

History of Chapter in Religious Communities

Chapters have a long and respected history within vowed religious life. Dairne McHenry, RSCJ writes in *General Chapters: A Guide for Facilitators, Planners and Participants* writes

The custom of holding chapters in religious congregations is an ancient and originally monastic practice. It can be traced back to the sixth century when St. Benedict gathered the monks in his monastery each week to read and discuss a chapter of the Benedictine Rule. It is interesting that Benedict held to the importance of each monk's opinion being heard and especially that of the youngest monk. The room where they met became known as the chapter room and the gatherings themselves were called 'chapters'. (p. 1)

The term "General Chapter" was established by the Cistercian Monks in 1195. All the Cistercian Abbots, from their various locations, met once a year at their founding Abbey in France. In 1215, the fourth Lateran Council established (in canon 12) that all religious Orders should celebrate "Chapters" at regular intervals as a means of promoting the reform of the religious life.

In the early days of the Franciscan Order, St. Francis would call his brothers together at the Portiuncula in Assisi for the purpose of formation, support, reflection and renewal. During its founding years the Franciscan held a "General Chapter" twice a year: at the feast of Pentecost (May-June) and at the feast of St. Michael (29th of September). One of these annual General Chapters was given the nickname 'The Chapter of Mats'. St Francis himself referred to it by this name. There were five thousand friars present, he said, and they lived in huts or tents made of reed mats and slept on such mats, hence the name.

As the number of friars rapidly increased, in the 1217 Chapter it was decided to divide the Order into Provinces, so that the Ministers Provincial could then represent their friars at the General Chapter and hold a Provincial Chapter for them on their return.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law (Book II; Article 2; cc 631-633) includes provisions for Chapters. The Canons (or laws) are general in nature because they apply to all religious institutes. The constitution of each religious institute identifies the specific way that institute will carry out its responsibilities.

Chapters are based on the theological belief that the Holy Spirit gifts all members for the good of the Community. Chapters are a legal expression of the principles of the Christian values of

- Representation,
- Participation, and
- Subsidiarity (the principle of delegating decisions to the lowest practical level).

These principles have been deeply grounded in Christianity since the time of the early Church and were reemphasized by Vatican II.