Federations: Present and Future

I Historical Introduction

The Church has always held in high esteem and had a high regard for cloistered nuns; indeed, she regulated with specific laws this form of consecration, which, for many centuries was the sole form of consecration for women.

With this in view, "due to the increase of the sacred institute of cloistered nuns"[1] Pope Pius XII instituted Federations with the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*, promulgated on November 21, 1950.

The Apostolic Constitution explains what prompted its conception, namely, the grave destitution in which many monasteries were finding themselves. The Pope wrote, "*in fact there are not a few monasteries, unfortunately, which suffer hunger, misery, and starvation: and because of domestic difficulties many lead a hard life which is no longer tolerable. Some others, even though they do not live in poverty, remain however completely isolated from other monasteries, and often die out*."[2] Moreover, rapid social changes urged a "moderate update" of the rigid legislation of monasteries.

Federations, therefore, are born from the changing circumstances that: "*often call for the association of monasteries of cloistered nuns; this provides an easier and more convenient distribution of offices, a useful, and often necessary, temporary transfer for various reasons of nuns from one monastery to another, reciprocal economic aid, coordination of work, the defense of the common observance, and other motives of this sort. That this may be done and achieved without curtailing the necessary autonomy, without diminishing in any way the vigor of the cloister, and without causing damage to meditation and to a more severe discipline of monastic life, has been proved beyond any doubt and the confidence born from the long experience of male monastic Congregations, as well as from the many instances of Unions and Federations already approved for cloistered nuns. After all, the erection of Federations, and the approval of the statutes which govern them, shall always be reserved to the Holy See*".[3] With these words, Pope Pius XII announced the establishment of the Federations, to which he referred again in article VII of the second part of the document titled "General Statutes of Cloistered Nuns".[4]

The Sacred Congregation of Religious published the Instruction *Inter praeclara* on November 23, 1950, in order to facilitate the putting into practice of *Sponsa Christi*.

The Instruction, referring to Federations, reiterates that they are instituted either to overcome difficulties that may arise from the complete isolation of monasteries, or to foster the spiritual and material well-being of the monasteries themselves. The Federations must not be imposed, but they are strongly recommended and, in some particular cases, they could also be considered necessary. The instruction also clarifies that the authority of Ordinaries or Regular Superiors is over a single monastery and not over the whole Federation; their authority, however, must not be undermined, diminished, or altered because of the Federation. The general aims and the principal benefits of Federations include the possibility and duty of fraternal assistance, the conservation, defense, and improvement of the regular observance, economic matters, and other necessities; the possibility of erecting common novitiates for all or a number of monasteries, where it may not be possible to provide a solid formation; the possibility as well as the responsibility to request and to exchange nuns for assistance in administration or formation; the possibility of temporary transfers for assistance, or for reasons of health or some other need.

The extent of innovation contained in the institution of Federations is noteworthy and will enhance communion between monasteries. At the time of *Sponsa Christi* there were disagreements and the manifestations of trepidation which we may consider as normal in respect of every innovation; therefore, the Congregation, in a letter dated December 15, 1953[6], containing the "*General norms to be followed in the preparation of Federations of monasteries of cloistered nuns*",[5] indicated a way of caution and respect, of prudence and of small steps. It sought to present with clarity the intentions of the Pontiff in the institution of Federations and patiently tried to disperse the doubts, misunderstandings and fears of the cloistered nuns. It recommended no impositions, and that even the semblance of imposition be avoided, seeing that, "*the Supreme Pontiff did not impose a* ***strict obligation*** *of joining a Federation*."[7] It also recommended that the monasteries be involved in the setting up of a Federation, and to have an active part in the organization of the Federation and the drawing up of its statutes. The fact that there was no **strict** obligation to join a Federation, resulted, on the one hand, in communities taking up the offer responsibly and form Federations, and, on the other hand, allowed other communities to not form part of a Federation for 65 years up to the present day. However, in my opinion, there was always the obligation, which still remains, to be part of a Federation so as to obtain those benefits which, according to the Pope, a Federation provides.

After the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* and the 'General norms' (1953) it was the Council decree *Perfectae caritatis* that took up again the matter; in n. 22 it encouraged Federations between Institutes and between Monasteries *sui iuris* that belong in some way to the same religious family, still reserving the approval to the

Holy See. The Council text uses the expression "*pro rei opportunitate*" in reference to Federations; the no strict obligation in '*General norms'* (1953) becomes 'advisable'- would this advisability be evaluated solely by the communities in question or by other entities too, like the Holy See?

The current Code of Canon Law (1983), in can. 582 specifies that only the Federations and the Confederations are subject for approval by the Holy See, as for the union and fusion of Institutes.

Another reference to Federations is found in the 1996 post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*[8] by John Paul II. In n. 59 we read:

> "As the Synod itself emphasized, Associations and Federations of monasteries are to be encouraged, as already recommended by Pope Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council, especially where there are no other effective forms of coordination or help, with a view to safeguarding and promoting the values of contemplative life. Such bodies, which must always respect the legitimate autonomy of monasteries, can in fact offer valuable help in adequately resolving common problems, such as appropriate renewal, initial and continuing formation, mutual economic support and even the reorganization of the monasteries themselves"[9].

Lastly, the Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*[10] dedicated only four parts (n. 27-30) to Associations and Federations, since the principal purpose of the Instruction, as stated in the introduction, was to establish "the norms that ought to regulate the papal cloister of nuns, given to a wholly contemplative life" beginning from the doctrinal fundamentals of the cloister already expressed in other Church documents. The Instruction defines Federations as "organisms of aid and coordination" between monasteries, aimed to guard and promote the values of the contemplative life and encouraging monasteries to realize their vocation. The adhesion on the part of the monasteries remains free, and regulated by statutes approved by the Holy See.

Verbi Sponsa encourages and regulates Federations, considering them especially useful for initial as well as continuous formation, which may promote the development in monasteries of a contemplative culture and mentality, the suitable renewal of the reorganization of monasteries, and of their mutual economic support. At the same time, it sees that certain rights are not transgressed, especially those of autonomy (defined according to internal governance and the stability of the members) and of the cloister (according to the various grades indicated in can. 667 of the C.I.C. and set out in the same Instruction). Moreover, the Instruction reiterates that a Federation does not have any authority of government over a federated monastery; it adds that monasteries,

which may no longer be able to safeguard a regular life or which may find themselves in particularly difficult circumstances, have the possibility to consult the President and his Council in order to find a suitable solution. Whenever there may be a community that no longer possesses the means to act with freedom, autonomy, and responsibility, the President is required to inform the Ordinary of the monastery and submit the case to the Holy See.

Depending on one's interpretation, *Verbi Sponsa* may be considered either a standstill or a further clarification of *Sponsa Christi*, which did not exclude the possibility, reserved in a most special way to the judgment of the Holy See, that a Federation might be able to curtail some of the autonomy of each monastery (VII § 5, 1), or even something resembling a central government (VII § 5, 2); moreover, while it recalled that contemplative life has an intrinsic apostolic dimension, it left open the possibility of a "moderate participation in the apostolate", in activities such as catechism, preparation of children for First Holy Communion, or spiritual guidance for individuals or small groups.

The "openings" proposed by *Sponsa Christi* were realized in part with the setting up of monastic Congregations of women and with the recognition of monasteries that took on some apostolic works of hospitality or charity suitable to contemplative life. For this, *Verbi Sponsa* n. 12 introduced the "cloister according to the constitutions" for those monasteries of cloistered nuns who, though professing the contemplative life, add some apostolic or charitable work to their primary work of the divine cult. Number 13 in the document is dedicated to monasteries of cloistered nuns of 'the venerable monastic tradition': these monasteries may have a purely contemplative life (then they would adopt the papal cloister), or may add some activity beneficial to the people of God or provide hospitality in forms which are in line with the tradition of the order (in this case they need to describe the cloister in the constitutions). N. 13 refers also to monastic Congregations, an organization of a federated kind, but with greater juridical consequences, and which are characteristic of the Benedictine and Cistercian tradition.

Federations take their inspiration from traditional monastic Congregations, which we need to look at briefly. Monastic Congregations, in the 1917 Code, were defined as "*Plurium monasteriorum sui iuris inter se coniunctio sub eodem Superiore*": "a number of monasteries *sui iuris* joined among themselves under the same superior" (can. 488, n. 2). In the current Code we find only some "traces" of such super-monastic structures.

Can. 620 equates the Abbot and the Superior of a monastic Congregation to Major Superiors (among which there is also the Superior of a *sui iuris* house); however, compared to Major Superiors, they hold a more limited power. This is intended to safeguard the monastic "system". The monastic Congregation appears in three other

canons, all from book VII: can. 1405 § 3, 2°; can. 1427 § 2; and can. 1438, 3°.

A monastic Congregation turns out to be a union of monasteries of a federated kind, with a central government entrusted to a General Chapter and the Abbot President with his Council, placed under the General Chapter, which has elective, legislative, and judgment functions, and an administrative and disciplinary control over individual monasteries; these, in their turn, however, maintain their own autonomous governments. The structure is peculiar and is adjusted in such a way that the General Chapter generally gives the norms of life of the congregation, but does not have executive authority over questions internal to the monasteries. The Superior of the monastic Congregation also assumes established powers over each monastery during visitations and during the election of the Abbot. The post-Council legislation gave the Superior of a monastic Congregation some powers typical of a supreme Moderator of a religious Institute, (for example, to grant exclaustration, dispensation from temporary vows, and the establishment of a novitiate in a non-autonomous house), in the discharge of his duties on behalf of the united monasteries.

Whether or not Federations arose in some way as female versions of monastic Congregations, several monasteries of cloistered nuns gradually associated themselves in various ways to form monastic Congregations or united to form among themselves genuine monastic Congregations. Thus, in relatively recent times, the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Society of Apostolic Life, in the wake of Vatican II and legislation renewal, erected female monastic Congregations. This phenomenon forms part of the movement of rediscovery and renewal of the proper *ius,* which is characteristic of the venerable monastic tradition.

II Federations Today

Today it is quite clear that Federations are federal structures to which cloistered nuns do not belong as individuals, but as whole monasteries, which participate in them on an equal footing. Hence the most important element in the federal structure is the Assembly of the Federation, composed, in general, of the Superior and a delegate from each monastery. The Assembly establishes the guidelines and the commitments of the Federation – to be determined according to the Statutes – which are then to be carried out by the President and the Council.

Clearly, a Federation's "performance" depends on the amount of communion, trust, and collaboration among the monasteries. Every monastery, however small, ought to feel the responsibility of representing the Order, and needs to be aware that it cannot act in total isolation from the others, nor entrench itself behind its own canonical autonomy with the aim of not being disturbed or to eliminate the need to answer to anyone for its actions. Communion is a "challenge", a long and tiring journey which today can no

longer be avoided. The more genuine communion grows, the more persons become open to collaborate, to give and to receive help. The President with the Council and the Assistant hold a position which allows them to have a deep knowledge of the Federation and of the monasteries; this knowledge permits them to respond with a certain creativity to the demands and the necessities that present themselves from time to time.

Without any doubt one may say that Federations were a great help to monasteries in their reorganization following *Sponsa Christi*; many of these monasteries, as we have seen, were marked by poverty and starvation, and a strong isolation due, above all, to the rigor of the cloister; from this point of view, they likewise encouraged a certain healthy unification of "customs and traditions" especially by means of assembles and other forms of communication.

With the passage of time there was a certain evolution, which followed the changes of the times. Federations assumed an important role in the sphere of formation (formation of Abbesses, common novitiates, and courses for those preparing themselves to profess temporary vows) and in supplying aid to monasteries. Doubtless, Federations encouraged the exchange of nuns for assistance – in government or otherwise – to monasteries in difficulty by means of temporary or permanent transfers.

Additional areas: the formation of formators, seeing that formation continues to be a focal point in the monastery itself; courses of specific formation, e.g., for choir masters, for cithara players, for icon painters, for nurses, etc.

Another rather significant area in which Federations accomplished a lot, and this is still going on, is in what may be called "culture and spirituality". By this expression we intend the translation of spiritual works; the publication of works about founders or saints or the history of the Order itself; the cataloging of documents, the life stories of nuns, songs, centennial celebrations; and the organization of courses with important keynote speakers, which would have been difficult for small monasteries to organize.

Federations promoted and financed these works; moreover, it often happened that cloistered nuns themselves were the authors, scholars, and lecturers. This is an area that needs a bolstering, given that it encourages detailed studies of the charism of the Institute; and it circulates within the Federation useful material. Collaboration between a number of monasteries allows the burden of the work to be distributed; meanwhile, cloistered life hardly suffers.

The effectiveness of Federations derives from the fact that they have found a "juridical institution" which respects the nature and the life of the monasteries, especially those of a purely contemplative life.

III What Future awaits the Federations?

Presently, there are 166 Federations, 47 Associations, and 5 female monastic Congregations; however, we must also point out that there are still entire Orders, and parts of Orders which correspond to whole nations, which are not federated. In truth, some of the resistances are the result of preconceptions or of some bad past experiences; this, however, does not justify the abandonment of the federal project, seeing that wherever it has been genuinely carried out, it produced copious good fruits for communities and for individual cloistered nuns.

At the urging of Pope Francis, and in view of the obvious difficulties which some monastic families are facing, the Dicastery has taken, and perhaps will take again in the future, the initiative of naming General Delegates who may help to overcome a certain inertia, which, in many cases, has become inactivity, and to reawaken dormant capacities, to give a new stimulus to monasteries and to a type of consecration that has yet much to say and give to the Church and to the world. Clearly, the cloistered nuns are being asked to open their minds and hearts, to lift their gaze towards these horizons and beyond. When I say beyond, I mean the Trinitarian communion, which is the ultimate goal of our existence; the Church, aware of this ultimate goal, is constantly aware that she is called to be a house and school of communion, as John Paul II wrote in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*[11]. This applies to all Christians and, therefore, also to cloistered nuns. If this ecclesiastical goal of communion isn't clear, and that it needs to be incarnated also in a Federation, then autonomy becomes defensiveness, fear, protection, closure, self-absorption, and collective individualism. It's the beginning of the end, and this applies also to larger communities.

Communion in Federations also facilitates the moving away from certain 'monarchies' which have been established in some communities; this makes it possible for a change of superior when a community fails to find one. In some cases, the granting of 'petitions' is synonymous to an arrangement so as not to change leadership; this, again, is another beginning of the end.

From this we may conclude that all kinds of monastic communities need to commit themselves to live **autonomy in communion**.

Clearly, autonomy in communion needs to be given a juridical framework in order to be able to be put into practice.

I add a final consideration regarding the topic of communion in reference to the relationships between monasteries of cloistered nuns and First Orders or the corresponding male Orders. In a letter dated November 21, 2012, sent to the Superiors General of Institutes to which the monasteries of cloistered nuns are associated, the

Dicastery, recalling what was stated in n° 26 of the Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*, affirmed: "*The Instruction explains clearly that good relationships inside a religious family can 'nurture the growth of a common spirituality'." "Good relationships" mean, in the specific case of monasteries of cloistered nuns: that the discipline of the cloister be protected, that the juridical autonomy of every monastery be respected, and that it should be kept in mind that monasteries are called to live in the true spirit of a religious family in a uniquely contemplative way. "Good relationships" also mean, as the text emphasizes, that, "in the new vision and outlook with which the Church today considers the role and the presence of woman, that form of juridical protection on the part of male Orders and Regular superiors, which may limit the autonomy of monasteries of cloistered nuns, must be overcome wherever it may exist". In particular, superiors of Orders to which female monasteries are associated are called to fulfill "their duty in a spirit of collaboration and humble service, avoiding undue subjection, so that the cloistered nuns may freely and responsibly take decisions regarding all aspects of their religious life". The desire to help monasteries doesn't justify any intervention or "creativity" which may lead to a leveling out of vocations and the bewilderment of the cloistered nuns and the whole people of God. Aid to monasteries must be offered – not imposed – and must take into account the circumstances and the nun's proper way of life, keeping in mind that cloistered nuns have the right to be protagonists of their own renewal, which, in many ways has amply been done with rather convincing results. This, in short, requires a kind of "conversion", a change of mentality, seeing that religious think in terms of an apostolic and centralized Institute, and tend simply to transfer the criteria known to them and practiced by them to monasteries of cloistered nuns*"[12].

Pope Francis, dealing with the topic of the presence of women in the Church in *Evangelii Gaudium*[13] reminds us that the role of woman in the Church is a challenge. There is still the need to give more space for a more incisive feminine presence in the Church, though the priestly ministry, reserved as it is to men, is not in discussion. The Pope invites pastors and theologians to meet the challenge with a better understanding of the role of women where they may take important decisions in various areas of the Church's life. In fact, in the past, not every reform or "variation", so to speak, of consecrated life took into consideration the needs which were expressed by the consecrated themselves, especially by consecrated women. Today, we see in the Church an awareness for more participation; recent papal teachings, from John Paul II to Francis, also show a clearer participation in decision-making by women in the life of the Church, especially in those matters which affect them.

The questionnaire[14] which the Dicastery sent to the Federations on April 29, 2014, and through them to the monasteries, moves in this direction: to allow the cloistered nuns to be participants in future decisions about their life, which should take into account real

needs and not only ideals. 2596 monasteries participated in the questionnaire.

From the responses to the questionnaire, as far as Federations are concerned, I derived the following conclusions:

First of all, I'll say straightaway that there is a certain fluctuation of thought upon the pros and cons of Federation, and this is across the board, in the sense that it is found in all Orders and in all continents.

Federated monasteries are all aware that the isolation of a community is a detriment to community itself; what is needed is the nurturing of a wider mentality of communion, of mutual acquaintance, and of responses to the various communitarian needs, which must be owned by all.

There are, however, communities whose superiors are also their founders; for these the charismatic aspect prevails over the communal aspect with the subsequent distancing from other monasteries.

Some cloistered nuns are of the opinion that Federations must not be imposed; others, on the contrary, hold that they should be made obligatory. Certainly, a Federation, to reach its goals and be of service, needs a new reflection to be able to express more efficaciously its spiritual-communal physiognomy in its endeavor of mediation, of discernment, of counsel, and in the search for the true good of the communities forming the Federation.

A Federation is considered to be a valid helpful instrument to assess critical situations and for accompanying communities in discernment; it is a solution to stem the drift toward isolation. Some cloistered nuns suggested that canonical visitations are carried out by the Mother President and a counselor (two persons); in this way the number of visitations is not multiplied, and also because often the bishop, or religious Ordinary, neglects to do it. Above all, being cloistered nuns themselves, it is easier for them to understand certain situations. However, the canonical visitation remains valuable because it is an assessment of the community from outside; this keeps in check the risk of self-absorption and is also an opening to address problems held too much close to the "cloister".

Some cloistered nuns pointed out that the Mothers of Federations, not having a fully defined role, are unable to act in many situations; others, while not wishing that a Federation limits its role to simple animation, do not want it to become a general government.

A consistent number of cloistered nuns asked that sufficient space be given to

Federations to make decisions, since they are privy to the reality of each community; they asked that the Authorities consider Federations in the same way as the male Orders. The latter are welcome to give support and insights regarding the charism, but must not interfere with the style of monastic life since they don't live it, and sometimes they do not even know about it or esteem it.

When it comes to help communities, a Federation should have the possibility to be the first to act and decide, even before contacting the Congregation for Religious. Some have asked that the Mother of the Federation should have the authority to transfer nuns: either to remove a problematic nun, or to put a new presence in a monastery. Some cloistered nuns have asked that the Mother President should have the authority to fuse together two monasteries. There were also cloistered nuns who would like to see norms not only for emergency measures, which are ever more frequent in monasteries, but also norms that enhance the life of the individual monasteries.

The Brothers need not be guardians, nor that the nuns be subordinates; they should journey together seeking to establish authentic friendship within a mutual relationship of reciprocity and in being complementary. The constitutions need to define clearly what powers Father Generals have over monasteries.

Some cloistered nuns have asked that a Federation protects the future of the younger members: Federations need to provide longer and more intense formation programs. Other nuns have requested that a Federation must be able to intervene in monasteries where the directives of the Federal Assembly are not carried out, especially in the case where candidates are not receiving an adequate formation through insufficient means or because the formation program is faulty.

A Federation also ought to organize formation courses for different age groups.

Some have asked that the Mother President should receive a suitable preparation for the ministry which she is called to perform and that her powers need to be clearly defined so as to avoid personal interpretations.

Others have asked that the proceeds of the monasteries or transferred goods be merged in a Federal fund and this is made available to monasteries in need, as well as to start new foundations.

Seeing the failures of the past, some cloistered nuns do not believe that a Federation may bear good fruit, nor do they wish to have ties with the corresponding male Orders.

Some cloistered nuns have asked that communities that wish to remain alone be deprived of their *sui iuris* and transformed into diocesan communities.

This rapid and concise examination helps us to understand that Federations are still "works in progress". In case some groups this afternoon should come up with further suggestions and reflections about the matter, the Dicastery will be happy to receive them so as to offer the Holy Father enough material for his possible future decisions on Federations.

Orazio Pepe

1 Pius XII, Apostolic Costitution *Sponsa Christi*, 21 November 1950 [*Ed.*: AAS 48 (1951), 5-24], in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, nn. 2211-2284..

2 *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, n. 2235.

3 *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, n. 2242

4 Cf. *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, nn. 2271-2278.

5 Sacred Congregation of Religious, Instruction *Inter preclara*, 23 November 1950 [*Ed.*:AAS 43 (1951), 37-44], in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, nn. 2285-2311.

6 Sacred Congregation of Religious, Directive *Consapevole*, 15 Decmber 1953 Prot. N. 2536/51 [*Ed.* :Acta Ord. Fr. Min. 73 (1954), pp. 85-86], in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, nn. 2734-2745.

7 *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, n. 2743.

8 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, [*Ed.*: AAS 88 (1996), 377-486], in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata*, nn. 6945-7280.

9 *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata* n. 7118.

10 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Instruction *Verbi sponsa*, Vatican City 1999, in *Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata* nn. 7415-7485.

11 John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Novo Millennio Ineunte* [*Ed.*: AAS 93 (2001) , 266-309], in *Enchiridion Vaticanum* 20, nn 12-122.

12 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, Letter Prot. N. 23479/2012 *Ai Superiori Generali di Istituti religiosi ai quali siano associati Monasteri di monache* in *Sequela Christi* 2013/1, 210-212.

13 Francis, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Vatican City 2013

14 Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Lettera e Questionario del 29 aprile 2014*, Prot. N. 28513/2014.