, it did not require cloistered seclusion or solemn vows. In addition, they had the distinction of living in the city, unlike traditional monasteries. However, a significant change occurred in 1947, when their assembly requested that they be placed among religious institutes, given that the 1917 code had recognized institutes of simple vows. Therefore, in 1958, they were recognized as a religious congregation of pontifical right with special dependence on the Holy See.[16]

3. Birth and Development of Societies of Apostolic Life

Given the disappearance of the institute founded during the Middle Ages, as well as the transformation of the remaining ones into religious institutes, it is in the modern era, and especially in the

[14] P. Lugano, "L'istituzione delle oblate," *Rivista storica benedettina* 14 (1923): 274-275.

[15] L. Ponzileoni, *Vita di S. Francesca Romana*, 116-117.

[16] M.B. Rivaldi, "Oblate del monastero di Tor de' Specchi," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, compiled by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 6 (Rome: Edizione Paoline, 1980), 586.

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societies of priests founded around the 16th century, that we must look to determine the moment of the birth of societies of apostolic life.

In fact, the modern era has been marked by the emergence of many societies of secular clerics that still exist today and constitute a large part of the current societies of apostolic life. They can essentially be divided into two large groups: on the one hand, the institutes of secular clerics that arose from the 16th century onwards, with the Oratory of St. Philip Neri as their precursor. On the other hand, there are the institutes linked to the creation of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and the renewal of the Church's missionary activity. The precursor in this field is the Paris Foreign Missions Society, whose model also gave rise to various national, regional, or rite-specific missionary institutes.

3.1 Modern era

3.1.1 The Oratory of St. Philip Neri and the French Societies of Apostolic Life

From a chronological point of view and in light of the criteria of the 1917 Code of canon law, the Confederation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri is the first officially established society of apostolic life that survives to this day. Based on its model, many other institutes were founded.

The Confederation of the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, whose members are called Oratorians, is intrinsically linked to the work and, above all, to the spirituality of St. Philip Neri, even though, certainly out of humility, he always defended himself against being considered its founder.[17]

The apostolic work of Philip was influenced by the particular economic and social context of Rome: economic misery, vices of

[17] A. Cistellini, "Oratoriani," in *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, compiled by Guerrino Pelliccia and Giancarlo Rocca, vol. 6 (Rome: Edizione Paoline, 1980), 764.

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all kinds, and counter-testimony from the clergy. Philip's goal was to invite the Roman people to conversion and to rekindle their zeal for the spiritual life by making the mysteries of the Christian life accessible to them. In addition to his dedication to the ministry of confession, he began to set aside moments for spiritual dialogue, meditation, and prayer in his small room. These moments of encounter were, in a way, the seed of the future oratory, which in turn would be the nucleus from which the Confederation of the Oratory[18] would arise.

From the outset, Philip had no intention of creating a new institute. However, some of his friends wished to embrace the priestly life in the service of the Oratory. Added to this was the fact that he established a community life for some priests in charge of a parish entrusted to him: the Oratorian community from which the new institute would emerge a few years later. With the papal bull *Copiosus in misericordia*, Gregory XII established the institute in 1575, naming it the Congregation of the Oratory of Secular Clerics and recognizing Filippo Neri as its provost.[19]

Through the Congregation of the Oratory, Philip wanted an exemplary type of cleric in the secular clergy, but without harsh religious mortification or the total renunciation of material goods. His wish, therefore, was that his spiritual sons remain in the secular clergy without vows or promises, which is why he always refused vows in the institute.

One of the fundamental characteristics of the institute is the total autonomy of the houses among themselves. Although they share the spirituality and charism of St. Philip Neri, the newly founded houses are independent from the older ones. They maintain only a spiritual bond with them. They are houses *sui iuris* that enjoy full self-determination.

In the chronological order of birth, the second society that presents the characteristics of a society of apostolic life is the Oratory of France. It was canonically erected on May 8, 1613, with the papal

[18] The Confederation of the Oratory derives its name from the place designated for orison (prayer). Cf. Oratorio di San Filippo Neri, *Costituzioni*, n. 1.

[19] ACOR, *Collectanea vetustiorum ac fundamentalium*, 12-13.

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bolla *Sacrosanctae romanae Ecclesiae*.[20] The Oratory was founded on the initiative of Pierre de Bérulle, a priest of the secular clergy who had noticed that the higher clergy, although educated, were for the most part without sincere vocation but rather attached to privileges and careerism, and therefore without apostolic zeal. The lower clergy, on the other hand, had received no serious training. In addition, many clerics led unedifying and scandalous lives. Added to this was the fact that many bishops still hesitated to implement the recommendations of the Council of Trent regarding the formation of the clergy. Inspired by the Council of Trent, he wanted an institute capable of restoring and glorifying the very idea of the Catholic priesthood; an institute that would work to restore the priestly order to the fullness of holiness, without which it cannot healthily fulfill its divine mission.

Like St. Philip Neri a few years earlier, he did not want to create a new religious congregation whose members would be bound by religious vows. He simply wanted a society of secular priests united by their priestly commitments and submission to the bishop in their apostolate. Although he wanted the institute to be highly centralized under the responsibility of the superior on whom all the other houses depended, the members would not be bound by religious vows or similar constraints. The only bonds they will have will be those of the priesthood. They therefore remain secular priests and not regular priests. The community life that distinguishes them is not an end in itself but rather a means, an aid in view of their apostolate.

Another society of apostolic life is the Congregation of the Mission, whose members are usually called Vincentians or Lazarists. It was founded by St. Vincent de Paul. For Vincent, the material and spiritual poverty of people could not be remedied without concrete material aid to the poor and religious instruction for the people. This instruction required prior and adequate training for the clergy in accordance with the guidelines of the recent Council of Trent. The Congregation of the Mission would be the instrument for its

[20] Paul V, *constitution Sacrosanctae romanae Ecclesiae*, 10 May 1613.

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implementation. The main purpose of the institute was rural missions.[21] In addition to this, there was also the preaching of spiritual exercises to ordinands.

The institute was founded as an organized group of secular priests with the clear intention of not being a religious institute.[22] It was presented as a mission.[23] Therefore, at the outset, the element considered most significant in conferring identity on the new institute was not the communal life of the secular clerics but their missionary activity.

Always on the back of the reforms initiated by the Council of Trent, the Society of the Priests of Saint Sulpice, commonly known as the Sulpicians, was founded by Jean-Jacques Olier in the seventeenth century. In starting the institute, Olier had behind him not only the experience of Vincent de Paul, whose conferences and missions he attended. His fundamental intuition was, above all, indebted to the plan conceived by Father Condren, director of the Oratory of France. Condren had gathered some of his spiritual sons, including Olier, with the intention, although not entirely clear at the time, of training them to serve as the foundation and direction of seminaries.[24]

Together with two other friends, Olier began a communal life. Shortly afterwards, they were joined by a few seminarians. Thus began the communal life that would become the Sulpicians' essential characteristic. At the request of the parish priest of Saint Sulpice, this group of priests was entrusted with the pastoral care of the parish;

[21] Luigi Mezzadri and Jose M. Román, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, vol. I (Rome: Edizione CLV, 1992), 113.

[22] Vincent De Paul, *Corrispondenze*, XIII, 205.

[23] A term commonly used to refer to any apostolic activity that, by its nature, depended on the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith, even in so-called Catholic countries. Cf. Mezzadri and Roman, *Storia della Congregazione della Missione*, 62.

[24] Pierre Pourrat, *Jean-Jacques Olier, fondateur de Saint-Sulpice* (Paris : E. Flammarion, 1932), 95.

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from there, the name *Priests of Saint Sulpice* was given to the members of the future institute. From the very beginning, they rejected the idea of religious vows and the establishment of the community as a religious congregation, preferring to be bound by ties of charity.[25] They were therefore not to be tied to a religious house and, above all, they were not to claim to be a separate entity distinct from the secular clergy.[26] The only solemn vows were those of baptism and priesthood, while the spirit was clerical. Since the members of the community were to train people called to be part of the secular clergy, the idea of a religious congregation would have been completely inappropriate. Finally, if we consider the bishops' apprehension towards congregations beyond their control, it is easier to understand why Olier rejected the idea of a religious congregation.

Pius IX's decree attributed to the society the nature of a congregation of priests with the character of a society without vows.

The Congregation of Jesus and Mary, also known as the Eudists, was founded by a priest named Jean Eudes, a former member of the Oratory of France. He was convinced that the primary vocation of every priest is to aspire intensely to a holy life. The appropriate place to realize this ideal, according to him, was the Oratory founded a few years earlier by Pierre de Bérulle.

His first pastoral experiences were marked by many charitable activities, but above all by popular missions. It was during these missions that Jean Eudes noticed certain difficulties, whose attempted solutions would be the real motivations behind the founding of the Eudists. These difficulties were fundamentally the mediocre and scandalous lives of many priests.[27] To remedy this, he began to hold formation and sharing meetings exclusively for priests. This soon changed the spiritual lives of many priests, with equally happy results at the pastoral level. Jean Eudes thus understood that the success of the missions and

[25] Jean Monval, *Les sulpiciens* (Paris : Grasset, 1934), 34.

[26] Monval, *Les sulpiciens*, 48.

[27] Jean Eudes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9, (Paris: P. Lethiellieux, 1906), 7.

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the conversion of the people inevitably depended on the clergy's prior conversion. He felt invested in the mission of reforming the secular clergy in accordance with what had been requested by the Council of Trent some time before. Moreover, this pious desire was in deep harmony with his vocation as a member of the Oratory.

However, his project met with much resistance within his own community, the Oratory, so he decided to leave and, with other diocesan priests, found a society of secular priests in which he could truly live his Oratorian vocation, namely, the formation of candidates for the priesthood.

The primary intention, namely the creation and direction of seminaries, was accompanied by another purpose: pastoral activity, especially missions. The institute's purpose will be the effective criterion for determining its legal form. From the outset, the institute defined itself as purely priestly and secular, and the religious state was completely excluded.[28] No obligation beyond what was required by the priesthood was imposed on the members.

3.1.2 Italian Societies of Apostolic Life

After the experience of the 17th century, which gave rise to the societies studied above, it was not until the 19th century that new experiences of life in common without vows, especially dedicated to the apostolate, emerged. Due to the similarity of the context, the intention was almost the same as that pursued by St. Philip Neri, namely, the need for a religious and moral renewal of Christian life. The urgency of this renewal was felt and demanded most strongly in Rome, given the historical events: the French Revolution, the birth of modern states with the consequent protest against the temporal power of the Roman Pontiff, and the financial difficulties faced by the papacy. The

[28] Eudes, *Œuvres complètes*, vol. 9, 141.

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consequence of all this was a profound change in the Church, marked by a drastic decline in faith, devotion, and religious practice.[29]

Added to this was the fact that one of the consequences of both the French Revolution and Napoleonic policy was the suppression of many religious orders with solemn vows, especially contemplative ones, because they were considered socially useless. Those spared were essentially those whose apostolate was considered socially useful. Furthermore, within the Church itself, the non-religious form of the institutes was very welcome to the bishops, who were often wary of religious institutes and their exemptions.[30]

One of the first attempts at restoration in the face of the crisis described above came from Gaspare del Bufalo, a Roman priest and founder of the Institute of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, which originated in the League of Evangelical Workers. The latter was an association of secular priests who lived together under a rule and devoted themselves to popular missions. Gaspare joined the association but soon wanted to go far beyond the initial purpose. In fact, he wanted the popular missions to be aimed not only at the laity but also at clerics, as well as the expansion of activities outside the diocese of Rome. After the founder of the Workers of the Gospel was appointed bishop and then left, Gaspare became the main figure of reference, with the freedom to implement his ideas for the group's configuration.[31] The first canonical characteristic given to him was that of being an apostolic and communal nucleus of the secular clergy, following the example of St. Philip Neri. They were secular clerics who, although living together for a specific apostolate, still depended

[29] Karl Bihlmeyer and Hermann Tuechle, *Storia della Chiesa: L'epica moderna*, vol. 4 (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1973), 194.

[30] Eutimio Sastre Santos, *La vita religiosa nella storia della Chiesa e della società* (Milan: Àncora, 1997), 801.

[31] Mario Brotini, *Inizio ed evoluzione giuridica della Congregazione dei Missionari del Preziosissimo Sangue* (Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 2001), 22.

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on their bishop of origin for incardination.[32] In addition to the clerics, there were also lay people, the so-called serving brothers or coadjutors. They were essentially laypeople who were not directly involved in the institute's apostolate but lived their apostolic involvement indirectly through material service to the institute's clerics.

About two decades after the founding of the Missionaries of the Precious Blood, the Society of the Catholic Apostolate was established in Rome, whose members are usually called Pallottines, in reference to their founder, Vincent Pallotti. Moved by the missionary spirit that permeated the Church under the pontificate of Gregory XVI, he designed a plan for universal apostolate based on three points: a pious institution of Catholic apostolate to spread the faith among non-Catholics, an apostolate to preserve, revive, and increase the faith among Catholics, and an institution of universal charity dedicated to works of spiritual and corporal mercy[33]. Thus, the Pious Society of the Catholic Apostolate was born, which promptly engaged in various activities: aid to the poor in Rome, foreign missions, organizing preaching, conducting spiritual exercises, etc.

One of the notable characteristics of this Pious Society was its openness to all. It was, in fact, characterized by the sacred union between clergy and laity, secular and regular clergy, ecclesiastical hierarchy, and lay faithful of both sexes.[34] Pallotti's initial intention was not to create a new regular order but to reinvigorate the apostolate of the Church with the participation of all Christian faithful of any state or social condition. It was the group that lived in community with Pallotti that would eventually become the congregation of priests and brothers of the Society of the Catholic Apostolate; it was mainly composed of members of the secular clergy.[35]

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[32] Missionaries of the Precious Blood (CPPS), *Regolamenti*, I, 278-300.

[33] Giovanni Hettenkofer, *Propositi ed aspirazioni del ven. Vincenzo Pallotti* (Rome, 1922), 281.

[34] Vincenzo Pallotti, *Opere Complete*, IV, 346.

[35] Pallotti, *Opere Complete*, III, 83.

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A clarification regarding the organization of the society came in 1846 with the rule of the congregation of priests and coadjutor brothers of the Catholic Apostolate. Vincent distinguished between a congregation and a society. The congregation was the central nucleus responsible for guiding the whole society, with its members living in a community. The society, on the other hand, was the second layer, composed of the faithful who assisted the congregation. For Vincent Pallotti, there was unity between the priesthood of the regulars and that of the seculars. This is why he did not want vows but only promises. Furthermore, he believed that the members should serve as a point of union between the secular and regular clergy. Precisely for this reason, the clerics belonging to it should in no way be called regular clerics, but priests of the Congregation of the Catholic Apostolate. These priests also had the particularity of living in a community under a rule.[36] This was another element that distinguished them profoundly from ordinary secular clerics. Pallotti, therefore, never wanted his institute to be a religious congregation. Nor did he want it to be merely secular. It was essentially a cross between regular life and secular life, hence the form and legal configuration he gave it.

3.2 Period of Missionary Expansion

One context that undoubtedly favored the birth and development of societies of apostolic life was the period of missionary expansion. This period was marked by the birth of the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*, which was certainly a key factor.

In fact, it was born out of a desire to free the missions from the colonialist label, to preserve their strictly ecclesial and evangelizing dimensions, and to promote the emergence of a native clergy and the progressive establishment of a local hierarchy. From the outset, the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith showed its preference for missionaries belonging to the secular clergy rather than to traditional religious orders, which prevailed over other missionaries, thanks to the numerous privileges and powers they enjoyed. The climate

[36] Pallotti, *Opere Complete*, VII, 4-5.

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thus outlined could only pave the way and encourage the foundation of societies of secular clerics dedicated to missionary activity.

The pioneers in this field were the *Missions Etrangères de Paris*, whose nature and legal configuration were of paramount importance as they served as a reference point for subsequent missionary societies. After the failure of various Italian attempts to found an institute of secular clerics dedicated to the missions, the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide turned to France to seek the political and financial support necessary to start an institute capable of responding appropriately to its directives on missionary activity. The foundation of the *Missions Etrangères de Paris* fits into this context.

The project was mainly carried out by the French priests Francesco Pallu and Lambert de la Motte, who began by founding a seminary to prepare priests for the mission by all appropriate means. In 1664, the seminary was confirmed by the papal legate.[37] With it, a new type of institute composed of bishops and secular clerics began, whose purpose was the apostolate in mission territories. The society also has the distinction of giving great importance to lay people from its inception.[38] From the outset, the institute did not consider itself an order or a religious congregation, but a society of secular clerics who, in response to the desire of the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* to involve the secular clergy more closely in the work of missionary evangelization, dedicated themselves to the mission in those territories under the direct authority of *Propaganda Fide*. This secular form was then confirmed in the society's first regulations, drawn up in 1700, which would essentially guide the society for many years. The society was directly dependent on the Sacred Congregation of *Propaganda Fide and, in the missions,* under the responsibility of the local bishops.

In Italy, the missionary work of the secular clergy is carried out by the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME) under

[37] Archives Missions Étrangères de Paris, vol. 166, 264.

[38] Louis Baudiment, *Francois Pallu - Principal Fondateur de la Societe des Missions Etrangeres* (1626-1684) (Paris : Beauchesne, 1934), 73.

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the impetus of the popes and some members of the Italian Church who helped to increase interest in missionary work among Italian Catholics and awareness among the clergy of the need to play a more active role in evangelization. PIME is the result of the merger of two previous seminaries for foreign missions. As indicated in the current constitutions of PIME, these are the Seminary for Foreign Missions in Milan and the Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul for Foreign Missions in Rome.

The former was born out of Pius IX's desire to see the long-awaited seminary for training young priests for foreign missions established in Lombardy. This project was initiated by Angelo Ramazzotti and then continued by Giuseppe Marinoni, a Milanese diocesan priest. The first members were already priests and clerics. From the outset, there was also a presence of lay people, who would later participate in the first expeditions.[39] In approving the Seminary, the bishops of Lombardy all committed themselves to making it an institute of secular clerics, in which its members retained their incardination in their own dioceses even as they exercised their missionary apostolate under the responsibility of the seminary.

The second seminary is the Pontifical Roman Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul for the Missions, founded by Pietro Avanzini, a Roman priest.[40] Unlike the Lombard seminary, the seminary in Rome already had internationality as its initial purpose and was exclusively clerical.[41] Following the example of the Lombard seminary, the founder wanted to avoid at all costs the seminary in Rome becoming a religious congregation.

Subsequently, the two aforementioned seminaries felt the need to unite. In fact, at that time, there were many colleges for missions in

[39] Piero Gheddo, *PIME: 150 anni di missione* (Bologna: EMI, 2000), 58.

[40] A. Bassan, "Il PIME – Monsignore Pietro Avanzini," *Il Vincolo* 151 (1986): 195-199.

[41] Daniele Mazza, *Le radici romane del Pime. Il pontificio seminario romano per le missioni* 1871-1926 (Bologna: EMI, 2008), 33.

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Italy and few young people who wanted to become missionaries, so there was a need to join forces and create a national missionary institute modeled on the Foreign Missions of Paris. The union took place on May 23, 1926, with a *motu proprio* from Pius XI.[42]

In addition to the aforementioned societies, there were also the Society of African Missions, founded by the Frenchman Melchior de Marion Brésillac, and the Missionaries of Africa, founded by Cardinal Lavigerie. In both cases, the founders' idea was to create seminaries for diocesan clergy who were going to serve in the mission countries, especially in Africa. Although they lived in communities, they did not take religious vows.

Many other national and ritual missionary institutes were founded later. Among them are for example the *Instituto Español de Misiones Extranjeras*, the Quebec Foreign Mission Society, the Portuguese Missionary Society, the Missionaries of Guadalupe from Mexico, the Korean Missionary Society, the Missionary Society of the Philippines, the Missionary Society of Saint Paul founded by the Nigerian Episcopal Conference, and the Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle in India which is an expression of the missionary revival of the Syro-Malabar Church.

4. Some Feminine Societies of Apostolic Life

Somewhat rare and little known, at least in terms of their canonical form, which is often confused with religious institutes, women's societies of apostolic life are a clear example of the dynamism of canon law in terms of the organization of states of life. The 2019 *Annuario Pontificio* lists a dozen, the largest of which is the Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul.

[42] Pius IX, *Cum catholica ecclesia*, March 26, 1860, Documents, https://www.vatican.va/content/pius-ix/it/documents/breve-cum-catholica-ecclesia-26-marzo-1860.html, 21 June 1874.

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4.1 The Daughters of Charity of Saint Vincent de Paul

The institute was born from the collaboration between Vincent and Louise de Marillac. The first nucleus was formed by a few girls from the countryside who had come to Paris driven by the desire to serve the poor.[43] The idea then emerged to gather them all together in one place rather than leaving them scattered. Vincent entrusted them to Louise, who lived in a house where they went to live. Thus began their life together.

The initial plan was not to found a new institute but to bring them together to make their service to the poor more effective. Some of them were also allowed to take private vows to be renewed each year, a practice that was very rare at the time. In fact, they led a life somewhat similar to that of religious women, although they were not legally recognized as such.

The initial commitment to assisting the poor was soon joined by the education of girls in the countryside and the care of orphans, the elderly, etc.

The need to ensure a more stable and binding legal framework that would guarantee the community's homogeneity and stability without becoming a religious institute led to the search for a solution that straddled the lay and canonical religious life of the time. In fact, under the law in force at the time, a female religious institute was synonymous with a cloistered life. Since apostolic activity was the primary and essential objective of the community and required the girls to go out constantly, it was impossible to take the form of a religious institute.

Upon approval, the institute was placed under the direct guidance of Vincent and, after him, under the direction of the superiors of the Congregation of the Mission, who would therefore be its superiors. Thus, for the first time in the Church in modern times, an institute with a unique characteristic was born: women living in common without a cloister and mainly engaged in apostolic activities. Vincent's opinion on this matter was unequivocal: they are not religious but rather like

[43] Daughters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul (FCSVP), *Genèse de la Compagnie*, 4.

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seculars, and they carry out their activities under the direction of the parish priest of the place where they are.[44]

4.2 Some Recently Founded Feminine Societies of Apostolic Life

Caritas Socialis is a society of apostolic life founded in 1919 in Vienna.[45] Its origins go back to Hildegard Burjan. Having moved to Vienna for work, she came into contact with the serious social problems in that city. She therefore began working in social work, committing herself to improving the working conditions of female domestic workers. As time went by, she realized that all these social problems could not be solved with temporary solutions alone. Rather, it was necessary to find people who would commit themselves permanently to works of charity. However, certain situations of social hardship were difficult for priests or religious to access. In other words, being a cleric or a nun was a barrier to accessing certain environments. What was needed were true missionaries of the people who, relying on an ecclesial structure of community life and supported by the evangelical counsels, could move anywhere without external restrictions on dress or seclusion.[46] Hildegard Burjan wanted to create an apostolic community that, through its loose structures, would enable a social apostolate. With the bishop of Vienna's agreement, she founded the *Caritas Socialis* association. To meet the need for stronger commitment without compromising flexibility, promises were established in the regulations revised upon incorporation in 1922.

Another feminine society of apostolic life is the Society of the Heart of Jesus,[47] established as an institute of common life without vows under diocesan law on September 15, 1945. The society was

[44] FCSVP, *Genèse de la Compagnie*, 13.

[45] Caritas Socialis, *Grundbestimmungen der Gemeinschaft Apostolischen Lebens Caritas Socialis*, 1.

[46] Irmgard Burjan-Domanig, *Una donna di azione sociale: Ildegarda Burjan* (Milan: Ancora, 1963), 50.

[47] Society of the Heart of Jesus, *Constitutions*, n. 58.

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founded by the Jesuit Francesco Biró, who realized how poor the religious education of not only girls but also Hungarian women was, and that something had to be done about it. He had the idea of enlisting the help of women to take on the apostolic activities he had in mind. To organize the various activities, Francesco Biró wanted some women to live in the community and others to have the option of living alone or with their families, while still working in the spirit of the institute. The next step was the taking of vows by the first members on January 1, 1921. The desire not to be hindered by the structures of religious institutes, combined with the presence of people who, although members of the institute, lived with their families, led the institute towards a form of community life without religious vows.

There are many other feminine societies of apostolic life, such as *Seraphische Liebeswerk Solothurn,* founded in 1924 in Switzerland, and the Sisters of Social Service, founded in 1923 in Budapest.

4.3 The Uniqueness of the *Dominicaines du Saint-Esprit*

The Dominican Sisters of the Holy Spirit are a society of apostolic life founded in France. They were founded by the diocesan priest and Dominican tertiary Victor-Alain Berto. The institute originated from a group of young teachers who took over the management of an orphanage created by the founder. Among them were two who had long nurtured a deep desire to consecrate themselves to God. They therefore drew up a rule of life that they followed privately. In addition, some of them had become Dominican tertiaries and had taken a vow of sacred virginity. Subsequently, in order to better organize their common life, they decided to adopt a rule of life. The general idea was to restore in France a non-religious form of Dominican life characterized by the pursuit of evangelical perfection, life in common, and only the vow of chastity.[48] With the consent of the bishop of Vannes, they were established as a fraternity of women associated with the Dominican Order; a sodality proper to that Order. The sodality is not a religious

[48] Sodalite Des Vierges Dominicaines Du Saint Esprit (ADSE), *pièce* nº II. 1, art. 4.

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congregation, and its members are not religious, but rather imitate St. Catherine of Siena.

The first statutes insisted that they were not religious but led a life that could be called *virginal* according to an ancient custom in the Church and that tended towards evangelical perfection. The only vow required was that of private chastity, which was taken secretly.

With the creation of the Pontifical Commission *Ecclesia Dei*, the sodality was established as a society of apostolic life of the Dominican Third Order, with the possibility of using the liturgical books of 1962 and the 1965 missal.[49] They are therefore a society of apostolic life that, in accordance with Dominican spirituality, first and foremost observes the contemplative life. The apostolate is exercised mainly in schools, in conjunction with other educational and teaching activities: catechism, conferences, libraries, etc.

Conclusion

The historical profile of apostolic societies is best understood by first considering their prehistory. The biblical icon to which they could be linked is the style adopted by Jesus with his disciples, that is, community life dedicated to the apostolate without recourse to any bond. Subsequently, this lifestyle is found in the early Christian communities led by the apostles and, after them, by their successors.

The various experiences of life in common among the clergy from ancient times until the end of the first millennium are also helpful in understanding the prehistoric background.

In the Middle Ages, new forms of communal living without vows began to emerge, almost all of them promoted by lay people. Although all these realities have now disappeared, it does not seem wrong to consider them the true ancestors of societies of apostolic life. The modern era, considered by some authors to be the precise moment of the birth of societies of apostolic life, saw the emergence of many

[49] ADSE, *pièce* nº 0, 6.

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societies of secular clerics that still exist today and constitute a large part of the current societies of apostolic life. They can essentially be divided into two large groups: The institutes of secular clerics founded from the 16th century onwards, whose precursor was the Oratory of St. Philip Neri, and the missionary institutes whose precursor is the *Missions étrangères de Paris,* from whose model various national, regional, or specifically rite-related missionary institutes were also born.

As for women's institutes, there was no desire to completely exclude religious life, to which there was, all the same, a real attraction. Rather, there was a need to escape the rigidity of the rules (especially cloistered life) then in force for consecrated women, to be able to better exercise their apostolate.



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