

# Separation from the Congregation

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INFO SSCC Brothers No 116 – September 4, 2017



The last chapter of the Constitutions is entitled: *"Separation from the Congregation"*.

Is it possible to leave the Congregation after making perpetual vows? Yes, it's possible. We promised that our commitment would be for our whole life; now we feel incapable of continuing. Something important has broken down. Is not what we wanted; it's not what the Church hoped would happen.... But it is possible.

Canon Law allows a religious to ask to be freed of the vows or a priest to request a dispensation from celibacy for **"very serious" reasons**. Let's be clear, it does not say that someone has a "right" to be

freed of his commitment. It's not something that someone can decide all by himself, but a **"favor"** that can be granted.

No one makes religious profession or receives the sacrament of orders solely by personal decision. The candidate asks to be admitted to profession or ordination and the authority of the Church accepts him or not. Likewise, when it comes to leaving a religious commitment, one can request it, but it is another (the Holy See in the case of perpetual vows or priestly celibacy) that grants it or not. Once we have made the vows, we are no longer absolute "masters" of our liberty, rather we place it humbly in the hands of the Church.

When someone just leaves, without asking permission, he offends the community and the People of God, he lacks respect for himself and he places himself in a situation of conflict with the Church.

In the last 8 years (2009-2016), 49 brothers in perpetual vows have left the Congregation<sup>1</sup> formally in various ways: incardination in a diocese, dispensation from perpetual vows, dispensation from priestly celibacy or expulsion. Another twelve

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<sup>1</sup> In the same period, 65 brothers in temporary vows also left the Congregation. But in this letter I am referring particularly to the commitment of perpetual vows. By its very nature, the period of temporary vows is a time of open discernment as to whether to continue in the religious life or to leave.

brothers, more or less, also abandoned the community but as of yet have not formalized their process of leaving.

The Constitutions remind us that the processes for leaving always require respect, dialogue, prayer and discernment (n. 148); they must be undertaken according to the norms of Church law (n. 149) and must be carried out in equity, generosity and justice (n. 150).

There will always be departures from the community. Our lifestyle is not easy; the human heart is home to many mysteries. Decisions of conscience demand our respect, even though at times they may surprise and upset us. As Pope Francis said recently, *"Some leave to be more consistent, because after serious discernment they recognize that they never had a vocation; however, others, with the passage of time, stop being faithful, many times just a few years after perpetual profession."* (January 28, 2017)

Given this reality, which I will not try to analyze in depth because cases are very diverse and complex, from my personal experience I would just like to address a word to three groups of brothers.

## 1) The brother who wants to leave the Congregation

I ask that you consider **your motivations**. There have to be "very serious" reasons that would lead you to request a dispensation from your vows. The journey leading to perpetual profession is long. Along the way there are many opportunities to look deeply at faith and our responsibility before God and the Church. The commitment is public: it gives great joy to many and they find in you someone they can really depend on in their lives and their faith. If you leave the Congregation, many people will feel bewildered and sad. Think of others, think of God, think of the community.

The real "very serious" reasons are never found outside of yourself. It's not something that you can only attribute to external factors. You can't just claim, for example, that the community treated you badly, that they don't appreciate you, that the brothers are not as good as they should be or that others made your life impossible. When you made perpetual profession, nobody promised you a "perfect" community (which doesn't exist anyway) nor a group around you always smiling and praising you.

What *Amoris Laetitia* says to married couples is also true for us: you mustn't throw in the towel at the first opportunity just because you didn't get what you wanted or because you don't feel fulfilled, or because your pride is hurt or from other reactions arising from our human weakness. (n. 237) Human bonds can only be maintained if we learn to bear our own weakness and that of others realistically and lovingly. Remember that we make profession to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, who did not come to be served but to serve and be the last of all.

I also ask you **not to manipulate God**. When you made profession, you said that God called you to be a religious, that it was a "vocation". Now you say that God is calling you to something else, as if his "will" changed and he himself decided what you have to do. Please, don't speak like that! God does not operate our lives like a puppeteer and his marionette. He created you free. In requesting profession and in requesting a

dispensation, it is you who are deciding and determining your path. Surely you desire to seek God's will and God desires to be at your side but he does not decide for you. Have the courage to acknowledge that the responsibility is yours and don't be scared of having to walk in the dark.

The "very serious" reasons that lead you to ask to leave the Congregation will always be **within you**. If in the sanctuary of your conscience you recognize that you should not have entered the religious life, that you don't see how you can live it coherently, and that your brothers in the Congregation can no longer count on you as you once promised, say that when you request the dispensation, asking the mercy of the Church. If you do that, you will speak more truthfully than if you put the blame on others. Find a humble way to express yourself and simply ask that you be allowed to find another place in the Church that would not be such a burden. There is no shame in recognizing who I am. God knows the clay we are.

## 2) The brother who is a major superior

When I began my ministry as Superior General, eleven years ago now, I discovered that there were some sixty brothers who were no longer in the Congregation but who were still on the list, because no one had done the canonical process to make their departure official.

It seems that, in the recent past, not much importance was given to the "formal" aspect of leaving. Perhaps they thought it was a way of better respecting people by not forcing them to go through a painful process of filling out documents and questionnaires. However, when brothers' departures are not formalized, what happens is that the vows begin to lose value and end up being reduced to a personal decision of which each individual is the only master and lord. We forget that our commitment is public and that we are answerable for it to the Congregation, to the Christian community and to God. This has a demoralizing effect on the community and the unspoken message to the younger generation is that everything is permitted and no one has the right to ask us to account for ourselves.

I continue to employ a good part of my energies as Superior General reiterating to major superiors that they fulfill their obligation to regularize situations from the past and that brothers leaving now be helped to follow the appropriate process. Do not allow any brother to leave without carrying out the corresponding canonical process!

Why do I insist on that? Is it out of some kind of obsession with the law? I don't think so. I insist on it for I consider it important to restore respect for the individuals involved, and to honor the commitment that we make publicly before the People of God. What's more, experience tells me that, when you help a brother **do the process of requesting a dispensation correctly**, he feels more appreciated and accepted and he understands that we are helping him to find a more appropriate place in the Church. On occasion, when they are obliged to put in writing what they are going through, some have given it more reflection, have taken a step back and have reincorporated themselves in the religious community with renewed spirit.

It is the responsibility of major superiors that the processes of departure are done correctly. I really want to thank the many superiors who are doing this. And I renew my appeal to those who continue to be negligent in this very important aspect of their ministry to be responsible.

And if the brother who is leaving, in spite of our invitation to do things as they should be done, refuses to collaborate? When, unfortunately, this occurs, the superior has no other alternative than to carry out the process of expulsion. The "last resort" must never be to let a person leave without any process, nor to keep him on the list of community members while he lives his own life completely outside the Congregation. For the good of the interested party himself, for the good of the Congregation and for the good of the Church, the major superior must collect the documentation required by law in these cases and send it to the Superior General so that he can then declare him expelled.

### 3) All the brothers of the community

A brother who leaves is no greater sinner than those who stay, nor is he an outcast or a traitor. Usually he's someone who is going through a rough patch in his life, who has had to bravely face his internal contradictions, who now finds himself without the support of a strong institution like our own, and because of all that needs **our support**.

The saddest cases are those who leave the religious life because they have lost the faith. It's as if Jesus disappeared from their lives. We have to really keep praying for brothers who are immersed in such excruciating darkness.

Even though the one mainly responsible for a decision to leave is the person himself, seeing him go always calls those of us who stay **to examine our conscience**. Did he discern his vocation well during initial formation? How attentive were we to his problems when they began to surface? Perhaps we left him alone? Did we offer him our care and our prayer? Are my motives for staying as strong as his for leaving?...

The moment of leaving is usually difficult and stressful. That's only normal when human ties are broken. However, it is a joy to see that there are brothers, who after leaving religious life, have found **a new way of living as Christians**, with greater serenity, bearing a different kind of fruit. The SSCC charism continues to illumine their heart and they manifest the experience of God that they came to know in the Congregation in their new surroundings. We continue to be brothers in our faith in Jesus Christ, sons of the same Church. That is what really counts!

