



Pope Leo and General Chapters

Fr. Carino Hodder, OP

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Sr. Carino Hodder, OP is a Dominican Sister of St Joseph based in Portsmouth Diocese, UK. She made profession in 2019 and assists her community with their apostolate of faith formation for parish catechists. She is also the author of The Dignity of Women in the Modern World (Catholic Truth Society, 2025) and writes regularly for The Lamp.

Since his election as pope in May 2025, there has been much speculation about the ways in which Pope Leo XIV's background as an Augustinian friar—and also as an Augustinian superior—might inform his style of papal governance. One place in which that influence has already become very clear is in his addresses to consecrated religious. To date, Pope Leo has given around thirty addresses to groups of consecrated religious, the majority of whom are members of institutes of pontifical right gathered in Rome for their General Chapters. While these addresses are brief, they are also theologically dense and canonically precise, using the occasion of the General Chapter as an entry-point into a deeper meditation on the nature of the consecrated religious life and its ongoing call to renewal and reform.

As such, these addresses serve a twofold purpose. Firstly they are excellent reflections on the spiritual significance of the General Chapter in the life of a religious institute, which all religious would benefit from reading. But they also serve as an insight of Pope Leo's broader vision of ecclesial governance which is of interest to all the faithful.

There are three key dimensions of the Pope's vision of religious life which are worth examining in more detail. These dimensions can be summarized in the Pope's own words

to the consecrated members of Regnum Christi in January of this year: “charism, governance and communion.”¹

The first, charism, is perhaps the most common theme we find in Pope Leo’s addresses to religious. His teaching on the founding charism follows, and often explicitly quotes, the ecclesial documents *Lumen Gentium* on the nature and mission of the Church, *Iuveniscit Ecclesia* on the relationship between hierarchic and charismatic gifts, and *Mutuae Relationes* on the relations between bishops and religious institutes. His approach is perhaps best expressed in a brief reflection he gave to the General Chapters of the Conventual Franciscans and the Trinitarians, using a painting of their two founders, St. Francis and St. John de Matha, located in the Basilica of St. John Lateran. In that painting, St. Francis, kneeling before Pope Innocent III, “demonstrates his docility to the Church, presenting his project not as his own but as a divine gift.” St. John de Matha meanwhile, standing and holding the newly-written Rule of the institute, “shows the approved text, after study and discernment, as the culmination of a task that was absolutely necessary to accomplish the purpose that God has inspired.”²

These two attitudes, the Pope concludes, “far from being opposed to one another, would have enlightened each other and been a guideline for the service that the Holy See has provided to all charisms ever since.”³ These are also the two attitudes around which Pope Leo frames his discussion of founding charisms: the need for docile obedience to the hierarchical authority which affirms the charism, balanced with genuine responsibility within the community itself for the safeguarding and implementation of the charismatic gift received.

When it comes to the first attitude, docility to hierarchy, the Pope is keen to close any perceived gap between hierarchic and charismatic authority in the Church. He repeatedly emphasizes that the founding charism of a religious order (or lay community) is not the community’s possession; rather, it is a gift bestowed upon them by the Holy Spirit for the good of the whole Church, to be exercised in collaboration with, and in obedience to, the

¹ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Assemblies of Consecrated Members of Regnum Christi*, 29th January 2026.

² Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapters of the Conventual Franciscans and of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Captives (Trinitarians)*, 20th June 2025.

³ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapters of the Conventual Franciscans and of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Captives (Trinitarians)*, 20th June 2025.

ecclesial hierarchy. As he reminded the Legionaries of Christ, “You are not masters of charisms, but their custodians and servants.”⁴

Nor, then, is the charism the possession of the founder or founding generation. The Pope regularly clarifies the relationship between the founder and founding charism, making clear that the development and safeguarding of the charism is in fact an ongoing responsibility in which each member of the institute plays their part through the ordinary means of community governance—including the General Chapter. “The charismatic gift that the Paraclete once bestowed upon your Foundresses and Founders,” the Pope reminded a group of four religious institutes, “continues to be renewed.”⁵

The General Chapter, therefore, as the Pope reminded another group of Augustinian sisters, is an opportunity to “renew your adhesion to the charism of your foundress,” for “while the process of her canonization continues, your journey of holiness proceeds too!”⁶ The General Chapter is thus inseparably “a return to the sources and at the same time a look towards the future,” the Pope informed the Servants of Mary, because “the more one returns to one’s origins, the more one becomes capable of creativity and prophecy.”⁷

Over the course of the Pope’s addresses, a clear image of the relationship between history, founder, and charism forms, underpinned by a deeply theological reflection on how past, present and future are connected within the religious institute. Following the example of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, the Pope holds together the juridic and the spiritual aspects of each institute he addresses by exhorting religious to view their ordinary channels of governance, such as the General Chapter, not as impersonal and perfunctory chores, but rather as the means the Church has given us to connect the treasures of the institute’s past with the promises of its future.

This leads us to the second key dimension of Pope Leo’s vision of religious life: governance itself. Because “one of the fundamental tasks of religious governance is the promotion of fidelity to the charism,” as he told the Legionaries of Christ, it follows that “it

⁴ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ*, 19th February 2026.

⁵ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapters of four Institutes: Missionary Daughters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, Daughters of Nazareth Institute, Apostles of the Holy Family Institute, Sisters of Charity of Saint Mary (also called ‘of Good Counsel’)*, 23rd August 2025.

⁶ Leo XIV, *Address to the Augustinian Sisters, Servants of Jesus and Mary*, 5th July 2025.

⁷ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Servants of Mary*, 24th November 2025.

is necessary to reinforce a style of governance characterized by mutual listening, co-responsibility, transparency, fraternal closeness and community discernment.”⁸

Just as with the subject of charisms, we see that the Pope’s most hard-hitting exhortations regarding governance come in his addresses to the family of Regnum Christi; in the same address, he asserts that “authority, in religious life, is not understood as domination, but as spiritual and fraternal service to those who share the same vocation... avoiding any form of control that does not respect the dignity and freedom of people.”⁹ Such reflections are acutely necessary, of course, in the case of a community whose members have borne the grave consequences of a disordered and dysfunctional exercise of authority. But the Pope also offers the same teaching, in a more meditative or reflective form, to other religious communities.

When he speaks of governance, the Augustinian character of Pope Leo’s own religious formation is particularly clear. For the Pope, the unifying principle of the community is not authority, but charity, and religious authority itself is fundamentally a role of service. The office of superior, he told the Conventual Franciscans and Trinitarians, is to be “perceived as a ministry, that is, he who makes himself the smallest in order to be a servant to all.”¹⁰

This vision of authority as service raises the question: service of what and whom? We find the answer in the third of Pope Leo’s key interrelated themes: communion. The building and preserving of communion within the religious institute is a particular responsibility of the superior, who must have a “particular sensitivity towards the safeguarding, growth and consolidation of communion” which necessitates “a witness of meekness, detachment and selfless love for one’s brothers and sisters and for the community.” The General Chapter is an example of one of the “traditional instruments of communion,” which “cannot be relegated to the sphere of ‘remote connections’,” for “the effort of coming together for dialogue and the exchange of ideas is an integral part of our evangelical identity.”¹¹

⁸ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ*, 19th February 2026.

⁹ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapter of the Legionaries of Christ*, 19th February 2026.

¹⁰ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the General Chapters of the Conventual Franciscans and of the Order of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Captives (Trinitarians)*, 20th June 2025.

¹¹ Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the Meeting promoted by the Union of Superiors General (U.S.G.)*, 26th November 2025.

Here we can also quote one of the Pope's addresses to lay communities on the subject of ecclesial governance, for it provides a useful synthesis of the teaching he offers specifically to consecrated religious across various addresses. Ecclesial governance, he reminds these communities, is "never merely technical," and "does not arise simply from the need to coordinate the religious needs of its members." Instead, governance within the Church has "a salvific orientation" and is "an effective sign of communion through which we participate in the very life of the Trinity."¹² In the context of religious communities, this close relationship between governance and communion helps us to understand the significance of the institute's means of governance such as the General Chapter.

This teaching on governance and communion will strike many readers as characteristic of what Elise Ann Allen describes as the "Prevost style" of governance, "evident from the moment Padre Roberto arrived in Peru." Pope Leo himself, in a lengthy interview with Allen, acknowledges that "some people appreciate the style of leadership that I have, which is not primarily hierarchical but rather tends to look for ways of pulling people together and doing things together so that people feel listened to."¹³ But this style of governance is not a personal affectation of Robert Prevost. To understand its true origins, we can turn to his own doctoral thesis in canon law, written as a young priest, titled *The Office and Authority of the Local Prior in the Order of St. Augustine*. "The presence of a superior," Fr. Prevost wrote, "is to provide a service which renders the goal of religious life more readily attainable."¹⁴ Thus the Augustinian prior must "aid the community in fulfilling its mission in the Church and in the world."¹⁵

In that thesis, Fr. Prevost also states a principle of consecrated religious life which will go on to clearly inform his addresses to religious as Pope Leo XIV. The consecrated religious life, Fr. Prevost writes, is "a reality made up of visible, concrete dimensions and spiritual, charismatic elements as well," where we discover that "it is in and through the visible dimension that the charismatic is actualized."¹⁶ In his addresses to religious, Pope Leo demonstrates this interconnectedness between the visible and the spiritual in religious life,

¹² Leo XIV, *Address to Participants in the Meeting with the Moderators of Associations of the Faithful, Ecclesial Movements, and New Communities promoted by the Dicastery for Laity, the Family and Life*, 21st May 2026

¹³ Elise Ann Allen, *Pope Leo XIV: The Biography* (Ebury Vine, 2026), 101.

¹⁴ Robert Prevost, *The Office and Authority of the Local Prior in the Order of St. Augustine* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2025), 12.

¹⁵ Prevost, *The Office and Authority of the Local Prior*, 191.

¹⁶ Prevost, *The Office and Authority of the Local Prior*, 188.

showing how the two can be held together in our speech and in our actions, and encouraging us to approach the General Chapter in the same way.

Overall, Pope Leo's addresses to consecrated religious reveal a deep love for the religious life and a willingness to exhort, caution and encourage those who share this love. While attentive to the particular charism and history of each institute to whom he speaks, his understanding of the religious life remains clearly and explicitly Augustinian. His teaching on the three interrelated dimensions of charism, governance and communion centers on the need for ongoing discernment of the charism in order to hold together past, present and future in the life of the institute; on the nature of authority as service; and on communion as an end in itself. Even if we ourselves are not among the religious for whom these addresses were written, we can certainly take their lessons to heart.

In his first encyclical letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, Pope Leo draws upon the scriptural image of the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem and exhorts all of us within the Church to find our own section of the wall to be rebuilt.¹⁷ In other words, we are called to identify the part of the world for which we bear responsibility under grace for developing a truly Christ-centered, pro-human society. For consecrated religious, our part of the wall is, quite simply, our own religious community. These reflections which Pope Leo offers to our fellow religious on charism, governance and communion can equip us to take full responsibility in this task of building. Fundamentally, what we can take from these addresses is that the Pope sees the health and vitality of religious communities to be a matter of supreme importance not only for each individual institute, but for the life and mission of the entire Church. We would do well to do the same as we set about the task of building up our particular part of the wall.

You may find the original posting of this essay, as well as the author's biographical and contact information, at <https://www.reviewforreligious.com/essays/pope-leo-and-general-chapters>.

¹⁷ Leo XIV, encyclical letter *Magnifica Humanitas*, 2026. See paragraphs 7-14 and 236-242 in particular.