

CLOISTERED LIFE: A LIFE FOR LOVE OF THE SPOUSE

From the solitude lived by the Spouse, to the stillness that speaks of new relationships

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An introduction

I am very aware that the topic assigned to me, which is the cloistered life, is an important, complex, and a delicate subject.

The topic is important in particular to those men and women¹ called to this kind of life following Christ's footsteps in institutes fully dedicated to contemplation², because cloistered life, in its various forms, mark their lives. In some cases this importance appears more distinguished by observing vows, with everything that implies³.

This topic is also delicate, because the cloistered life is not only diverse, but also in many cases is lived out in contrasting forms, just as shown by the responses to the questionnaire⁴ sent by the Congregation of Consecrated Life and Apostolic Societies to all the religious contemplatives.

As the responses to this questionnaire show, there are sisters who fear any possible change that may arise in the present discipline the cloistered life; others, on the other hand, believe that there is a necessary and urgent cause to revise several elements that constitute the cloistered life today. According to them, the mentioned elements no longer correspond to the actual challenges that many monasteries are facing today and, also to current female anthropology⁵.

This also makes the topic more complicated: it really depends on the understanding and the experience of those who lived it, and at the same time on the kind of vision about the consecrated life one may have.

For what has been said, to speak of this topic namely, the consecrated life in itself would already be a nerve, so who can enter the mystery of God, the object of contemplation; to speak of the this topic, in the present situation, maybe it is more than everything that has been said, I would add a profound conviction, which is surely has been said already by some other people: to discuss an issue with deep knowledge of the facts it is necessary to do it based on one's experience, in order not to miss principles more or less interesting. Not having by myself that experience, for consistency I can only be a spokesperson of those who have lived what has been written in publications that everyone can consult, or in the responses to the questionnaire indicated before. On the other hand, if I do it, assuming all the risks that entails, it is by the great love I have for this way of following Christ within the consecrated life, which I consider as the true spiritual heart of the Church. Another clarification I want to convey before starting to discuss this topic. I want to make it clear that I do not intend to offer a definite assessment on particulars. All I want is to provide, if possible, some elements, not even pretending them to be something new, to the reflection now taking place in several contemplative communities.

¹ A partir de ahora hablaré principalmente de las mujeres que viven enteramente dedicadas a la contemplación en la vida claustral, no solo por ser la mayoría de cuantos siguen esta forma de *secula Christi*, sino también porque a veces, directa o indirectamente, haré referencia al *cuestionario* que en su día la CIVCSVA envió a todos los monasterios de contemplativas y solo a ellas. Es obio que, cambiando lo que se ha de cambiar, y teniendo siempre en cuenta las propias Constituciones, lo que digo para las monjas lo digo también para los monjes.

² Concilio Vaticano II, *Perfectae caritatis*, 7. Esta expresión son muchos los que la creen inapropiada, pues también los monasterios de clausura tienen actividades internas que no son contemplación en sentido propiamente dicha. Está claro que lo que se quiere decir es que quienes pertenecen a esos Institutos se dedican primordialmente a la contemplación. De todos modos, por ser del Concilio, en mi reflexión seguiré haciendo referencia quienes son miembros de esos Institutos hablando de la vida enteramente contemplativa.

³ Es el caso de las Hermanas Pobres de Santa Clara o Clarisas que hacen, como cuarto voto, el voto de clausura.

⁴ El *cuestionario* fue enviado por la CIVCSVA a todos los monasterios de monjas contemplativas con fecha 29 aprile 2014. Dicho *cuestionario* se refería a la formación, la autonomía y la clausura de las monjas. Se han recibido 1067 respuestas en español/portugués (España, Portugal y América Latina), 581 en inglés (USA, África y Asia), 445 en italiano (Italia y divesos países que han usado esta lengua para comunicarse con el Dicasterio, particularmente Polonia, Croato, Lituani, Rumanía), 420 en francés (Francia, África y algún país de Asia), y en otras lenguas (alemán, chino y japonés) 83. En total hemos recibido 2596 respuestas. Se debe tener presente que en no pocos casos las respuestas son de grupos de monasterios y de algunas Federaciones.

⁵ Es significativo como en las respuestas al *cuestionario* algunos monasterios o federaciones se preguntan por qué existe todavía hoy una legislación al respeto distinta para los hombres que para las mujeres.

In my presentation I will start by situating the topic of the religious cloistered life in the context of contemplation, the main objective of entirely contemplative way of life, then, later, I will proceed to what we call "theological" in it.

I will not go into issues strictly juridical, because such issues depend, in large part, on the proper constitutions of each order, and on Church discipline, which, of course, may change in the future.

TO CONTEMPLATE: TO WHOM? BY WHOM? HOW?

Contemplation, the heart of all consecrated life⁶, is the ultimate cause of the consecrated life being *entirely contemplative*, beyond any other element that we may form the lives of these sisters. Everything a religious contemplative is done and the way it does, must be guided by and subject to contemplation.

The discovery of the treasure, hidden for many (cf. Mt 13, 44), leads the contemplative who has been graced with the discovery to consider it as their "wealth and satiety"⁷, therefore they may make life choices difficult to understand for the many, dedicating themselves in the entirely contemplative life to the Love that, just as in the case of Jeremiah, seduced them and made them (cf. Jr 20, 7); they run after him; in a beautiful expression of St. John of the Cross⁸, go out "on the streets and plazas" seeking the love of their lives (cf. *Cant* 3, 2), and they put their "eyes fixed on the one who prompts and completes our faith: Jesus" (*Heb* 12,2).

A strong experience of love from the one who loved us first (*1Jn* 4, 19), has led men and women of all times to dedicate themselves to a life entirely contemplative: to write a beautiful story of Love, dedicating themselves completely in the service of searching God; a search that may outline what a contemplative would be of all time, and they keep constantly an *itinerant* attitude, well knowing that, the more they search still they never will have it; they search for something already written of in the book of Exodus, presented as under the images of cloud or -of fire.

This is love in a great degree that when somebody is in love they pass beyond reason.

This is what leads to lover, the contemplative, to transform in the Beloved, which is Christ, the end of all contemplation; to be permanent indicator of transcendence, the primary mission of an entirely contemplative life. And this is precisely what makes the contemplative life a life spent on the edges of two abysses: the fullest of all or the nothing more absurd. This is precisely what the entirely contemplative life is all about: either the fullest of all or the most absurd. There is no in between.

Only with God would be enough!, exclaims St. Teresa⁹; God is everything, the good, the highest good, the every good writes St. Francis¹⁰. This confession made by Teresa or Francis is what all contemplatives should make, and is what constitutes the fullness of their lives. In this sense the purely contemplative is not only a sort of a radical life, evangelically speaking, but also a prophetic life in the full sense, so, just like all prophets, religious contemplatives should acknowledge questions that God and men put in the furrows of the human history, and develop the ability to keep seeing God in a world that ignores His presence¹¹.

But, unfortunately, also the contemplative life may become absurd. That's when a contemplative by profession, even taking account of the great distance between himself and Jesus, fails to work in his image; when a contemplative person does not make constant reference to Jesus, or when it is not an existential narrative of him.

As Elizabeth of the Trinity says: If he does not fill the cloister of monasteries, which would be so empty. Just as one contemplative write: "It is difficult to endure this permanent vertigo without a handle, and Jesus of Nazareth is the ground that balances us and allows us to sustain standing"¹².

Then it is not about, I tell it now, defending gates and barriers, when the object of the contemplative life is to search always and in everything, that may inhabit all areas of the monastery, must fill all the gaps that may

⁶ CIVCSVA, *Contemplad. A los consagrados y a las consagradas tras las huellas de la belleza*, Roma, 15 de octubre de 2015, 1.

⁷ San Francisco de Asís, *Alabanzas al Dios altísimo*, 5.

⁸ Cf. San Juan de la Cruz, *Cántico espiritual*, Canción primera.

⁹ Santa Teresa de Ávila, *Poesías*.

¹⁰ San Francisco de Asís, *Alabanzas al Dios altísimo*, 3.

¹¹ Cf. Ssan Juan Pablo II, Ex. Ap. *Vita consecrata* (=VC), Roma 1996, 68.

¹² Patricia Noya, *Soledad habitada por el amor. El lugar y el sentido de la vida congtemplativa, en Una historia de amor. Seguir a Jesús en la Vida Consagrada hoy*, edt. Efarantzazu/Verbo Divino, Navarra, 2015, 189.

exist in it, and the silence, the recollection, and the cloister being remembered, those who live in the monastery and all who approach him, that Christ walk in every house¹³.

In this context it is necessary to remember, nevertheless, that those contemplatives are not superheroes or superstars; they are people who are searching ardently for God (cf. *Sal* 27), for the hidden God (cf. *ICro* 16, 11; *Sal* 105, 4; *Is* 55, 6; *Am* 5, 6), this is what leads them on in holy pilgrimage in search of the deeper meaning of life, so that they feel like permanent mendicants, shrouded in the great mystery that surrounds them; they are men and women who are constantly made for what is leading makes the feel "unfinished"; men and women with their own weaknesses, fully human; men and women who step on land and often with "feet of clay", which makes them walk in humility and truth, and to apologize when they sin or when in their midst sin is present.

With regard to this, with great realism and lucidity, a contemplative confesses: "Behind the walls of our monasteries, under our more or less weighty habits, our human hearts beat, as mean and cowardly, as generous and ardent as any other person, living in wonder everyday of our mediocrity burning in his fire"¹⁴.

This reality of mud does not scare or discourage contemplatives from walking in their search of God. Since God became man, neither the humility of the flesh, nor the fragility of the contemplative are obstacles against entering God's mystery, but a door that will open an easier way to the extent that what is being contemplated is the humanity and *-kenosis* of Christ,¹⁵ in the mysteries of his incarnation, passion, and death¹⁶.

Also it is true that in the monasteries there is lot of sanctity and many older persons develop skills unsuspected till they reach "a life transformed by the presence of God"¹⁷. Yes, among contemplatives there are many people who radiate unified humanity and holiness, people who develop from the silence of the cloister a regenerative mission, from the same road of reunion and intimate reconstruction of themselves. It is the miracle of those who are totally open to God, who unites exclusively to Christ the spouse, being thus as "sign of the exclusive union of the Church, the wife, with God, profoundly beloved"¹⁸.

If a contemplative left everything in a radically particular way to follow the Lord, (cf. *Mt* 19, 27) he has done not as a consequence of his extraordinary qualities, but because he has felt "seen" by God and has allowed this to transform him. How could a man or a woman peer into the abyss of the mystery of God, to call that which does not let enter in any name (cf. *Ex*. 3, 14), to look at that which nobody has ever seen (cf. *Jn* 1, 18), without the loving gaze of the Lord and without the transformation that he causes in the contemplative's soul? The entirely contemplative life, like all consecrated life, is the generous response to God's gift, even more generous. And that love is only compensated with love.

Before proceeding directly to the theme of cloistered life we have to answer a question being raised earlier: ¿How to contemplate?

Just as so many other things in life, contemplation is a matter of "seeing": letting us be seen and letting see the face of the beloved, thus it is only by that way one can enter in the mystery. To see and to be seen will make a contemplative have a new relationship with God, with himself, with others, and with creation itself. The eyes of God on a person change the person himself and their world of relationships.

To contemplate is to open the eyes of the heart to see, consider, and contemplate the presence of God in oneself, in others, and in history, letting oneself be transformed by the presence: contemplating at the mirror, and being converted into mirror for others.

To contemplate is an encounter with the God of history and in the creation that the Creator carries significance¹⁹. History, just creation itself is presented to the contemplative not as an obstacle, but as a mirror wherein to contemplate, and in this mirror to see one's own face. Contemplation, then, at the same time while it brings us closer to God, makes us closer to our true self and to the deeper meaning of history and of creation. Contemplation, just like -prayer, is "to make friendship"²⁰, to be and to know that he is there, allowing God the one who, by the communion, works the "miracle" of the transformation of the contemplative person into a luminous image of the Trinity itself, and converts the monastery into a sacred space, a place of communion with the Lord.

¹³ Cf. Santa Teresa de Ávila, *Libro de la vida*, 32, 11.

¹⁴ Patricia Noya, *art. cit.* 186.

¹⁵ Cf. Santa Teresa de Ávila, *Libro de la vida*, 9, 6; 22, 6-7.

¹⁶ Cf. Santa Clara de Asís, *II Carta a Inés*, 18- 22; *IV Carta a Inés*, 19- 26.

¹⁷ Papa Francisco, Ex. Ap. *Evangelii gaudium*, Roma, 213, 257.

¹⁸ VC 59.

¹⁹ San Francisco de Asís, *Cántico de las criaturas*, 4.

²⁰ Santa Teresa de Ávila, *Libro de la vida*, 8, 5.

Contemplation is, in other words, an intense communion with God. It is there where there is the desire to be always with him (*Mt* 17, 4); it is there where the consecrated life, and particularly the entirely contemplative life, is born and regenerates constantly²¹.

THE CLOISTERED LIFE

The cloistered life is situated within the scope to which it corresponds, that of the contemplation; Let us approach now directly the issue of cloistered life.

On the reason for the cloistered life: passionate love for Jesus

Among the many testimonies that could be quoted on the motivation due to which, men and women, have opted for this kind of life, I would like to quote a text that seems to me to express it perfectly. The text refers to Clare of Assisi who lived "prisoner" in the "small place" of St. Damian, just outside of Assisi for many years, if one takes into account that the "sister's bodily death", he visits her while he was still very young. The text says: "In the seclusion" of this "little place" [St. Damian], the virgin Clare locked herself for love of the celestial husband"²².

The cloistered life of Clara, and surely of many other contemplatives, of the past and the present, is motivated by love for Jesus and sustained by Him throughout the life of consecration. I am personally convinced that doing a memory of the vocational path and the purpose of life for a contemplative, beyond the weaknesses, it remains clear this strong desire: be with God, to be with Him without destructions; spend time, without schizophrenia caused by the noise in which often one lives, and to deal with so many things, though necessary, is not the only, nor the most important.

The option for the cloister comes from a firm desire: to love with the whole being, body and soul, the one who "entirely" gave himself for our love²³. The option for a cloistered life is born and nourished by the desire of the total gift. As we have already mentioned, one who has discovered Jesus as the "treasure", feels the need to put aside everything to be with the first and only Spouse (cf. *Os* 2, 9); feels the need to renounce even space so as to remain together with the one who contains everything.

Therefore, the cloistered life is fundamentally, although not exclusively, a cloistered life of the heart, that responds to the desire of being alone and in close intimacy with the Spouse and of belong only to him. The cloistered life is a condition of a heart centered on the Lord, the only thing necessary (cf. *Lc* 10, 41); of a profoundly loving heart of the "fairest among the sons of men" (cf. *Sal* 45, 3), that burn with passion for the beloved, just as the woman in the *Song of Songs*, of a heart flying in the dream, a heart wounded for love (cf. *Cant* 5, 2, 8). The cloistered life is a constraint of taking awareness of the greatness of the vocation that leads to an appropriate response to the proportion of the gift: "To whom much is given, much is being sought; and who was entrusted much, of him more will be asked" (*Lc* 12, 48). Hence the importance of knowing well the vocation (*ICor* 1, 26)²⁴, and not forgetting that the contemplative, just like in the case of the disciples, it is not to choose God, is chosen by God (cf. *Jn* 15, 16).

The need for intimacy with the Lord, to remain with him constantly, without impediment (cf. *Jn* 15, 1ss)²⁵, it explains all; it justifies everything, also the cloistered life. Contemplatives have firsthand experience of being called by love and for the love of the Spouse they responded without any reservation. Otherwise, it would be very difficult, not to say impossible, to understand the cloistered life, that it is nothing but the desire to be with the Beloved, to be transformed with him (cf. *Cant* 3, 2), the ultimate goal, as we have said, of the contemplation. All this makes the question that Pope Francis addressed to all consecrated men is even more pressing in the case of a person entirely dedicated to the contemplative life: "Is it really Jesus the first and

²¹ Cf. San Juan Pablo II, *Homilía* 2 de febrero de 2001.

²² Tomás de Celano, *Leyenda de santa Clara*, 10.

²³ Cf. Santa Clara de Asís, *III Carta a Inés*, 15.

²⁴ Cf. Clara de Asís, *Testamento*, 4.

²⁵ En este contexto, Clara de Asís pide a su hermana Inés de Praga: "Recordando tu propósito y, como Raquel, viendo siempre tu principio [...] con andar apresurado, con paso ligero, sin estorbos en los pies, para que ni siquiera tus pies recojan el polvo, segura, gozosa y dispuesta, recurras con cautela la senda de la bienaventuranza" para que nadie ni nada sea de obstáculo en el cumplimiento de "tus votos al Altísimo, con aquella perfección a la que te ha llamado el Espíritu del Señor" (cf. *II Cart.* 11ss).

only love we intend when we profess our vows?"²⁶. Upon the answer given to this question depends entirely the significance of the contemplative life and the happiness of those who have embraced it.

Speaking of the cloistered life, its penitential aspect, in which involves every repudiation, ought not to be forgotten. All cloistered, with their choice of life, are deprived "of space, contacts and so many goods from creation"²⁷. All this can only be justified by the divine flame of love for the Lord (cf. *Cant* 8, 6), that burns out without switching off in the heart of a truly contemplative soul, being realistic we cannot but say that they no longer live as a deprived and does not prevent the feeling of those who experience the price of sacrifice.

In this sense one cannot failed to note that cloistered life; is a way of life in penance, which leads to living in a very concrete way the *kenotic* mystery of Jesus in his incarnation, passion, and death. This participation of the contemplative in the kenosis of Jesus only makes sense when constantly lived according to the language of love, the language of those in love. It is then that those who live in seclusion can heal loneliness, self-absorption, selfishness. That true contemplative lovingly proclaims the primacy of God and the true meaning of sacrifice that involves the cloistered life and many other deprivations of that kind of life.

And when it is more oriented to interpersonal love relationship with God, to the contemplation of the beloved's face and to hear his voice (*Cant* 2, 14), your life will be more prophetic. Thus, the penitential aspect of the cloistered life reaches its zenith: to show, to be transparent, and to be free for the purest love for the Lord. And therefore, also in the cloistered life when the person who lives takes the contemplative life entirely to a purification/conversion as much as that allows him to acquire what the fathers called *puritas cordis*, and to have, as Benedict XVI says so poetically, "a heart which sees", in such a way that contemplative can see, to love as he loves, to feel as he feel (cf. *Fil* 2, 5)²⁸.

But this penitential dimension, to be truly meaningful, it cannot be lived but from the matrimonial dimension we have pointed out before and that is a source of deep joy. The joy that is constitutive of true Christian faith is not a possibility for a contemplative but a grave responsibility. Through it, contemplatives manifest it having reached the summit of its existence; the fullness of life that shines in its entire positive, meaningful and worth living.

The joy that should characterize the cloistered life must also be maintained in the midst of trials (cf. *2Cor* 7, 4; *Col* 1, 24), and is born and grows from the experience of feeling dense, loved and called; of contemplation, as we have already mentioned, the "fairest of the sons of men" (cf. *Sal* 45, 3); of a strong relationship of communion and humanity in the brotherly love inside the community²⁹. Thus, when contemplatives shows the world that true happiness dwells in the depths of the heart, which does not depend on what one has or one does not have, and that life consists of the life hidden in Christ.

Also it may be useful for contemplatives the words of Pope Francis to all consecrated when he says: "a search that is a lonesome is a lonely search"³⁰. No hardship, not even about space and a certain type of relationship, typical of the cloistered life, nor of finding difficulties, just as the numerical reduction and the advanced age of the communities, nor the dark nights of the spirit, disappointments and the diseases can steal the joy that a contemplative experiment of feeling loved with a love of fondness by the "heavenly bridegroom". Nothing can deprive the contemplatives to witness the world and in the Church the joy that comes from their faith in Christ and from his love. Rather, the difficulties of all human life and the cloistered life in particular, as Pope Francis reminds in the Apostolic Letter to all consecrated, must be lived as an occasion to find "the perfect joy", a chance to bear witness "through their lives by the truth of the words of Scripture: When I am weak, then I am strong" (*2Cor* 12, 10)³¹.

The cloistered life: a desert where life flourish

Passionate love and a joyful penance, is what leads to the transformation of the heart, which is the result of a choice for life lived in seclusion. In this sense the cloistered life can be paragoned to the image of the monastic desert mentioned by the holy fathers.

Whoever enters the desert comes to separate "from" but also to separate "for". The desert is a place of solitude (separate "from"), but also a place of privacy (apart "for"). It is also place for listening, for

²⁶ Papa Francisco, *Carta Apostólica a todos los consagrados* (=CAC), Roma, noviembre de 2015, I, 2.

²⁷ VC 59.

²⁸ Cf. Benedicto XVI, *Deus caritas est*, Roma, 25 de diciembre de 2005, 31; Cf. CIVCSVA, *Contemplad.* Roma 15 de octubre 2014, 44.

²⁹ CAC II, 1.

³⁰ *Idem*

³¹ *Idem*.

maximum listening that can be given: in *midbar* (Desert), says the Talmud, God is sensed as *medabber* (the speaker). The desert is the "training school" wherein God's people had been trained, as such, as people of the Covenant (cf. *Ex* 19– 24). The desert is a place of struggle and love; It is the place of intimacy (cf. *Hos* 2: 16ff) and temptation (cf. *Lk* 4: 1 ff), is a required period in life towards liberty.

The cloistered life, just like the desert, is a separation "of" and a separation "to". The cloistered life as separation "from" is bound to be experienced as living space for the hope of encounter and privacy. In this sense, the cloistered life cannot be live on the margins of hope that craves the encounter.

The cloistered life is the place of privacy, but also the place of temptation and struggle. Following the comparison of the cloistered life with the desert we may say that the cloisters are training school to a more radical freedom that that comes from a self-knowledge (cf. *Gen* 12, 1) and the full adherence to the word of God (cf. *Mt* 4, 1-11).

Henri le Saux writes about the desert: "God is not in the desert. It is the desert that is the mystery itself of God". Applying it to the contemplative way of life we may say: God is not in the cloisters. The cloister is the mystery of God himself.

La cloistered life: a life lived of solitude

Solitude is constitutive element of anthropology: man, though by its nature a being in relation, born alone and dies alone. Moreover, solitude itself is an ambiguous reality that can be negative or positive. It is negative when it is lived in isolation, that involves being distant to one another and if the fear of apartness arise. It is positive when it leads to the encounter with oneself, in which requires great courage, when it is lived as a subsisted reality. In fact, in solitude, if the soul is attentive, God is being encountered.

In the case of contemplatives, solitude which involves mainly their lives is only understandable and justifiable if it is solitude inhabited by the Spouse.

Silence is so important in the life of contemplation and it is only positive when it is not reduced the noises in the absence of words but to listening, to the One who is the definitive Word of the Father the humanity (cf. *Heb* 1, 1); Instead, in the deeper meaning of the term, of the encounter with the One who in the Incarnation "tilted his tent among us" (*Jn* 1, 14), this is as well as solitude.

Then if, as Girolamo Savonarola says "Prayer has a father and a mother for silence and solitude," then it is true that solitude and silence are essential elements in the life of contemplative.

If silence is the language of love, of the depth, of other's presence, and solitude is the need for privacy, a place of communion with God, the place where God let him be seen, therefore neither can silence or solitude lacking in the lives of those who want to live a truly spiritual life, a deep relationship with him whom Ignatius of Antioch defined as "the Word that comes from silence." Neither the silence nor the solitude cannot be missing in the lives of those who wish to concentrate on essential things (Dietrich Bonhoeffer), of whom, like those contemplative, desire to hear the Lord's voice (cf. *1Sam* 3, 1ss), and discover its path through history (cf. *1R* 19, 12). But silence and solitude will be important elements in the life of contemplatives, their most perfect song and their highest prayer, an occasion of deepening and unification, a living word and a prophetic call in our society, crammed with empty words and presences which are not really presences, in so far as which is inhabited by the is the eternal Word (cf. *Jn* 1, 1ss), the word that is, was and will be manifested at the same time mainly in the silence of the cross, "magisterium in which can never be stop to sprout every theological word"³².

Contemplative can only testifies having a real life lived with solitude and silence that speaks, screaming with their lives, that God is able to fill hearts of all men and women, to make them happy without seeking happiness elsewhere. Only then the cloistered life may speak and testify "the joy and beauty of living the Gospel and in follow Christ"³³ and will be the prophecy of the mystery of the Church-the spouse³⁴. By that contemplatives themselves may avoided to put in serious crisis the cloistered: or by hurdling lightly or by clinging to it even in situations where it could be broken materially in function of other higher values

Indeed, the cloistered life is put into crisis when people are seeking all kinds of *suterfugios* to justify unwarranted outputs, taking the gate behind them, in a very visual expression of Pope Francis.

It gets into crisis when one use media communication without discernment nor the necessary discretion required by the form of life hidden in Christ (cf. *Col* 3, 1-4), distinctive that of contemplative. But the cloister also may be put into crisis when the contemplative life is identified with the cloister life; when

³² Enzo Bianchi, *Le parole della spiritualità. Per un lessico della vita interiore*, Rizzoli, Milan 1999, 143.

³³ CAC II, 1.

³⁴ Cf. *Venite seorsum* 4; *Verbi Sponsa* 10, 1; *Vita consecrata* 59.

reduce it to a physical and material, without soul nor soul, a "leak" motivated by the fear of a world that appears only in its dimension of sin; a leak that has nothing to do with the true meaning of "*fuga mundi*" of which so much talk in the sense of spiritual treatises.

The cloistered life is put into crisis when a mere material observance leading to not leave the cloister when there are more than valid reasons to do so is being reduced.

In both cases we cannot speak of a lived contemplative life and, therefore, the cloistered life is in a serious question. If contemplatives have a disposition in contemplation, in the face of Jesus, only if or may be in the strong desire, in the passionate pursuit, and active and hopeful searching, then, the contemplative life is lived and, as in the case of the desert following the comparison we have done earlier, also in the cloisters life flourish mysteriously (cf. *Is* 32, 15; 35, 1. 6; 41, 18-19; 43, 19-20; 51, 3), and you will love life and the life in abundance (cf. *Jn* 10, 10).

La cloistered life: a new mode of relationships

The cloistered life at its deepest spirit has much to do with the world of relationships. "In a world pierced by virtual contact, visited by occasional groups who often consume relationships in here and in now, not mentioning the profound need for authentic relationships", In a world full of presences which are not contemplative " they would reaffirm today, with words that descend in God, the importance of authentic relationships that build a truly human and divine bond"³⁵; relationships with God, with himself, with others and with the creation.

Relationship with God

The cloistered life, not only a physical place but also a theological, is called, first, to speak of God, with a symbolic and paradoxical language: the limits in monasteries evoke the endless horizons of God; the limited space of the cloisters speaks of the Infinite, the "monotony" of daily life constantly denotes the incessant creative activity of God. Moreover, as J. Moltmann says, "in the history the experience of the limitation it has always been the one to make it possible to speak of transcendence."

Whoever enters contemplative life, as we have advocated already, is not to "escape" but to "search": to God, to men and women, brothers and sisters, the whole creation, from the encounter with oneself. And want to make getting rid of everything that could determine us such as encountering the truth of oneself and others, without using or manipulating anyone.

What can you tell of God the contemplatives? Primarily the contemplative life is called to tell men and women of our time that God is alive and present in the city of men: "The Lord is there" (*Ez* 48, 35). Cloisters thus becomes a parable of encounter between God and men in their specific situations (cf. *Ex* 2, 24-25; 3, 7-8), between God and everything that exist.

The contemplative life is also called to announce that God's faithfulness remains "forever" (cf. *Sal* 146, 6); that God's covenant with humanity by God is never broken. At the time of the provisional monastic stability and as the cloister knows is a strong call to what can last, to something that has consistency.

Finally, the contemplative life speaks to us a God of custodian, of safety, of strength. It is significant as many of the monasteries, especially older ones, are built on rock. For an attentive pilgrim, the monastery conveys this message. The cloister life comes thus as the custody of a life entirely dedicated to contemplation, which admits distractions.

This is all true, but not instinctive. The contemplative way of life speaks of God depending on the people living within it. The contemplative talks about God as they live a place of communion with God and with our brothers and sisters, when the limitation of space is at the service of the internalization of the Gospel and its values³⁶, when the nuns live their humanity and expressed in a healthy relationships according to logic of the creation, of the Passover, and according to the logic of God³⁷.

Yes, the cloistered life speaks of God through the relationships that live inside the monastery, and first of all, in the relationship with God through personal and liturgical prayer, in the daily offering, in trust, and in recognizing the providential presence of God in the history of each one and the community itself.

³⁵ Cf. Joao Braz de Aviz, *La misión de las Hermanas Pobres de Santa Clara*, en "*Franciscus et Clara: Communio et Mediatio...*", Roma 2012, 45.

³⁶ Cf. VC 59.

³⁷ El papa Francisco a las contemplativas del protomonasterio de Santa Clara, durante su visita a Asís, afirmó: "Las monjas de clausura son llamadas a tener una gran humanidad", Asís 4 de octubre de 2013.

This is a call to all contemplatives to be attentively careful, besides of fraternal relations, also to prayer, in other things that everything may become a real and authentic, a clear moment in proclaiming God who loves and saves time. Also they are asked to open the prayer to the history so that it may transform in praises and intercessions.

Relationship with others

Contemplative life, from a fraternal life in a human community is humanizing, in the responsibility and freedom of those living in monasteries, is called to be greatly proactive in human relations. What can the world tell of the contemplative relations?

Contemplative life, "in our days dominated by invasive global communication and at the same time, the inability to communicate authentically", is called to be "a sign of possibility among human relationships, being transparent and sincere"³⁸, in the same that is it called to show that it is possible the communion of persons with respect to its diversity, and in a world of relationships marked by equality: "You are all brothers" (*Mt* 23, 8).

In this context, in order that contemplative life may be at the service of a deeply evangelical relationships, a visitation of fraternal life in community is necessary, knowing that this can be a real prophecy or anti sign in our way of life, and more specifically that it is necessary a revisiting of service of authority in the community, in such a way that it is at the service of the sisters, not just structures or a soulless compliance; at the service of all the sisters, not just for some nearby who holds the authority.

The mission of the contemplative life, like of every consecrated life, is situated in the perspective of the centering the person who knows how to start from what is human. Since encounter with Christ demands and encourages bringing out all the richness and truth to humanity". Consecrated life and the cloistered, in particular, moved by the Spirit, is called to recognize what is a truly human is, "to be formations of humanity, from their experience of mystical encounter"³⁹.

On the other hand, some contemplatives could not respond to other great challenges that is also thrown to them by the digital culture, particularly in the world of that refers relationships, and with the danger that is also present in the monasteries wherein exists relationships more virtual than real. Contemplatives must always remember that God, to whom there are consecrated and dedicated "has spoken through men and in a human way"⁴⁰, and in the person of his Son, Jesus (cf. *Jn* 1, 14), God has opened a real and never a virtual communication with the men and women of all time⁴¹.

The relationships contemplative-Web and digital culture, in general, are asking contemplatives to practice persevering listening, and therefore, something that is purified, of what the Spirit is telling contemplative communities today (cf. *Ap* 2-3).

Relationship with the creation

One of the sayings from the desert Fathers says: "A philosopher asked St. Anthony: Father how you can feel so excited when they have taken your comfort from the books? And Anthony replied: My book, Oh philosopher, is the nature, and I always have before me that whenever I want to read the Word of God"⁴².

The creation is God's mirror:... *of you O Most High, Most High*⁴³. Creation is the resting place of God, of life, the presence of God's power. Contemplative knows how to discover in the creation the Creator; she knows that everything in life reflects to face of God.

What do contemplative says about the creation? Let us start with an observation: There exist a close relationship between the ancient monastic life and appreciation of the potentiality of the nature, so as the respect and conservation of ecosystems, to the extent wherein we can affirm that the cloistered world has given and continues to give an important contribution to the vital balance of the environment, promoting,

³⁸ Cf. CIVCSVA, *Escrutad. A los consagrados y consagradas que caminan tras los signos de Dios*, Roma, LEV 2015, pg 72-73.

³⁹ *Idem*; Papa Francisco, *Discurso a los Rectores y alumnos de los Pontificios Colerios y Residencias sacerdotales de Roma*, 12 de mayo 2014.

⁴⁰ Concilio Vaticano II, *Dei Verbum* 12.

⁴¹ En este contexto considero importante una formación adecuada para adquirir la sabiduría necesaria para utilizar convenientemente y según la forma de vida *enteramente contemplativa* que una conemplativa ha abrazado los medios digitales que tanto pueden servir al Evangelio, como crear dependencias y relaciones virtuales incompatibles con una vida enteramente consagrada al Señor: evasión del *claustr* e inmersión en la mundanidad, así como la fuga en el mundo de las relaciones que *bypasan* la fatiga del tú a tú.

⁴² Texto tomado de Joan Chittister, *La vida iluminada. Sabiduría monástica para buscadores de la luz*, Sal Terrae, Santander, segunda edición 2001, 99.

⁴³ Cf. San Francisco de Asís, *Cántico del hermano sol*, 4.

more to life than big speeches, but topics like, fraternal relationship with creation as God's will, and responsibility towards creation, which has been entrusted to man by the Creator (cf. *Gen* 1, 28; 2, 15), and today, thanks mainly to the teaching of Pope Francis⁴⁴, we are all taking new consciousness, after having for a long time being delegate to the atheist and secularist sensitivity. At the same time, contemplatives continue following the example of great saints and contemplative like St. Francis of Assisi, and it transforms words of praise and gratitude for the Creator and to all his creatures⁴⁵.

However, there is still the danger of believing that matter is evil, and therefore, it is something opposed to contemplation, or to speak contemplation would not only mean to direct the mind and heart in God because contemplation entails other things beyond. It is necessary to overcome this danger, this temptation. Do not perceive the voice of God in the balance of creation, in its beauty and its struggles "it is to go through life with the blind heart and the deaf soul".

A contemplative is called to see, to listen and to contemplate Creator in the creation, to discover in it the presence and power of God. To this, they must "get into the rhythm of life, to lean from the cycles of time, to listen to the heartbeat of the universe"⁴⁶.

Who others can do better than a contemplative? Who can better send message of fraternal reconciliation with the creation than a contemplative? Who could ask respect for creation better than contemplative? This is all certainly a great and wonderful opportunity for the contemplative life, for the cloistered life.

Relationship with the Reign of God

Contemplatives also, with its life hidden in Christ, are called to respond to Jesus' command: "go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (*Lc* 9, 60). "The kingdom is in your midst" (*Lc* 17, 21). They gaze to take consideration of it, while the kingdom continued to occurred with the characteristics of the smalls, like the mustard seed (cf. *Mt* 13, 31), for it is joy, peace, justice, joy in the Spirit; and from the hidden life of contemplatives, because they live it and they proclaim it.

With this, cloisters must assume with joy their status as "minors", from "unimportant lay" as Pachomius called them. The cloistered life have to assume, without complication, their vocation / mission to be leaven, privileged image of the Kingdom (cf. *Mt* 13, 33), called to "ferment time where God works" (Didier Rimaud). If contemplatives want to talk about Kingdom they must share faith that "share the kenosis of Christ and the Easter's victory", to anticipate in time the eschatological perfection⁴⁷, for they are called to keep the memory of this objective alive.

Speaking of the kingdom, contemplatives are called to live the tension of the kingdom and for the Kingdom, in the never achieved harmonization between the law and life, between discipline and passion, between the stability of the past and precarious of the future anticipated in the present, between the received tradition that needs to be transmitted, and the emergence of the Spirit which opens anew. In this sense, the contemplative life is being called to be laboratory of what is unpublished and to be creative according to the Gospel.

Relationship with oneself

This is all possible only if contemplative lives a new relationship among themselves.

A relationship reconciled with their frailties and inconsistencies, a serene and specified relationship, to the interior of their communities and fraternities and in relationship with others. This is all a real self-encounter with his I and not ideal. This is why silence and solitude are important in life of contemplative.

The cloister: a reality of crisis

Everything that has been said is true, but it may not always be true. Judging by the responses in the Congregation after having received the questionnaires sent to contemplatives worldwide, many sisters realized that contemplative life is in crisis. However, this should not scare anyone and not even contemplatives themselves, if we give meaning to the term crisis that would mean: moments at which decisions must be made.

⁴⁴ Cf. Papa Francisco, *Laudato si'*, Roma 2015.

⁴⁵ Cf. San Francisco de Asís, *Cántico del hermano sol*.

⁴⁶ Joan Chittister, *La vida iluminada. Sabiduría monástica para buscadores de la luz*, Sal Terrae, Santander, segunda edición 2001, 100.

⁴⁷ Benedicto XVI, *Homilía de la Presentación del Señor*, 2 de febrero de 2013.

I believe that cloistered life, just as any other aspects of consecrated life, is an encounter at a time when you have to make decisions with clarity and discernment, from a perspective of faith that must animate the response from the received vocation.

I don't think there's any question about the desirability of maintaining the practice of contemplative life as a sign of total belonging to God and a means to promote it. As far as I know contemplative life, is, as been experienced in many cases, needs to be revised in their deepest motivations and in its external manifestations, if we do not to quench the calling of the prophecy that this sign is called to offer.

They cannot continue to present itself, as "a grave obligation of conscience both for the nuns and as much as for external"⁴⁸. It is not possible to continue to unify all forms of monastic life in the same discipline over the contemplative life; this would lead to the loss of the beauty of the rich mosaic of contemplative life⁴⁹.

Criteria when revising the discipline of the contemplated life

The criteria that should guide this revision are: lucidity and discernment, from an experience of faith.

Lucidity serves, primarily, to take life in their own hands, to have the courage to call things by its proper name, without easy excuses that would not lead to a peaceful thing, at the same time, fatefully with mediocrity, losing thus, their ability to be salt of the earth and light of the world, the leaven of the Kingdom (cf. Mt 5, 13-16), city built on the mountain that speaks of Jesus and of truth, of the offshore beacons that guides sailors. Therefore, how could consecrate life awake the world? How could they be a prophecy?⁵⁰

Perhaps, one of the temptations in which no consecrated persons or contemplative may believe, is to hide under the sand, as ostrich do, for fear of confronting the reality that could scare them, or fear for not knowing what decisions to make.

The worst thing that could happen to consecrated men, and thus to contemplatives, is to slowly loss its significance and evangelical prophecy, characterize consecrated men even without asking them about what is happening in their lives, or by placing them in defensive positions, or simply they becomes defensive for fear of entering into dialogue with the cultural changes that are occurring in recent decades.

Lucidity is not simply living what is ideals but also involves more, as Pope Francis says to all consecrated: "I do not ask you to keep alive the ideals, but that you may know how to create places where the logic of the evangelical gift, of fraternity, acceptance of diversity, of mutual love"⁵¹.

It is not possible to just keep doing only poetry about the consecrated life, neither from those who are outside, nor those living inside monasteries. Abundant ideal and poetic literature on the cloistered life has a very little thing to do with reality.

Many poetry and beautiful things are present in the monasteries! How much holiness! But also: Many dramas! Much lucidity is what they needed, more courage to call things by their name.

Discernment, meanwhile, is another important thing to revise in the praxis of contemplative. Discerning is to "separate what comes from God and what does not"⁵², it is asking God, what do you want from me?, personally; brothers / sisters, what can we do?(cf. *Hech* 2, 17). In any case, to discern is to listen to the God who is always the God of history and to discern is also to make historic our faith in him. This requires having "a profound experience of God and be aware of the challenges of their time, understanding in its theological sense [...] with the help of the Holy Spirit."

To speak of discernment in evangelical sense one must unite lucidity in vision and courage in the options to be taken⁵³. Discernment is to enter, similar to disciple's attitude, not the one of the master, in listening to the Spirit who continues to incline where he wants, as he wants and when he wants (cf. *Jn* 3, 8). Discernment is to move freely within the dynamic of creative fidelity, in which the Church is calling all consecrated today⁵⁴.

Fidelity is not to stay always in the same place or in the same position. Fidelity is to be where one must be and for one it is necessary to walk, for fidelity means walking in the right direction.

⁴⁸ Cf. CIVCSVA, *Verbi Sponsa. Instrucción sobre la vida contemplativa y la clausura de las monjas*, Roma 1999, 14, 3.

⁴⁹ Muchas contemplativas han pedido en respuesta al *cuestionario* que la CIVCSVA haga una nueva Instrucción, en lugar de *Verbi Sponsa*, que manifieste claramente la dimensión esponsal de la vida monástica, con expresiones de la clausura más comprensibles para el hombre y la mujer de hoy, y más consonantes con la práctica que ya se sigue en muchos monasterios. El Santo Padre ha ya pedido a la Congregación de hacer dicha Instrucción. Es nuestra intención hacerla, teniendo en cuenta las aportaciones de las respuestas al *cuestionario*, después de que salga la nueva Constitución Apostólica para las contemplativas, en sustitución de la actual *Sponsa Christi* del 1950.

⁵⁰ CAC II, 2.

⁵¹ *Idem*.

⁵² VC 73.

⁵³ Cf. VC, 73.

⁵⁴ Cf. VC, 37

It is important in consecrated life to live in a holy tension between fidelity, which is always a dynamic reality just as the work of the Spirit and ability to read carefully the signs of times to response from the Gospel.⁵⁵ The present and the future of consecrated life, and also of contemplatives, are necessarily comprised of discernment. Without it, consecrated and contemplative life will dance to the beat of music they usually like to hear: or they will *marry* with the fashion, in which soon they will become widows, or they will make a pure archeology, which will later be converted to a museum, like a piece that can be admired, but never be something attractive. However, the discernment that is needed to enshrine the contemplative life involves freedom.

This will only be possible if done with an attitude similar to exodus, from an experience of faith: "to decide to be with the Lord and to live with Him"⁵⁶, and from this "to be" and "to live" with God, just as the words of God to Jeremiah: "Do not fear for I am with you to defend you" (*Jr* 1, 8)⁵⁷. It will only be possible if their contemplation remains fixed on God⁵⁸; if they keep constantly "the heart turned to God"⁵⁹; if in their contemplation of the mirror, which is Christ, scrutinize their own face⁶⁰, and, in this way; if Jesus would be their "sole desire" and the only "bliss"⁶¹.

A conclusion

To conclude this synthesis, I would like to make use of the metaphor used by Benedict XVI addressing monasteries. I think it could help all consecrated and contemplatives to achieve a greater authenticity of life. I think it could illuminate the praxis of cloisters in line with the things that has been explained earlier, and of the revision, in which the hidden manifestation of Christ is needed in order not to lose its evangelical significance. Pope Benedict XVI, at the Angelus on November 19, 2006, using two powerful images, spoke of the monasteries as "oasis in which the pilgrim on earth can approach the source of the Spirit and quench their thirst along the way, "and also comparing monasteries as the "green lungs of a city" .

These two images being related to the contemplative life, is not applicable for those who are living it already but also to those who are desiring to live it, like an oasis in the midst of the desert, as a point of arrival is good for encountering and recovering forces; a space in which life is being guarded and nurtured , and a place where can life bear fruit abundantly . When the cloister is not situated in margin at the path of those men and women of our time⁶², as oasis they are called to offer our contemporaries, in which many of them are beggars in the sense of not having a deep meaning of life, a significance and orientation of life.

As a green lung, contemplative speaks of God who dwells among the city like a tree that constantly bears fruit (cf. *Os* 14, 9), and his image becomes regeneration and broad space, beneficial for men and women in the enduring search of freedom and true life.

To achieve this, contemplative must speak and be transparent with their relationship with God, and to have a good relationship with others as well. To be evangelical, the cloister should really help contemplatives to keep everything complete: mind, heart and body, so that they may consistently grow in privileged relationship with the God and in healthy relationship with others.

A pure mind goes beyond the ambiguity and duplicity. A heart, leads contemplatives to love as free women, free to offer their heart to God. A body, in a way contemplative may live with significance and authenticity of what they have chosen freely.

⁵⁵ Cf. Concilio Vaticano II, *Gaudium et spes* 4; VC 82.

⁵⁶ Benedicto XVI, *Porta Fidei*, 10.

⁵⁷ Solo tiene miedo de caminar el inseguro. Quien se sostiene en el Señor no tendrá miedo a ponerse constantemente en camino.

⁵⁸ Cf. Pablo VI, *Alocución en la última sesión pública del Concilio Vaticano II*, 7 de diciembre 1965.

⁵⁹ San Francisco de Asís, *Regla no bulada*, 19. 25.

⁶⁰ Cf. Santa Clara de Asís, *IV Carta a Inés*, 15.

⁶¹ CIVCSVA, *Verbi Sponsa*, 10.

⁶² Las contemplativas se separan del mundo, pero no pueden situarse al margen de él ni permanecer ajenas a cuanto alegra y preocupa al hombre y a la mujer de hoy.