

THE SECRETARY GENERAL: ROLE, QUALITIES, AND COMPETENCE SOME REFLECTIONS

MY EXPERIENCE

Towards the end of our General Chapter in 2009, the Minister General informed me that he intended to propose me as his preferred candidate for the office of Secretary General of the Order. This came to me like “a bolt from the blue”: I was at the Chapter as a canonist and not as a voting member. I was about to return to Ireland to continue the work I had been doing for the preceding 25 years, i.e. that of judge of the ecclesiastical tribunal and juridical adviser to several religious institutes. Although I was familiar with the Canon Law on religious life, I had not the slightest concrete or clear idea of the work of a Secretary General.

There is no trace of such a figure in the universal law of the Church. Luckily, however, our own general legislation contains some references to the figure and specific duties of the Secretary of the Order:

According to our GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS, “*For the general affairs of the Order there is to be a Secretary General. The General Statutes are to make provision concerning his election and office. The Secretary General is the notary of the Order*” (Art. 211). “*The Secretary General discharges the office of notary in all sessions of the General Definitory*” (Art. 202 §3). Moreover, “*The Minister General with the Vicar and Definitors General form the supreme collegial tribunal in the Order, with the Secretary General functioning as actuary*” (Art. 204).

According to our GENERAL STATUTES, “*The Secretary General of the Order has the duty of properly coordinating, even for the other offices, all the work that is done in the General Curia. The Secretary General attends the sessions of the General Definitory, but without having a deliberative vote. He records in writing what has taken place, keeps the seal of the Order and, under the authority of the Minister General, coordinates everything concerning administrative matters that have to be dealt with. In addition, he is to ensure that the acts of the Curia are drawn up and kept in the archives*” (Art. 153).

With these short indications, I was able to begin my service, with the practical assistance of my predecessor who, fortunately, had been elected as General Definitor and remained in our Curia. Gradually, with a little experience, I learned more clearly the real meaning of the office.

SOME IMPORTANT FACTORS

As I already said, and as you all know, there is no norm of universal law to describe the juridical role or duties of the Secretary General of a religious institute. Instead, each institute in its general legislation must indicate a clear definition of the precise role and competence of the Secretary. There is no standard model of such a definition. The role and competence depend on different factors, for example:

- i) The size and international quality of the institute.
- ii) The nature and character of the institute.
- iii) The form of government of the institute.

These three factors have a strong influence on the nature of the office and the way in which it is exercised in our Order.

i) Our Order is big: there are more or less 14,000 friars in the world, present in more than 110 countries, organised into more or less 130 different Provinces or other similar Entities. The international quality of the Order and the reality of communication and languages are quickly seen.

ii) As far as the nature and character of the Order goes, it is both easy and difficult to give a description:

According to the RULE of 1223, *“The Rule and life of the friars minor is this, namely to observe the Holy Gospel of Our Lord Jesus Christ, living in obedience, without anything of their own, and in chastity”*. In that Rule, St Francis never specified any particular form of evangelisation. For him, the fundamental elements were a Gospel life and fraternal life.

According to the current GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS: *“The Order of Friars Minor, founded by St. Francis of Assisi, is a fraternity. In this fraternity the friars follow Jesus Christ more closely under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit; through profession they dedicate themselves totally to God whom they love above all, living the Gospel in the Church according to the form observed and proposed by St. Francis. The friars, as followers of St. Francis, are bound to lead a radically evangelical life, namely: to live in a spirit of prayer and devotion and in fraternal fellowship; they are to offer a witness of penance and minority; and, in charity towards all mankind, they are to announce the Gospel throughout the whole world and to preach reconciliation, peace and justice by their deeds;¹ and to show respect for creation”* (Art. 1).

“The Order of Friars Minor is made up of friars incorporated into Provinces, Custodies or Foundations immediately subject to the Minister General and governed in accordance with the norms of universal and proper law by the same Minister General with his Definitory” (Art. 168).

As can be seen from these texts, the apostolic and ministerial scope of the Order is very broad. The basis of every ministry and apostolic work is our fraternal life which, according to Francis, is the first means of evangelisation. These statements are beautiful from the standpoint of spirituality; from the organisational or administrative point of view, they present many practical challenges.

iii) As regards the form of government within the Order, the structure of the Province is fundamental: *“The Province, the basic unit in the life and mission of the Order, is made up of friars incorporated in it, living together in Houses and governed by the Minister Provincial with his Definitory in accordance with universal and proper law”* (GENERAL CONSTITUTIONS Art. 169).

Every friar, without exception, must be incorporated into a Province or a similar Entity. So, our Order has some characteristics of a very centralised government, and others that belong to a model of government that is more decentralised because of the great autonomy of the Provinces. These factors have an influence on the figure and competence of the Secretary General. On the one hand, the autonomy of the Provinces means that, in keeping with the principle of subsidiarity, many decisions lie within the competence of the Provinces and per se do not have to come to the attention of the general government; on the other hand, however, our legislation demands the ratification or, in some instances, the approval of some decision taken at Provincial level. This means that the Secretary General finds himself in more or less permanent communication with all the Entities of the Order.

¹ Cf. Rnb 17,3.

A JURIDICAL FOUNDATION – IN GENERAL

The articles of our general legislation concerning the role of the Secretary General do not have any direct source in the Code of Canon Law. However, by means of the *analogia iuris* (legal analogy) it is possible to discern a canonical foundation in a few canons of the code. Even if, according to Vatican II, religious life does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church but to its life and holiness, nonetheless, in its structures of government or administration, there are many similarities. So, for example, we can look to those canons that deal with the offices of chancellor and notary within a diocese:

“In every curia a chancellor is to be appointed whose principal function, unless particular law establishes otherwise, is to take care that acts of the curia are gathered, arranged, and safeguarded in the archive of the curia” (can. 482 §1).

“Besides the chancellor, other notaries can be appointed whose writing or signature establishes authenticity for any acts, for judicial acts only, or for acts of a certain case or affair only” (can. 483 §1).

“It is the duty of notaries: 1° to draw up the acts and instruments regarding decrees, dispositions, obligations, or other things which require their action; 2° to record faithfully in writing what has taken place and to sign it with a notation of the place, day, month, and year; 3° having observed what is required, to furnish acts or instruments to one who legitimately requests them from the records and to declare copies of them to be in conformity with the original” (can. 484).

In the light of the content of these canons concerning the chancellor and notary of a diocese, it seems possible to construct an overview of the essential elements of the task of the Secretary General of any religious institute. In a certain sense, in fact, the Secretary General carries out the role of both these diocesan officials.

A MORE PRECISE VIEW OF THE TASK

In his famous *Dictionary of the English Language*, the scholar Samuel Johnson inserted a definition of his own role as the author a dictionary: reading the entry “lexicographer”, one immediately finds the phrase: “a harmless drudge” – a good example of the wry humour of the famous Dr Johnson! It seems to me that these few words can serve as a brief description of the work of the Secretary General. Above all, as can be seen from the aforementioned canons, the basic task of the Secretary General has to do immediately almost always with documents – in the canons, it says that the function of the chancellor consists of making sure that the documents of the Curia are drawn up and preserved (can. 482 §1); the writing or signature of the chancellor or notary guarantees the authenticity of documents (can. 483 §1); and then the notary has the task of drawing up documents in writing, recording in writing what has taken place, etc. (can. 484). In fact, it is possible to sum up the basic role of the Secretary in a single word: PAPER! However, of course, one must remember that every document, every piece of paper refers directly or indirectly to people, to our own brothers or sisters.

From my own experience, the basic task of the Secretary General is threefold:

- The preparation of documents;
- The communication of documents;
- The preservation of documents.

Before looking at these concrete aspects of the Secretary's task, it is necessary to be clear about the documents we are speaking of: what documents are they? I think we can identify a few of the more important categories of document:

a. Minutes:

It belongs to the Secretary to draw up the Minutes of the meetings of the General Council. But he or she must also make sure that Minutes are drawn up in other meetings, e.g. of committees, of the Economic Council of the institute, etc. In every meeting, one of the participants ought to act as the minute-taker and pass the Minutes to the Secretary General.

b. Decrees:

In the course of the meetings of the General Council, decisions will be made. It is the task of the Secretary to know clearly those decisions that belong to the Superior General and his or her Council so as to be able to prepare all the documents that belong to the decisions: from the universal law, for example, the erection, or suppression or transfer of a novitiate (can. 647 §1); the total and radical renunciation of one's goods on the part of a religious in perpetual profession (can. 668 §4); the concession of an indult of excommunication (can. 686 §1); the readmission into the institute of a member without the obligation of repeating the novitiate (can. 690 §1). The Secretary needs to know the proper law of his or her institute concerning the other decisions that lie within the competence of the Superior General and his or her Council.

c. Letters:

Besides the daily correspondence, at the end of each session of the General Council, very often there will be many letters to write. It is for the Secretary to know who must prepare the text of the letter and whether it must be signed by the Superior, or by the Secretary, or by some other person who is responsible.

d. Declarations:

From time to time, the Secretary is responsible for the preparation of some declarations of a purely bureaucratic nature, e.g. the declaration needed to obtain a visa, the declaration to obtain the *permesso di soggiorno* or its extension, the declaration of the good standing of a member of the institute, etc.

Before considering the threefold task of the Secretary, an essential premise that must be borne in mind is the necessity of establishing and following a system for protocolling the documents. At its simplest, this means giving a protocol number to each administrative activity of the Secretariat – either to a letter that has been received, or to a spontaneous act on the part of the general government. This will make it easy to find the document in the future. But it is also possible to have a protocol system that is much more developed.

Another premise to be borne in mind concerns the different kinds of documents that a Secretariat handles: there are original documents, authentic copies, electronic versions, emails, faxes, translations, etc. Each kind of document has its own particular value.

1. THE PREPARATION OF DOCUMENTS

a. Minutes:

Before drawing up any form of Minutes, it is necessary to consider first of all the preparation of the meeting of the General Council. For ourselves, the Secretary General must

always be present, but without active voice, even though he is often invited to speak or to share his opinion. However, the most important role of the Secretary lies in the preparation of the meeting itself. Usually, a few days before the beginning of the period of the meetings, the Minister General, the Vicar and two members of the Council will meet with the Secretary. The purpose of such a preliminary meeting is to identify the more important matters to be considered in the course of the subsequent meetings and to plan the discussion in general terms. At the end of this preliminary meeting, the Secretary will prepare a draft Agenda for each day of the meeting.

At this point, it is also useful to speak to the person moderating the session in order to establish clearly that, at the end of each discussion, it will be necessary to indicate clearly what the Council has decided and why, and then to specify who must execute the decision, by when, etc. Clarity on these points will help in the writing of the Minutes and in the administrative work that will follow the meeting.

In every session, in accordance with the requirements of canon 627 of the Code of Canon Law², it is necessary to bear in mind two other canons concerning the role and function of the General Council:

a. Canon 119: “*With regard to collegial acts, unless the law or statutes provide otherwise:*

1° if it concerns elections, when the majority of those who must be convoked are present, that which is approved by the absolute majority of those present has the force of law; after two indecisive ballots, a vote is to be taken on the two candidates who have obtained the greater number of votes or, if there are several, on the two senior in age; after the third ballot, if a tie remains, the one who is senior in age is considered elected;

2° if it concerns other affairs, when an absolute majority of those who must be convoked are present, that which is approved by the absolute majority of those present has the force of law; if after two ballots the votes are equal, the one presiding can break the tie by his or her vote”.

b. Canon 127: “§1. *When it is established by law that in order to place acts a superior needs the consent or counsel of some college or group of persons, the college or group must be convoked according to the norm of can. 166 unless, when it concerns seeking counsel only, particular or proper law provides otherwise. For such acts to be valid, however, it is required that the consent of an absolute majority of those present is obtained or that the counsel of all is sought.*

§2. When it is established by law that in order to place acts a superior needs the consent or counsel of certain persons as individuals:

1° if consent is required, the act of a superior who does not seek the consent of those persons or who acts contrary to the opinion of all or any of them is invalid;

2° if counsel is required, the act of a superior who does not hear those persons is invalid; although not obliged to accept their opinion even if unanimous, a superior is nonetheless not to act contrary to that opinion, especially if unanimous, without a reason which is overriding in the superior’s judgment.

§3. All whose consent or counsel is required are obliged to offer their opinion sincerely and, if the gravity of the affair requires it, to observe secrecy diligently; moreover, the superior can insist upon this obligation”.

These canons indicate the need to distinguish clearly between the collegial decisions of the Council, and those of the Superior who at times has need of either the consent or the advice of his

² §1. According to the norm of the constitutions, superiors are to have their own council, whose assistance they must use in carrying out their function. §2. In addition to the cases prescribed in universal law, proper law is to determine the cases which require consent or counsel to act validly; such consent or counsel must be obtained according to the norm of can. 127.

or her Council. In accordance with the norm of canon 127, the Superior does not form a part of the Council, if he or she needs to obtain its advice or consent. The Council in these cases must be convened in keeping with canon 166; for the validity of the act, it is necessary to obtain the consent of an absolute majority of those present. The Superior cannot vote to break a tie in these cases. In accordance with the response of the PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR THE INTERPRETATION OF LEGISLATIVE TEXTS of 5th July 1985³, the Superior who must obtain the consent of some college or group of persons does not have the right to vote, not even in order to avoid a possible tie.⁴.

In order to prepare the Minutes, the Secretary needs to be clear about the nature of the Council's decisions: were they collegial acts? Or did the Superior need the consent of the Council? Or perhaps the advice of the Council was needed? Everyone taking part in meetings needs to be clear about these distinctions, especially the Secretary General.

At the very beginning of the Minutes of every session, it is necessary to indicate the date, the time, and the place of the meeting, as well as to list the names of those taking part, indicating clearly the number of those with active voice. As far as the text of the Minutes goes, in my opinion, it is never sufficient to record only the decisions of the Council: it is much more useful – immediately for the Secretary and for the Council and in the future for historians – to record the decisions within the context of the discussion that preceded them, but synthetically, without recording every word or every contribution by the Councillors.

Good Minutes ought to be clear, contain only what is essential, and should contain accurate references to the relevant documents. Moreover, I consider it very prudent at times not to record some parts of the meetings, e.g. all the interventions by the Councillors during an open conversation; the judgements of the Council or the Councillors concerning individual religious or communities – especially when these judgements are very negative. Whenever there is a technical or complicated presentation at a meeting, I will for a copy of the text and attach to the Minutes, in order to avoid any misunderstandings or misinterpretations.

b. Decrees (or formal decisions):

As I already mentioned, in the course of the Council meeting, decisions will be made – always bearing in mind the contents of the canons quoted above. In the light of canon 484, the task of the Secretary is to prepare the official documents of these decisions. These documents must contain the following elements:

- i) The substance of the decision;
- ii) The motivation of the decision (at least in summary form, in law and in fact, in accordance with canon 51⁵);
- iii) An unequivocal indication of the author of the decision, stating clearly whether it is a decision of the Superior General alone, or after having received the consent of the Council, or after having heard their opinion, or perhaps whether the decision is a collegial act of the Superior along with the Council;
- iv) An unequivocal indication of the person for whom the decision is intended;
- v) The date of the decision, the date of the writing of the decree, the signature of the Superior General and that of the Secretary.

³ *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 77(1985), p. 771.

⁴ Per chiarezza, questa risposta è stata ora esplicitamente incorporata nel testo dell' Art. 131 dei nostri STATUTI GENERALI.

⁵ *A decree is to be issued in writing, with the reasons at least summarily expressed if it is a decision.*

Here it is necessary to stress in the strongest way possible the responsibility that the Secretary General has in the preparation of documents of making sure that they are prepared in the form prescribed by law. As already indicated implicitly in the text of canon 483 §1, the signature of the notary establishes the authenticity of a document. The signature of the Secretary General is the guarantee of the authenticity of documents – so, no compromise can ever be admitted on this principle: the Secretary must be certain of the contents of the document and must check it thoroughly before signing it. A symbol of this authenticity is the seal of the institute which must be affixed to each document of a formal nature. As already pointed out, in our Order, one of the tasks of the Secretary General is to keep the seal of the Order⁶.

Decrees and formal decisions can deal with a wide variety of topics and subjects:

- Those already indicated that can be found in the Code;
- Fairly bureaucratic decisions, e.g. the ratification of decisions that belong to other levels of government within the institute, such as the ratification of elections, etc.;
- Administrative decisions, e.g. the appointment of a member of the institute to a commission of the institute, the closing of a religious house, the erection of a new Province, etc.;
- Strictly disciplinary decisions, e.g. dispensation from temporary vows, the decision to forward to the Holy See a request for a dispensation from perpetual vows or from the obligations of sacred ordination, or the decree of the Council concerning the dismissal from the institute of a member in accordance with canon 699 §1, etc.

It does not matter what the content of the decision might be. What is essential is that for each decision there is a corresponding document. To put two decisions into the same document risks provoking confusion. Some decisions, and thus some documents will be responses to requests submitted by the government of Provinces or other Entities of the institute, or at times submitted by individual members. Other decisions will arise in the course of the Council meeting in order to deal with the various current realities of the institute.

c. Letters:

The preparation of letters also belongs to the Secretary. At the end of the Council meeting, perhaps, there will be letters to be sent out. Perhaps they will be replies to the various questions sent by members or superiors. Perhaps they will be replies to complaints made to the general government. In each case, the Secretary has the responsibility for preparing the text of the letter for the signature of the Superior General or for his own signature. As already indicated, each letter or response should have at least a protocol number. In all circumstances, the text of the letter must be clear, preferably short, and always discreet; it should never give offence to anyone.

d. Declarations:

In the preparation of declarations, the Secretary should always bear in mind the forms and the examples distributed by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, or by the civil authorities, in all that concerns applications for a visa or for the *permesso di soggiorno*, or other similar requirements. Once more, it is useful to save these forms and examples on the computer to be able to compile them easily whenever it becomes necessary. The preparation of these declarations can often be tiresome, but it is a great service to our brothers and sisters who not infrequently express their gratitude for the assistance given.

⁶ GENERAL STATUTES OFM, Art. 153.

2. COMMUNICATION OF DOCUMENTS

Once they have been prepared, it is the task of the Secretary to make sure that all the documents are communicated to the interested parties in the correct form or in the form required by law. First of all, this task requires the preparation of a database regularly updated of the names and addresses of the institute, along with their e-mail addresses and telephone numbers. Secondly, it is necessary to be clear about what we mean by “in the correct form”. It’s true that some decisions can be communicated to the interested parties by telephone or by e-mail but, when it comes to a decision the communication of which must be proved these contemporary means are not enough – they do not have probative force. Instead, if a decision is communicated by means of a written document that has been drawn up as indicated above, protocolled, signed, sealed and counter-signed by the Secretary, then there is certainty, first of all, of the existence of the decision, and also of its communication on the part of the competent authority.

As I have just noted, it is not enough to send a copy of the decision to the interested parties by means of an attachment to an e-mail or by fax, or to communicate the substance of the decision in a telephone call or e-mail. Formal notification must follow the norm of law, i.e. it must be done in writing or orally before two witnesses⁷. In the Code, there are some cases in which the communication of decisions or decrees must follow some very precise formalities: e.g. in canon 1509, “§1. *The notification of citations, decrees, sentences, and other judicial acts must be made through the public postal services or by some other very secure method according to the norms established in particular law.* §2. *The fact of notification and its method must be evident in the acts*”. Practically speaking, then, each Secretary General must be familiar with some courier agency, such as TNT or DHL.

3. PRESERVATION OF DOCUMENTS

As far as the preservation or conservation of documents is concerned, it is necessary to turn again to the norms of the Code dealing with the archives in the diocesan curia⁸. From these canons, it is possible to deduce the following practical principles:

⁷ Canon 55: *Without prejudice to the prescripts of canons 37 and 51, when a very grave reason prevents the handing over of the written text of a decree, the decree is considered to have been made known if it is read to the person to whom it is destined in the presence of a notary or two witnesses. After a written record of what has occurred has been prepared, all those present must sign it.*

⁸ Can.486 §1. *All documents which regard the diocese or parishes must be protected with the greatest care.*

§2. *In every curia there is to be erected in a safe place a diocesan archive, or record storage area, in which instruments and written documents which pertain to the spiritual and temporal affairs of the diocese are to be safeguarded after being properly filled and diligently secured.*

§3. *An inventory, or catalogue, of the documents which are contained in the archive is to be kept with a brief synopsis of each written document.*

Can.487 §1. *The archive must be locked and only the bishop and chancellor are to have its key. No one is permitted to enter except with the permission either of the bishop or of both the moderator of the curia and the chancellor.*

§2. *Interested parties have the right to obtain personally or through a proxy an authentic written copy or photocopy of documents which by their nature are public and which pertain to their personal status.*

Can.488 *It is not permitted to remove documents from the archive except for a brief time only and with the consent either of the bishop or of both the moderator of the curia and the chancellor.*

Can.489 §1. *In the diocesan curia there is also to be a secret archive, or at least in the common archive there is to be a safe or cabinet, completely closed and locked, which cannot be removed; in it documents to be kept secret are to be protected most securely.*

§2. *Each year documents of criminal cases in matters of morals, in which the accused parties have died or ten years have elapsed from the condemnatory sentence, are to be destroyed. A brief summary of what occurred along with the text of the definitive sentence is to be retained.*

Can.490 §1. *Only the bishop is to have the key to the secret archive.*

- It is important to preserve the documents of the institute with the greatest care.
- It is necessary to set up a secure archive, well organised, with a catalogue or inventory.
- Access to the archive must be limited and controlled.
- When necessary, authentic copies of some documents are to be made.
- It is not permitted to take documents out of the archive except for a brief period of time.
- It is necessary to set up a kind of secret archive for reserved and more delicate cases.
- It is necessary to set up and manage an historical archive of the institute.

As already indicated, an essential premise of any talk about the keeping of documents is the setting up of a system of recording and registering documents from the moment of their arrival in the curia or from the moment of their creation. In our case, documents follow this path:

Documents to be registered are passed by the Minister General to the Protocol Office. The director of the office places the letter or the documents in a folder of a particular colour that indicates the competent office to which it will be passed: *Green* (**S**: General Secretariat); *Pink* (**M**: Missions and Evangelisation); *Yellow* (**F**: Formation and Studies); *Red* (**P**: Procura). The elements to be entered in the database [Filemaker Pro], or the protocol register of correspondence, are, in general: the sequential protocol number; the date of registration; its position in the archive (the classification is threefold: *Category – Individual – Title*); date of the letter; any protocol number of the sender, the name of the sender of the letter, recipient of the letter, a summary of the object of the letter; indication of any attachments. The director then prints this information on the folder inserting all the relevant documents. As a general rule, when all the official documents are ready, it is the task of the Secretary General to make sure that the original is communicated to the recipient, with copies being sent to the other interested parties and a copy to the file. At the end of this ordinary path, i.e. after the decision, the file – signed by all the members of the Council – comes back to the Protocol Office to begin its life in the archive.

With the help of this protocol system, it is quite easy to construct and maintain an archive of the institute. In our Curia, we have an archive with three levels:

1. The contemporary archive in which all the files of the previous ten years are kept: this is to be found in the Protocol Office – with the help of the database, it is very easy to find on the computer a summary of the content of the folder and its protocol number; so it is possible to check files very quickly. Direct access to this archive is limited to the Secretary General. Usually, not even the Minister General goes directly to ask for something, except through the Secretary.
2. The intermediate archive in which are found all the files dating from more than ten years ago to fifty years ago. This is located alongside the office of the Secretary General. It is possible to find files here with the help of the same system of protocol. Once again, access is very restricted: the only ones who can enter are the personnel from the General Secretariat and from the Protocol Office.

§2. When a see is vacant, the secret archive or safe is not to be opened except in a case of true necessity by the diocesan administrator himself.

§3. Documents are not to be removed from the secret archive or safe.

Can.491 §1. A diocesan bishop is to take care that the acts and documents of the archives of cathedral, collegiate, parochial, and other churches in his territory are also diligently preserved and that inventories or catalogues are made in duplicate, one of which is to be preserved in the archive of the church and the other in the diocesan archive.

§2. A diocesan bishop is also to take care that there is an historical archive in the diocese and that documents having historical value are diligently protected and systematically ordered in it.

§3. In order to inspect or remove the acts and documents mentioned in §§1 and 2, the norms established by the diocesan bishop are to be observed.

3. The historical archive: all the documents older than fifty years are located here. This archive – of the utmost importance to us since it is the memory of the Order from its beginnings – is located on the ground floor of the Curia, with large store-rooms and cabinets underground. Everything is well-organised. Access is limited to scholars who are accompanied by the Archivist. Some of the deposits of documents are sealed – so the material is not accessible for a hundred years after a particular date. Here are to be found, for example, the private documents of some former Ministers General, the Minutes of some confidential commissions, etc.

In the past, the General Archivist was a member *ex officio* of the General Chapter, as the “memory” of the Order. The role of being the immediate memory of the Order today belongs to the Secretary General – even though very often he does not remember everything!

This archive system goes for all the important documents in the life of the Order at general level. However, in the life of a Secretary General, there are many other documents that are not quite so important, e.g. the bureaucratic documents of a temporary nature – declarations for a visa, etc. In our office, we keep these in a small archive of the General Secretariat which is very useful when checking expiry dates, etc. In addition, every office has its own archive to keep the memory of the office and communicate it to future officials.

OTHER ASPECTS OF THE TASK OF THE SECRETARY GENERAL

According to the proper legislation of each institute, the Secretary General will have other duties in addition to the fundamental role, e.g.:

- The coordination of all the offices of the Curia. And we have a lot of them!⁹ An important aid to this work was the preparation of a kind of *General Regulation of the Offices of the Curia*.
- Constant contact with the Provinces and other Entities. For this aspect of the work, our *Manual for the Secretary of the Province* is a useful resource. This has two distinct

⁹ In our Curia, the principal offices are the following:

SECRETARIATS:

- Secretary of the Minister General (Anticamera)
- General Secretariat of the Order
- General Secretariat for the Missions and Evangelisation
- General Secretariat for Formation and Studies

- General Archive
- Bursar General's office
- General Postulation for the Causes of Saints
- General Procura

OFFICES OF ANIMATION:

- Office of JPIC
- Office for General Assistance to the Secular Franciscan Order
- Office for Nuns

OFFICES:

- Automation Office
- Communications Office
- Juridical Office
- Post, packaging and logistics OfficeUfficio
- Protocol Office
- Development Office (Fund Raising)
- Translators' Office.

dimensions – all the work that belongs to the Secretary General, and all the work that must be passed to the Holy See through our General Procura.

- The constant updating of the database of our members, of the houses, of addresses, etc. I am very fortunate to have two collaborators in the Secretariat: the Vice-Secretary General and an Assistant. These two take care of all the technical work.
- The preparation of bulletins and the updating of the website of the Order. Once again, I have to confess that I am very fortunate. Our Communications Office takes care of this aspect. The Order updates the website every day. Every month a short and informal bulletin *Fraternitas* is published. And then, three times a year, the official bulletin is published, *Acta Ordinis Minorum*; in these copies of all the most important public documents in the life of the Order are published.
- Responsibility for the revision and updating of proper legislation. With us, the competent office is the Juridical Office. At the moment, I am the director of this office. In the study of our legislation, I work in strict collaboration with the Juridical Commission of the Order, made up of professors from the Faculty of Canon Law at the Pontifical University *Antonianum*.

QUALITIES

Etymologically, the word “secretary” has its roots in the Latin word “*secernere*”, meaning “to separate” or “to set apart”. From this verb comes the participle “*secretus*”, meaning “separate, distinct, particular”. Classically, the secretary was a person of confidence who kept the confidential information of his master. Thus, traditionally, the Secretary of a Department of the Roman Curia signs the more important documents with the title “*Archiepiscopus a secretis*”.

As far as the qualities needed for the office of Secretary General of a religious institute, we can say that they are the same as those indicated in canon 483 § 2: “*The chancellor and notaries must be of unimpaired reputation and above all suspicion*”.

In addition, we can add some other elements:

- A love for the Church and an appreciation of the contribution that religious institutes make to the life of the Church.
- A deep love for one’s institute, for one’s brothers or sisters, for the government of the institute.
- A knowledge of the traditions and particular practices proper to one’s institute.
- A knowledge of the proper legislation of one’s institute – at all levels.
- A good knowledge of the members of one’s institute – and not just of one’s friends.
- A knowledge of geography, so as to be able to understand the different expressions of religious life in one’s own institute.

In the end, it can be said that the Secretary must be someone convinced of his or her own vocation, always alert to the word of God, open to the different realities of the world and the Church, discreet, of good reputation, patient, and capable of collaborating with others, very often in rather trying circumstances. In a few words, the Secretary must be a saint, but according to the definition of Robert Louis Stevenson: “*a saint is a sinner who never gives up*”!

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Aidan McGrath ofm