**In a new document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican says new lay movements in the Catholic Church are a 'great resource' but insists they must accept the authority of the hierarchy, and warns that getting official recognition may take a while.**

*(Fr Carl Schafer OFM: Note:   
The Secular Franciscan Order is not a new movement, but what is said here about the new lay movements is also relevant to the OFS.)*

**NEW LAY MOVEMENTS IN THE CHURCH**

ROME - After years of occasional tension and misunderstanding between new lay movements in the Catholic Church and the hierarchy, the Vatican on 14 June 2016 released a document essentially arguing that both sides in the equation need each other.

The institutional Church needs these new impulses in order to keep itself young, the document suggests, while those impulses need the acceptance and support of Church leadership if they want to be around for the long haul.

The bottom line is that both ought to play nice, since both the “charismatic” and “hierarchical” dimensions of the Church have been part of the picture from the beginning, and that’s not going to change.

The new document is titled *Iuvenescit Ecclesia*, translated as “The Church Rejuvenates,” and it’s issued by the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It’s styled as a letter to the more than 5,000 bishops around the Catholic world, and it says that a time of “ecclesiastical maturity” has opened for the movements.

Lay movements, such as the Focolare, Communion and Liberation, Sant’Egidio or Schoenstatt, are a diverse and hard-to-define cluster of groups which developed mostly during the twentieth century, especially after the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). They’re highly diverse, but tend to be characterized by lay leadership and by a strongly missionary drive.

At times they’ve run afoul of bishops in various parts of the world, who’ve charged some of these groups with being secretive, resistant to oversight, and idiosyncratic in their methods to the point of running counter to the pastoral aims of the local diocese.

Some critics have charged the movements with, in effect, representing a “parallel church.” The document, however, calls the movements a “great resource of renewal” for the Church, at a time when “the work of effectively proclaiming the Gospel has proven to be particularly urgent.”

*Iuvenescit Ecclesia* says that because the Church is called to bring the Gospel not only to Catholics but also to those who have abandoned the faith or never known Jesus, these numerous “charisms,” a term for a gift of the Holy Spirit, haven an essential “work of new evangelization,” capable of “reawakening and nourishing the life of faith of the People of God.”

The movements’ capacity to gather people together, it says, “constitutes a significant testimony to how the Church does not grow ‘through proselytism but through attraction’.”

In general, the lay movements promote a particular way of life organized around the inspiration of a founder, and they’re broader than the diocesan and parish structure. The largest movements are international in scope.

And, therein lies the tension: How does a global movement with its own way of doing things, often enjoying recognition by the Vatican, relate to the life of whichever local church in which it sets up shop?

The 15-page document, signed by the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, German Cardinal Gerhard Müller, talks about “the relationship between the hierarchical and charismatic gifts in the life and the mission of the Church”, meaning the bishops and the lay groups.

Quoting Pope John Paul II, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* says the two are both essential “because they both help to make the mystery of Christ and his saving work present in the world.”

The document also presents two “fundamental criteria” that are “inseparable” for understanding the relationship between the hierarchy and the movements.

The first one is the “respect for the particularity of individual charismatic groups,” which calls for the hierarchy to avoid “juridical straitjackets” that might dampen the novelty born from the specific experience.

The second principle is a warning of sorts to the movements, calling them to respect the ecclesiastical structure to avoid being considered as “running parallel” to the life of the Church or undermining of the hierarchical gifts.

The document insists that to be genuine, eventually a movement will require official recognition by Church authorities. Generally that process begins on the local level, with recognition by a bishop, and eventually reaches the Pontifical Council for Laity in Rome, whose functions will shortly be absorbed by a new department for “Laity, Family and Life.”

The document warns movements not to expect those wheels to grind quickly.

“This process is time-consuming,” it says. “It requires an adequate period to pass in order to authenticate the charisms, which must be submitted to serious discernment until they are recognized as genuine.”

“The reality of the group that arises from the charism must have the proper time to grow and mature,” it says. “This would extend beyond the period of initial enthusiasm until a stable configuration arises.”

Drilling down to what the “groups of the faithful, ecclesial movements, and new communities” are, *Iuvenescit Ecclesia* says they can’t be understood as a “voluntary association of persons desiring to pursue a particular social or religious goal.”

“The gathering of the faithful into groups, with an intensely shared common existence in order to strengthen their life of faith, hope, and charity, expresses well the ecclesial dynamic as the mystery of communion for the sake of mission, and manifests itself as a sign of the unity of the Church in Christ” the document says.

After providing theological background to justify their existence, from the Bible to Pope Francis’ Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, “The Church Rejuvenates” provides an eight-point check-list for “discerning the charismatic gifts:”

* The primacy of the vocation of every Christian to holiness, meaning movements must be at the service of the holiness of the Church.
* Commitment to spreading the Gospel.
* Profession of the Catholic Faith.
* Witness to a real communion with the whole Church, meaning accepting the authority of the pope and the local bishop, as the “visible principle and foundation of unity.”
* Recognition of, and esteem for, the reciprocal complementarity of other charismatic elements in the Church, meaning a movement can’t overshadow others.
* Acceptance of moments of trial in the discernment of charisms, meaning that during the path towards recognition things might get tough, but there’s an “unvarying history of the connection between charism and cross.”
* The presence of spiritual fruits such as charity, joy, peace and a certain human maturity;
* The “social dimension of evangelization”, meaning a commitment to building “a more just, charitable and loving society.”

*Iuvenescit Ecclesia* was released by the Vatican on Tuesday, and presented in a press conference by Müller and Canadian Cardinal Marc Ouellet, head of the Congregation for Bishops.

According to the [Vatican directory for lay movements](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/laity/documents/rc_pc_laity_doc_20051114_associazioni_en.html), released in 2005, there are at least 122 lay associations with pontifical recognition, but the number has grown since then.

Although the document avoids citing any specific movement, one section does underline the significance of the groups working on married life, which “should try by their programs of instruction and action to strengthen young people and spouses themselves, particularly those recently wed, and to train them for family, social and apostolic life.”

The Church’s failure in offering adequate marriage preparation and support after the sacrament was a recurring concern during the two-fold Synod of Bishops on the Family, and a key issue in Francis’s Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*.