

Year 2025

**Course: Recognising oneself**  
**The Statutes: a path and a mirror**

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Lesson 4B

Elisabetta Scomazzon

**Government: service to unity**

*Does governance and government refer to the same reality?*

No. Government and governance are two different things. Government is an activity, a form of guidance and direction, carried out through established roles, which can be exercised by one person or a group of people. Governance is something more nebulous, more generic, relating to the broader way in which something should or could be governed. But let's look at the dictionary of the Italian language, Treccani online, and see what it says about governance. It reads: "In business language, it's the manner, style, or system of conducting and directing a company." When we talk about a company, the term governance more specifically describes management practices using concepts and principles from the economic sector. Similarly, in managing works within the Church, we can also apply concepts and principles from the economic sector—appropriately adapted—for the improvement of management.

The Focolare Movement is different: it is a "people" born from the Gospel, with a Statute approved by the Church. It is made up of a variety of people of all ages and vocations, Christians from various churches, followers of other religions, and some people without religious affiliation. As we have heard in other lessons, however, they are united by the goal of reaching the perfection of charity, love, and the unity of the human family. For its journey, this people, this community, needs to have guides at both the general and local levels. To govern, then, means remembering what the charism is, ensuring that things move forward according to the charism, correcting errors where needed, helping to develop it and doing everything necessary to carry forward the Work of Mary. But how? By ensuring that those who govern are guided by Jesus in their midst. Based on my experience, His light is essential also for reading the Statutes, —that is, to be united among ourselves but also with Chiara and those who founded the Movement with her, to immerse ourselves in her writings and in the charism.

As you mentioned, Lorenzo, the focus of today's lesson will specifically be on the norms in the General Statutes regarding the organs of the central government of the Work of Mary at the universal, that is the international level. In another lesson, you will hear about the organs of government at the geographical level of a zone. These organs are already introduced in Article 10, which is in the second part of the General Statutes that speaks of the structure and composition of the Work of Mary. From reading Article 10, you will see that they are: the Assembly, the Central

Governing Body of the Work of Mary and the General Council.

It is said that “without organization, which provides a stable, continuous, and ordered service - ordered is the legal description - love cannot be lived within the Church.” And we see this in the Scriptures, in the Acts of the Apostles: remember that situation, the problem of discontent that was created because the widows were not receiving their bread in the daily distribution, and so seven men were chosen: that was the beginning of the office of deacon. The organs of the central government described by the General Statutes are expressions of the charism, capable of expressing it and protecting it. Let's look at this.

The structure of Part Four is divided into chapters. We find the governing organs placed in order of importance. The first is the General Assembly. It is a form of government for extraordinary organisation because it happens at special times, every so many years. Then, in the second chapter, we find the ordinary organisation, which is the day-to-day process that begins immediately after the conclusion of the assembly and continues until the next assembly—this is the period from one assembly to another. In this system of organisation, we find the President, the Co-President, the Centre of the Work of Mary, the General Council, central delegates, and general councillors. Given the limits of this lesson, I cannot address all of Part Four comprehensively; I will try to give some ideas and I really hope that they will help you in your personal and group study.

Undoubtedly, among the governing organs, the General Assembly is particularly significant. It is a collegial body. What does this mean? It is made up of many people. In its composition, the Assembly represents the entire Work of Mary at both the Centre and in the Zones. It is a representative body. In fact, the vast majority of members of the Work of Mary are not physically present in the Assembly, but they can be represented in the Assembly through zonal or branch assemblies that elect their representatives. Let's look at the composition: there are members by right and elected members. Members by right are people who are called to be part of the General Assembly because they have a specific role (e.g., the President, Co-President, members of the General Council, as well as the people who are responsible centrally for various activities and works that depend on the Centre of the Work of Mary). Then there are the elected members, chosen specifically by the zonal assemblies or the branch and movement councils. The Assembly can be ordinary, gathering at the intervals specified in the Statutes, every so many years. They can also be extraordinary, when there are special reasons that require it to be convened outside these intervals. The Statutes contain the rules that establish how the Assembly is convened. It is envisaged that the Assembly will have a regulation, and a procedure for forming the collective will of the Assembly, specifying the majority needed for decisions, how many votes are required for elections—these are all the rules that allow decisions to be made: some rules are established by Canon Law and others that are specific to the General Statutes.

The General Assembly has precise tasks. The main task is to elect the President, Co-President, and Councillors of the Centre of the Work of Mary. It is an important task, and in fact, three days of retreat take place beforehand to prepare everyone's hearts for this task, through an invocation of the Holy Spirit, to be open to His voice. Furthermore, the Assembly has tasks such as modifying the Statutes, approving and modifying the Regulations. It deals with the most important matters. All these topics are gathered together and ordered by the Centre of the Work of Mary and then presented, according to a determined procedure, so that they reach the Assembly. As you can see, it is very important for each participant to prepare for the Assembly not only through these three days of spiritual retreat but also by preparing their minds. Every participant in the Assembly has an active role: they can propose that other topics relating to the life of the Work of Mary be examined, following the procedure outlined in the Regulation. For this reason, it is crucial that everyone is well-formed and also well-informed about the life of the Work of Mary.

Now, let's move on to the ordinary organisation conducted by the President, the Co-President, with

the Central Governing body of the Work of Mary and the General Council. The President, as you know, by Statute, is a focolarina who is elected. She has authority over the entire Work of Mary, representing it according to canonical order. The Statutes outline the duties and procedures that the President must carry out, depending on the subject matter, both for decision-making and activities, in collaboration with the Co-President, but also with the central delegates and the other general councillors. I encourage you to read the articles that describe the President (they are very beautiful articles, on which we could somehow also model ourselves and see what we should all aim for), but also to look specifically at the duties. There are limits linked to the role, its duration, and what happens in the case of death, resignation, or incapacity. I want to highlight that at the end of the President's term, all the general and zonal bodies lapse from office.

The Co-President: The Co-President is a Focolarino priest who provides the President with constant interaction in exercising authority, mindful that two people are enough for Jesus to be present. He has duties of a Co-President and specific tasks. The Statutes also outline all the rules regarding duration, and what happens in the case of death, resignation, or incapacity.

*So, in the ordinary organisation, if I understand correctly, you mentioned that there are two governing bodies: the Centre of the Work of Mary and the General Council. Could you explain a bit more about their characteristics and also the differences between them?*

In the norms that regulate the Centre of the Work of Mary and the General Council, Chiara managed, in an original way, to convey what the Holy Spirit had suggested to her, which was then approved by the Church. That is, two bodies, two organs, with different and specific functions, to ensure the unity of the Work of Mary among its various components (the ramifications) with different vocations, but all of which are based on two core structures, consisting of the sections of both the men and the women focolarini.

The Centre of the Work of Mary is an organ established through election – that is, it is technically representative of the entire Work of Mary. It encompasses the whole Work of Mary and is directly elected by the General Assembly. It is composed of the President, the Co-President, the elected councillors, and added to these are those responsible for the respective Sections of the men and the women focolarini, who are also elected by their respective Assemblies, specifically for the role within the two sections. The President entrusts the councillors of the Centre of the Movement with various aspects (which you've already heard about) and with the large zones (geographical areas in the world). The Centre of the Work of Mary is convened and chaired by the President. In case of impediment, the Co-President takes over. It has a delicate task: the direction and government of the entire Work of Mary, alongside the President and the Co-President, ensuring the unity and the faithfulness to the charism. And precisely because of this, decisions are made with a two-thirds majority to emphasize the importance of broad consensus.

Let's move on to the General Council. The General Council is made up of both elected and appointed members. It is an organ that allows for the participation of the various components of the Work of Mary in its governance. In it, we find all those who are responsible for the ramifications (sections, branches, and movements), and it also includes the dialogues.

The President consults the General Council for all decisions that concern important matters for the Work of Mary. So, it is a "place" of communion, of responsibility, but also of decision-making. Voting is often consultative, meaning it expresses a consultation. However, at times, the Council gives consent for an action or decision to be finalized, and in this case, a two-thirds majority of those present is required to ensure the decisions reflect as far as possible the unity of the Work of Mary. In other cases – a third scenario – the Statutes require the General Council to make a decision through a collegial act: all deciding and voting equally, such as for the approval of the budget

forecasts and the final accounts of the Work of Mary or of its sections, branches, and movements, or whenever the President deems it necessary.

*What is the legal difference between elected and appointed members?*

These are two different ways of assuming a role. Let's take the example of the general councillor: a general councillor assumes this role, this task, either through election, where they are elected by the General Assembly, or through an appointment made by the President, and in some cases, the consent of the General Council will be sought, and in other cases, only their opinion on the individual is requested.

Now, to return to the General Council: as we said, it consists of elected and appointed members. In fact, the elected councillors are those chosen by the General Assembly from among the men and women focolarini with perpetual vows, and their number is equal. The number is chosen by the President and cannot be less than 20 according to the present norms. The two people who are responsible for the sections of the men and women focolarini are also elected members, because they have been chosen by their respective assemblies. Similarly, the person responsible for the branch for diocesan priests and deacon focolarini is elected, as well as those responsible for the branches of the men and women volunteers of God, who are also elected by their own assemblies. Then, we have the appointed councillors. In this case, as I mentioned earlier, the consent or opinion of the General Council is required to take up this position. These are practically those responsible for the branches, movements, and for the dialogues. Added to this group is the secretary for the meetings of the Bishops who are friends of the Focolare Movement and those women focolarine who are appointed by the President to ensure that the male and female representation in the Council is equal. So, the importance of the equality between the male and female members is emphasised, with this provision found in the Statutes.

Additionally, those belonging to the Work of Mary from other churches, different from the Catholic Church, despite not being able to hold elected or appointed positions in the government according to the Statutes, are not stopped from attending the meetings of the General Council and contribute their specific input. It's also important to note Article 145 of the General Statutes, which requires that their opinion be sought in the most appropriate forms whenever necessary, to bear in mind the thoughts and practices of their respective churches and communities.

And finally, to conclude this question, I cannot fail to mention the General Decree which was issued by the Dicastery for the Laity, Family, and Life regarding the international central government. It was promulgated on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of June 2021 and specifically addresses this part of the General Statutes. As you know, the Work of Mary is subject to the jurisdiction of the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, meaning it is governed by this Dicastery. The Decree concerns the duration and number of terms of office, which is fixed at a maximum of 10 years—rather than the twelve years established in our General Statutes. It also addresses the level of representation of members in the election process of the international governing body of international associations of the faithful. This Decree has the force of law and is binding for all associations recognized or established by the Dicastery. Therefore, it is binding for the Work of Mary too! For this reason, a commission has been tasked with revising the General Statutes to align them with the Decree. What is the purpose of the Decree? It is precisely to promote a healthy turnover in leadership roles, ensuring that authority is exercised as a true service, articulated within ecclesial communion, and also to prevent personality bias and ownership. The preparatory commission for the General Assembly, already in operation, is working to ensure that proposed amendments to the Statutes are known and reviewed both at the Centre and within the zones, to facilitate the approval process in the Assembly.

*Elisabetta, but should we ensure that every person belonging to the Work of Mary is involved in the processes of reform, decision-making, and elections? What do the General Statutes stipulate in this regard?*

I would like to make a premise. As you know, the structure of the Work of Mary is an association of the faithful which unites all those belonging to the Movement in a single way of going toward God and unity, while at the same time maintaining distinctions between its members. There are the branches to safeguard the clarity of each person's commitment, but also to ensure the support that is proportionate to the individual's personal vocation. These branches are entrusted to people who live the same ideal according to their vocation. This structure is supported by the General Statutes of the Work of Mary for the entire Movement. They are the general life norms for the life of the Movement as a whole, and then by Regulations which are specific guidelines for each ramification. This is where it's possible to express the participation of everyone in reforms, decisions, and everything necessary for life.

Therefore, the General Statutes provide for a plurality of structures of communion, I would say an effort to live unity in charity. It's a plurality where everyone, through their own branch, at the level of the central government, makes their voice heard through their representative in the general council – as we've heard. They can also do this in the assembly through members by right, elected members, and a representation of the central councils of the branches and movements, also elected from within them. The men and women focolarini have a total commitment of life in the Work of Mary. They consecrate themselves to God, take on the evangelical counsels with vows or promises, and are members of the Movement with full rights. They all give their contribution and vote through the zonal assemblies.

We could say, it's like the unity within the Trinity, the Statutes unite by distinguishing so that everyone can find orderly ways to participate in the life and also in the governance of the Movement.