

Feminine Contemplative Life: Custodian of Gratitude and Rich Apostolic Fecundity

Presentation on *Cor Orans*, Implementing Instruction on Feminine Contemplative Life

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Introduction

During the audience to the participants in the International Congress for Episcopal Vicars and Delegates for Consecrated Life, speaking of contemplatives, our Holy Father, Pope Francis said: “Accompany them with fraternal affection, always dealing with them as adult women, respecting their competencies and without undue interferences¹.”

Both *Vultum Dei quaerere* (VDq) and *Cor Orans* (CO) are situated within the long journey of accompaniment by the Church in support of the feminine contemplative life: an accompaniment full of *fraternal love*². At the same time, both documents have made a great effort to *deal with contemplatives as adult women, respecting their competencies, as is due*, in the development of their own lives.

It is true that it is impossible to please everyone. As such, these documents have not lacked in receiving applauses³ and this by the immense majority; but they do not lack, on the other hand, in the presence of doubts⁴, objections⁵ and fears⁶. What is certain is that both VDq and CO were elaborated keeping the following in mind:

- *The postconciliar magisterium on consecrated life*. Finally, and in a clear manner, the Council and postconciliar developments stemming from the reflections on consecrated life during this time, have been incorporated into the proper legislation of feminine contemplative life⁷.
- *The significance of woman in the society and in the Church*: “The Church recognizes the indispensable contribution of women in society [...]. There is still the need to create even wider spaces for a more incisive presence of women in the Church [...] The presence of women ought to be guaranteed in those areas in which important decisions are made, both in the Church as well as in social structures⁸. Both VDq and CO presuppose a serious effort to respect “the possible role of the woman in diverse areas of the Church where important decisions are taken”⁹. Both these

¹ Pope Francis, To the participants in the International Congress for Episcopal Vicars and Delegates for Consecrated Life, Rome Oct. 28, 2016, 3.

² VDq dedicates significant recognition of the appreciation which the Church has for the feminine contemplative life (cf. nn 5-6) and the closeness which it has always shown towards it (cf. nn 7-8).

³ In a letter written by a contemplative nun after the publication of both documents, she told me: “Finally, the Church is treating us as adult women. Thank you...”. I have in mind another letter acknowledging that the *Instruction* is a document of “great importance and density”; a work that is “clear and exhaustive in the areas it addresses”. In the Congregation we have received many other letters of gratitude, even from bishops.

⁴ These doubts are formulated in questions that are very legitimate. In the many different encounters that I have had with contemplatives or with Episcopal Vicars/Delegates, questions have arisen on how to comprehend the text and, above all, on the application of what is found in CO.

⁵ For some “there is someone out to destroy the feminine monastic life”, because, according to them, it will become like the apostolic life. For others, the Holy See has, especially with the *Instruction* lost a new opportunity to do justice to women and to the feminine contemplative life.

⁶ The fears of some of the monasteries, though I could not say how many, are principally about the authority that has been given to the federal president and the obligation to become federated; the required years of formation, which seems to be too much for some nuns; and the option for papal or constitutional enclosure, which some believe may create divisions within the Order.

⁷ To this effect, it is helpful to point out that in VDq, the Second Vatican Council is cited 16 times; John Paul II, 22 times; Benedict XV, 17 times; Pope Francis 17 times; the documents of the Congregation 7 times and the Code 19 times.

⁸ Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* nn. 103.

⁹ *Idem*, n. 104

documents should be read from a positive view of the woman and not from any ideology or prejudice. Seen from this context, we can understand the many faculties that have been granted to the abbess or the prioress, as well as to the federal president.

- *The present reality of consecrated life.* We cannot draw near to the feminine consecrated life today without keeping in view its present-day reality. It is a reality that has radically changed in the last years¹⁰, and which, if we take into account such factors as the lack of vocations and the high medium age range, it will continue to change quickly.
- The responses we received in the questionnaire of 2014 sent out by this Congregation to all federated monasteries dealing with three principal questions: the autonomy of the monasteries, formation and on the enclosure¹¹.

In order to avoid any possible misunderstandings, it is beneficial to clarify from the outset the nature of *VDq* and *CO*. The first document is an *Apostolic Constitution*. It has an eminently inspiring character, with only a few fundamental norms. The second document is an *Instruction* which, in dealing with the application of *VDq*, makes references to the Code of Canon Law, but which is in continuity with the *Constitution* as can be seen by the many references to it¹².

The *Constitution* carries the weight of law (cf. can. 32, 1), while the *Instruction*, receives its authority from the fact that it is an application of the *Constitution*. The obligatory nature of the law as expressed in the *Constitution* extends itself to the obligatory nature in the observance of the *Instruction*. Otherwise, the law would not be kept correctly (cf. can. 34, 1). Thus, between the two documents there exists a tight interdependency, as can be deduced from the fact that, were the law –which gave rise to the *Instruction* – to cease, the *Instruction* would also cease. (can. 33, 2; 34, 3)

2. Presentation of *CO*

A careful review of the *Instruction*, published with the approval of the Holy Father¹³ on April 1, 2018, Easter Sunday, shows four principal themes: the Monastery, the Enclosure, the Federations and Formation, each of which are considered in *CO* according to different aspects.

2.1. The Monastery

The *Instruction* deals with the Monasteries in Chapter 1, from numbers 15 to 85. We highlight here some of the more significant elements¹⁴.

¹⁰ It is sufficient to refer to an objective fact: the number of monasteries. When *Sponsa Christi ecclesia* was published the number of contemplatives in the world were 55,834 solemnly professed, 3,819 temporarily professed, and 2,426 novices, with a total of 62,079. Currently, counting together all solemnly and temporarily professed and novices, there are about 43,000. Thus, within the last 60 years, the population of the feminine contemplative life has diminished by 19,079, and has a much higher median age range than before.

¹¹ There have been many, many responses received to the questionnaire we sent out in 2014 to all federated monasteries. To my knowledge there were 420 received in French, 581 in English, 445 in Italian, 1067 in Spanish and a total of 83 in other languages, including Chinese and Japanese. It was a total of 2595. Significantly, many of the responses were thorough and profound. This questionnaire was a great effort on behalf of the CIVCSVA in order to give a voice to contemplatives about their own way of life. The same can be said about the contemplative commissions which worked on the drafts of *VDq* and *CO*.

¹² In *CO* we find 69 references to *VDq* while the Code of Canon Law is cited only 54 times.

¹³ In some cases this application is explicit, as in the case of the derogation of some of the canons of the Code. This faculty of derogation belongs exclusively to the Holy Father as Supreme Legislator. This does not impede, as is already noted at the end of the *Instruction*, the Holy Father from approving the publication of the complete text, which in turn, gives it greater authority.

¹⁴ In reference to the autonomous monastery: cf. SEBASTIANO PACIOLLA, *Il Monastero autonomo tra potenzialità e limiti, in Vita Consacrata in comunione. Atti dell'Incontro internazionale, Sequela Christi*, Vol. I, 2016/01, 278ss.

a) Autonomy

The *Instruction* confirms the juridic autonomy of a monastery (cf. CO 6, 15-17), as was done in VDq¹⁵. At the same time, CO offers a description of what is to be understood by autonomy. It is a definition which I personally consider to be quite complete and which should be accepted with all of its elements. A monastery is autonomous when: “Its Superior is a Major Superior, its community is permanently established for the number and quality of the members; by law it is the place of the novitiate and of formation, is considered a public juridical person, and its assets are ecclesiastical goods.” (CO 15; can. 613, 2; 620)

According to this passage, autonomy grants the use of certain faculties to be exercised in an autonomous manner: governance, formation, administration. On the other hand, autonomy must fulfill certain requirements: a stable community, sufficient numbers and quality of life for its members¹⁶. The aforementioned faculties are conceded only in the measure in which the requirements are fulfilled. In this way, the *Instruction* recognizes a correct and well-balanced notion of autonomy that includes both the concession of faculties as well as the demands that are necessary in order to enjoy them.

Autonomy is not something that is acquired without any conditions, nor is it an irrevocable privilege. Rather it is an historic condition which presupposes entrance on a path of growth and development. If this is lacking, and instead of growing it begins to diminish, either in numbers or in the quality of life, then that autonomy is lost.

As it was justifiably pointed out in one commentary¹⁷, one of the merits of this *Instruction* is that it not only defines autonomy, but that it also extends that definition; considering not only its juridical definition, but also its concrete, ascending reality on the path necessary to achieve it, or its descending reality, and its possibility of being lost. The conditions necessary for a true autonomy are presented in the paragraphs dedicated to the foundation of a monastery (cf. CO 20-38) and in its canonical erection (cf. CO 39-53). From this context its more significant points can be summarized as follows:

- The specific number of nuns needed to make a new foundation is established. There must be 5 nuns with at least 3 of them being solemnly professed (CO 29).
- The new foundation, which does not “enjoy any autonomy” (cf. CO 30), is to be guided by a local superior (who is not an abbess nor a Major Superior), named by the abbess/prioress of the founding Monastery or by the President, if the new foundation depends on the Federation (cf. CO 20; 31).¹⁸

¹⁵ As autonomous monastery it is to be understood “a particular religious house that enjoys juridic autonomy and is a juridic person”, cf. PACIOLLA SEBASTIANO, Art. cit, pag. 281.

¹⁶ Given the difficulty to evaluate the quality of the members in a Community solely on the basis of their age, it seems opportune to me an observation made by SAVERIO CANNISTRÁ in his letter to the Discalced Carmelites, Oct. 1, 2018, prot. 302/2018 GM, *More on Cor Orans, doubts, objections, fears* when he says that it would be more just to speak of “nuns that give sufficient proof of physical, psychological and spiritual stability”.

¹⁷ See the interesting commentary on the *Instruction*, to which I am indebted on various points in this presentation, done by the Superior General of the Discalced Carmelites, SAVERIO CANNISTRÁ, in a letter directed to the “Sisters of Carmel”, protocol n. 200/2018 MG, dated on the Feast of Our Lady of Mt. Carmel, July 16, 2018.

¹⁸ The manner by which she is named as well as the duration of her mandate ought to be determined in the statutes of the Federation. It is important to note that the nuns of the new foundation “retain capitular rights in their own monastery which remain suspended in their exercise until the erection of the new Monastery” (CO 32).

- The new Monastery must have at least 5 solemnly professed nuns in order to be established as the place of the novitiate (cf. CO 33).
- The period of time between the foundation of the Monastery and canonical erection cannot be more than 15 years (cf. CO 38).
- For the canonical erection of a Monastery it is necessary that it have at least 8 solemnly professed nuns and that the majority of the Community not be of advanced age (cf. CO 39). At the same time, it specifies that it is necessary to receive the consent of the diocesan Bishop (cf. CO 29, 38c).

On the other hand, autonomy is lost when:

- There is no correspondence between juridic autonomy and autonomy of life. This must be according to the criteria found in *VDq*, namely: “a certain, even minimal, number of sisters, provided that the majority are not elderly, the vitality needed to practice and spread the charism, a real capacity to provide for formation and governance, dignity and quality of liturgical, fraternal and spiritual life, sign value and participation in life of the local Church, self-sufficiency and a suitably appointed monastery building” (*VDq*, Art. 8 § 1).

These criteria, considered “comprehensively and in an overall perspective” (*ibid.*), must be carefully evaluated by the Federal President.¹⁹ In the event that the elements are no longer present, she is obligated to inform the Holy See (cf. CO 43)²⁰.

- When the solemnly professed are less than five²¹. If this occurs, the Monastery loses the right to elect their own superior. After listening to the Sisters in community, the Holy See will name a “administrative Superior” (cf. CO 45), unless it is an affiliated Monastery²². In this case, the local Superior is named by the Major Superior, abbess/prioress of the affiliating Monastery or by the Federal President on whom the affiliated Monastery depends (cf. CO 20, 31)²³.

When the vital autonomy of the Monastery is in danger, the Congregation may name an *ad hoc committee* if it considers it necessary. This committee is made up of the Ordinary, the Federal President, the Federal Assistant and the Superior of the Monastery (cf. CO 56, 69). Before arriving at such a debilitating situation, the Monastery may choose to become affiliated to another Monastery or to the Federation. It then becomes “*donec aliter provideatur*”, that is “a dependent house” (CO 57). However, this affiliation is always a temporary situation; either the Monastery is revitalized again, or in the case that “the inability to manage the life in all its dimensions is irreversible” it is suppressed (cf. CO 55, 67).

¹⁹ Perhaps this is one of the most uncomfortable elements of the *Instruction*, but it has been deemed necessary to include it in order to avoid “an asserted autonomy, but in reality, very precarious or, in fact, non-existent” (CO 54).

²⁰ I have the impression that this may be one of the principal reasons why some Monasteries have so much difficulty in becoming part of a Federation. For although this is not the case, some may see the President as a form of “spy” for the Holy See.

²¹ In this way, CO stipulates “the minimum number of sisters” necessary for a Monastery to maintain its autonomy *sui juris* that was already referred to in *VDq* (cf. *VDq* II, 8, 1).

²² Some can ask: Why not allow the Monastery to become extinct on its own instead of closing it? The *Instruction* responds in n. 68: “A monastery of nuns that cannot express, according to the contemplative nature and finality of the Institute, the particular public witness to Christ and to the Church His Bride, must be suppressed, keeping in mind the usefulness to the Church and to the Institute to which the monastery belongs”.

²³ On affiliation: cf. CO nn. 54- 64; On suppression: cf. CO nn 67- 73.

In any case, the autonomy spoken about in the *Instruction* must be interpreted in the light of what is found in the *Apostolic Constitution*, that is: that it favors the stability of the life and internal unity of the Community, and guarantees the best conditions for contemplation (cf. *VDq* I, 28).

We also have to keep in mind that *CO* speaks of a “just autonomy” in reference to both life and government, with the intention that the Community can “enjoy its own discipline and be able to preserve its character and protect its identity” (*CO* 16; *CIC*, can. 586, 1).

This is why it is a *just autonomy*, or if you prefer, an *autonomy in communion*, or an autonomy *as the principal of subsidiarity*, where it is not seen as an absolute, but as something which opens unto a *web* of communion. This means that autonomy cannot be utilized in order to favor independence or isolation from relationship with other Monasteries of the same Institute or with the local (or universal) Church. Neither does this signify an autonomy that emphasizes “a logic of self-preservation or self-referentialism” often found in many Monasteries today, and which, in many cases “converts what is important into something secondary, and what is secondary into what is most important”²⁴, or into a “spiritual narcissism” so foreign to the Gospel. It is an autonomy open to communion that finds in the Federation an adequate structure.

In this context, it is very appropriate to cite what Pope Francis has stated in *VDq*, referring to the *Letter to all Consecrated Persons* (=LCP):

No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance”. For this reason, take care to avoid “the disease of self-absorption” and to preserve the value of communion between different monasteries as a path of openness towards the future and a means of updating and giving expression to the enduring and codified values of your autonomy” (*VDq* 29; LCP II, 3).

On the other hand, autonomy seeks to protect one’s proper identity. This means overcoming the idea – found extensively in the Church – of treating contemplatives simply as nuns, without a concrete “last name” that refers to one’s charism. Each contemplative must be understood from within the specificity of her own charism (cf. *VDq* 11, 2, 3; 3, 4; 6, 2) as happens with Institutes of apostolic life.

b) Ecclesial vigilance over the Monastery

Without diminishing the principle set by *VDq* which states: “The association, even juridical, of monasteries to the corresponding Order of men is to be encouraged” (*VDq* Art. 9, 4), as is the case in many parts of the world, the vigilance of a Monastery may be confided to:

- The diocesan bishop “in reference to the communities of monasteries entrusted to his special vigilance according to the norm of law present in his own particular church” (*CO* 75, c; cf. can. 615)
- “The Major Superior of the male associated institute” (*CO* 75, b). These cases “form the basis of the scope and the vigilance of the religious Ordinary of the Associating Institute over the juridically associated female monastery and must be present in the Constitutions of the associated monastery” (*CO* 82).

²⁴ Pope Francis, *Homily at the Opening of the Synod on Young People*, St. Peter’s Square, Oct. 3, 2018

- “The President of the female monastic Congregation in reference to the communities of the congregated monasteries” (CO 75, a), who exercises authority over the Monasteries that belong to the Congregation (cf. CO 12).

In this context, it is noteworthy to point out:

- The *vigilance* exercised by the Federal President is geared toward communion and is not the vigilance that is proper to the Ordinary as stated in can. 134 of the Code.
- As the monastic Congregation is “a structure of governance erected by the Holy See” (cf. CO 12), the *vigilance* exercised by the President as a Major Superior, in accordance with can. 620, is a direct vigilance over the Monasteries that form part of the Congregation, in accordance to the norm of the *Constitutions*, but is distinct from that of the Ordinary. The vigilance, as stated in the same can. 134 of the Code, can only be exercised by the Bishop or a Major Superior of clerical Institutes of pontifical rite.

The person who exercises the *vigilance* as Ordinary is required to: preside over the conventual Chapter that elects the Major Superior; carry out the regular visit of the monastery, examine the annual report of the financial administration of the monastery; give his written consent for particular administrative acts if established by proper law; confirm the indult of definitive departure from the monastery granted to a temporary professed member by the Major Superior; issue the decree of dismissal of a nun, even of temporary vows (cf. CO 81).

Whoever has the service of *vigilance* over the Monastery must show due attention to the proper charismatic identity of the sisters in the Community (cf. VDq 11, 2, 3, CO 79). It is in this diversity where we see the beauty of the contemplative life. In addition, as affirmed in the *Instruction*, “congregated monasteries and juridically associated monasteries, however, remain bound to the diocesan Bishop as established by the universal law (CO 80; 83)²⁵.

c) Extension of the faculties in the internal life of the Community

There are three areas in which the *Instruction* grants greater authority to the Superior of the Monastery and to the Chapter. These are:

- In the area of the administration of temporal goods, canon 638 of the Code is derogated so that it is no longer necessary to receive a written permission from the local Ordinary or Regular Superior (when dealing with an associated Monastery) for the alienation of goods. From now on, for the validity of these acts it is sufficient to have the written permission of the Superior with the consent of the Chapter as well as the opinion of the President. If the monetary value of the alienated good is superior to that which is established by the corresponding Episcopal conference, then it is necessary to receive the authorization of the Holy See (cf. CO 52-53)²⁶.

²⁵ The juridical association with a masculine Order, “respecting the autonomy of feminine *sui juris* monasteries, excludes the particular vigilance of the diocesan bishop”. In the monastic law of Benedictine tradition, the term “incorporation” is used in these cases, PACIOLLA SEBASTIANO, *Art. cit*, pg.284. Keep in mind the meaning of the “*consociatio*”, as it is understood in can. 614 of the Code. For the relationship between feminine monasteries and the diocesan Bishop see cf. can. 692; can. 680; can. 394; can. 673; can. 674; can. 612; can. 683, 2; can. 1320; can. 09; can. 567; can. 603, 3; can. 616, 1; can. 87; can. 667, 4; CO 83- 85.

²⁶ It is important to note, as can be seen in recent cases, that a Community cannot freely dispose of the Monastery structure by donating it, for example, to the City. The Monastery is an ecclesiastical good and it is necessary to have the permission of the Holy See to alienate it.

- In reference to the enclosure, it is of the competence of the Superior to “to allow a sister to perform the services of the external sisters for a limited period of time” (CO 198). In addition, “the dispensation from the cloister rests solely with the Major Superior” (CO 175), since “its immediate custody” (CO 173) is also of her competence. If the dispensation exceeds fifteen days, she must “obtain the consent of her Council” (CO 175).

With these new norms, the diocesan Bishop or the Religious Ordinary no longer intervene “in granting dispensation from the cloister” (CO 174).

- In reference to permissions for an absence or for an indult of exclaustation, the *Instruction* allows that “for a just cause” the Major Superior “with the consent of her Council, may authorize the absence from the monastery of a nun with solemn vows for not more than a year, after hearing the diocesan Bishop or the competent religious Ordinary” (CO 176). She is to obtain the consent of the Bishop within the diocese where “the nun will have to live” (cf. CO 177). It is necessary to obtain the permission of the Federal President and her Council for an extended period of up to two years (cf. CO 178-179).

2.2 The Enclosure

As was expected, CO dedicates much attention to the enclosure²⁷ in the chapter dealing with separation from the world (cf. CO nn. 156-218). This is a great novelty.

To speak of the enclosure is to enter into a topic that is important, delicate and complex. It is important because it structures the daily life of those Institutes “wholly dedicated to the contemplative life”²⁸. In some cases, this importance takes the form of a vote, with all that this entails²⁹. It is delicate because feelings about enclosure are not only diverse, they are often in opposition to each other. It is complex because it depends on the lived experience and on the understanding of the nature of the consecrated life, and equally, on the dignity of women and their role in the Church.

Some aspects to keep in mind:

a) *The cloister within the framework of the contemplation and other elements proper to the contemplative life*

Both *VDq* and CO situate the enclosure within the framework of contemplation. The enclosure is not an end of itself, but a means which makes possible the primacy of God in the life of the contemplative, and of the constant search and desire for Him. This must be the fundamental criteria present when evaluating the role of the enclosure. In addition, enclosure can no longer be seen as a “structure” on its own, but must be seen together with other elements that also make up the contemplative life as described in *VDq* nn. 12-35. This is one of the clarifications provided for by the Apostolic Constitution and the *Instruction*. It would be a disservice to the contemplative life to insist solely on one of its elements to the detriment of the

²⁷ On the enclosure, cf. RODRÍGUEZ CARBALLO, JOSÉ, *La clausura: Una vita per amore dello Sposo. Dalla solitudine abitata dallo Sposo al silenzio che parla di nuove relazione*, in *Vita Consacrata in comunione. Atti dell'Incontro Internazionale, in Sequela Christi*, 2016/01, 296ss.

²⁸ VATICAN II, *Perfectae caritatis*, 7. Many believe that this is not the most adequate expression, because even those Monasteries which keep papal enclosure have internal activities which are not strictly contemplative in nature. It is clear that this expression should not be interpreted in a strict sense.

²⁹ In at least one situation, the nuns who profess a vow of enclosure are in the process of studying the origin of this vow. There are many who believe it gives a disproportionate emphasis to have a vow of enclosure on the same level as the other three vows.

rest. Pope Francis has already warned us about this when, addressing the Ecclesiastical Vicars and Delegates during the International Congress organized by this Dicastery, he affirmed:

“To place all our attention on a single element [of the feminine contemplative life], no matter how important it may be, as is the case with the enclosure or the autonomy, could lead to a vital imbalance which would have sad consequences on the life of these sisters”³⁰.

This does not mean that the enclosure does not deserve “particular attention for the high esteem that the Christian community nurtures towards this kind of life, sign of the exclusive union of the Church-Bride with her Lord, supremely loved” (CO 157). Nor does it mean that we can treat this topic lightly, *carrying our grates on our shoulders*, so to speak, and acting as if the nun’s cloister was the world, or as Pope Francis would say, “as if the cloister was the whole world”³¹. This is a mistake. But it is also a mistake to “sacramentalize” the cloister to such an extent that it causes contemplatives to feel as if they were aliens to the world and all that goes on in it.

In order not to fall into either one of these extremes, it is necessary that each Monastery show prudence and discernment, “according to the Rule” and the plan of life of the Community –to which *VDq* makes several references³²— in addition to the discernment of each individual nun. Personal and communitarian discernment done in the light of the Gospel, the charism and the signs of the times, will show when it is necessary for a nun to go outside of the enclosure and when she should remain within.

There is no doubt that in the contemplative life the cloister “responds to the need, perceived as a priority, to remain with the Lord” (CO 160). For this reason, the enclosure has a definite purpose in the passionate love of the Lord. More than the physical grates, the enclosure should be a rejection of all that is worldly; it is to be, above all else, the guardian of the heart, though not exclusively. Saint Benedict would put it as being “estranged from the work of the world”³³, and as the necessary condition to “place nothing before Christ”³⁴. And St. Gregory the Great affirms “If thou be God’s servant, let the chain of Christ, and not any chain of iron, hold thee”³⁵.

Without diminishing the importance of the material cloister, which must be “concrete and effective and not simply symbolic” (CO 188)³⁶, it would mean little if it is not accompanied by the cloister of the heart. A contemplative must ask herself often: To whom do I give my heart? Who enters there? This is why Pope Francis asks contemplatives to examine themselves to see if the Lord is at the center of their lives (cf. *VDq* 11, 4, 1.2)³⁷.

³⁰ Pope Francis, To the participants in the International Congress for Episcopal Vicars and Delegates on Consecrated Life, Rome, Oct. 28, 2016, 3.

³¹ Pope Francis, Encounter with the Religious of the Diocese of Rome, March 16, 2015.

³² cf. *VDq* II, 3, 1; 6, 1; 7, 2; 13.

³³ SAINT BENEDICT, *Rule*, 4, 20.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4, 21.

³⁵ SAINT GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogues*, Book 3, XVI.

³⁶ The expression “radical, concrete, and effective way and not simply symbolic” (CO 188), should be interpreted in the light of n. 164, where it states that the cloister guarantees “a space of domestic and family life, within which the community lives fraternal life in its most intimate dimension”.

³⁷ The work –which in *VDq* is considered as a “share in the work that God the Creator carries out in the world” and which is an instrument that places contemplatives “in close relationship with all those who labor responsibly to live by the fruit of their toil [...]– “must never stifle the spirit of contemplation” but should be done “carefully and faithfully, without yielding to the present-day culture and its mindset of efficiency and constant activity” (*VDq*, 32).

In this sense, the cloister can be compared to the image of the desert³⁸, that monastic place *par excellence* chosen by the Desert Fathers with all that it entails: to be separated “from” so as to encounter oneself “with”: to separate oneself from the world so as to encounter oneself completely in the All³⁹. Henri le Saux writes about the desert: “God is not in the desert. It is the desert which is the very mystery of God Himself.” Applying this to the cloister, we could say, God is not in the cloister. It is the cloister which is the very mystery of God Himself.

b) Solitude and Silence

If it is true, as Jerome Savonarola stated once: “prayer has as its father, silence and as its mother, solitude”, then these two elements are indispensable in the life of a contemplative. Only in silence and solitude is it possible to listen: that is to say, to receive within oneself not only the Word but also the very Presence of Him who speaks. In the experience of love, silence is often the most eloquent, intense and communicative language, it is a “self-emptying in order to grow in receptivity” (VDq I, 33). The spoken word needs to be heard, and to hear, silence is essential.⁴⁰ Man, who by nature is a relational person, communicates in a balanced and significant way thanks to the harmonious relationship between the spoken word and silence, between presence and solitude.

The life in the cloister, therefore, is to be accompanied by silence and solitude, but one that is always inhabited by the presence of the Other (cf. VDq I, 33), because only in this way will silence and solitude truly speak. It is a matter of making spaces, spaces that guard the interior life; spaces that are necessary “for listening and pondering His Word and the prerequisite for that gaze of faith that enables us to welcome God’s presence in our own life and in that of the sisters [...] and in the events of today’s world” (CO 168). From silence and solitude comes forth words that are penetrating, pungent, wise, illuminating and prophetic.⁴¹

The solitude of contemplatives entails both an affective and an effective solitude. The first is the choice for a celibate life that is not mitigated by community life, but rather is sustained and comforted by it. Community life transforms silence and solitude into a shared solitude and silence. The second finds its greatest expression in the image of the desert so frequent in monastic literature (as stated earlier). Thus, the contemplative life requires “time and the ability to be silent and to listen to God” (VDq 33).

And though silence and solitude are an undeniable characteristic of the contemplative life, they should never be used to justify separating oneself from one’s sisters: “It is not healthy to love silence so as to avoid encountering others”⁴². Silence and solitude are not a distancing from all that is around us, much

³⁸ Certainly the desert is a physical place, but above all, it is a space in which the faithful enters in order to encounter self (cf. Gen. 12, 1) and God, for, as *Talmud* states in the desert (*midbar*), God makes Himself felt (*medabber*) as the one who speaks, (cf. Ex 3, 1-4; 19-24; 1R 19, 12; Os 2, 16). For the Fathers of the Church, it is sound teaching that the desert forms the person who goes there frequently, into an expert in piercing the depths of the interior life; someone with a penetrating eye. At the same time, the desert is the school of the essential and of freedom. These are all elements which cannot be lacking in the life of contemplatives who profess “separation” from the world.

³⁹ Cf. Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Praises of God*, 3.

⁴⁰ St. Ignatius of Antioch would say that “the Word proceeds forth from silence.” Christianity contemplates Jesus Christ as the “Word made man” (Jn 1, 14), but also as the “Silence of God”.

⁴¹ It is to be understood that silence and solitude lived out in this way does not signify a lack of words but rather indicates an interior dimension; that is to say: to silence the thoughts, images, rebellions, judgements and murmurings that are born in the heart for it is “from the heart that comes forth evil.” (Mc, 21)

⁴² Cf. Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et exultate*, 26.

less from people; it is a new way of being present. Here it is important to keep in mind how St. Augustine explains the *monos* of St. Jerome –from which we get the word *monk*—in the sense of *unus*. It is understanding the monk as the person who is deeply united to his brother, modeled on the unity of the Primitive Church (cf. Acts 4, 32) in which all the believers lived “*un-animis*” that is united⁴³. The silence and solitude proper to the contemplative life must bring forth in those who embrace it, the positive dimension of charity, of fraternal love for each other.

c) The means of communication

The enclosure is also very much linked to the use of the means of communication (cf. CO 168-171). There use requires serious discernment. This does not mean closing oneself off from them as if they were the devil in person; but neither does it mean to open oneself to them without due prudence and discernment. It is here where one will find the just balance in their use⁴⁴.

It would not be proper to utilize the enclosure as an excuse to “not hear or see anything”. I am thinking, for example of the news. Once, to the question, “Should we allow news to enter into the monastery?”, Pope Francis responded, “You must! But not the news from gossip columns, rather that news about wars, epidemics, the suffering of the people. This is why one of the things you should never do without is time to listen to people.” The Pope continues: “It is always important to communicate with the world, to know what is going on”. And the reason he gives for this is because: “Your vocation is not a refuge but a being in the center of the battle field; it is to struggle, to call on the Heart of the Lord for these areas of strife.”⁴⁵.

On this theme, as in almost everything that has to do with the contemplative consecrated life, the attitude which ought to be characteristic is that of discernment. Evangelical discernment, which is what we are taking about, is born from the experience of the love of God who is present and active in our lives, loving us, caring for us and speaking with us. It is this experience which initiates evangelical discernment and which poses a key question: how do we respond to the love of God. Evangelical discernment is always the fruit of that love which desires to respond concretely to Love with the maximum generosity, fidelity and service possible. Without this experience, life becomes very routine, a fulfillment of norms and sadly mediocre.

Discernment, which is “not a public slogan, nor a technical organization, nor a fad”, has its roots, “in an act of faith and in the conviction that God enters into the history of the world, in the situations of one’s life, in the people we encounter and in those with whom we communicate”⁴⁶. Discernment is a requisite of the Gospel for every disciple of Jesus and so, for all contemplatives. Only by entering into this dynamic of listening to the Spirit will the contemplative life cease to be a reality closed in on itself, and become open to the “novelty and surprises of God”⁴⁷, “a signpost pointing to a journey and quest, a reminder to the entire People of God of the primary and ultimate meaning of the Christian life (VDq 4), capable of being a credible sign for new generations.

⁴³ SAINT AGUSTIN, *Praeceptum* 1, 2, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Pope Francis, *Encounter with Religious of the Diocese of Rome*, March 16, 2015.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Pope FRANCIS, *Discourse on the opening of the Synod on Youth*, Vatican, October 3, 2018.

⁴⁷ cf. *Ibid.*

In referring to the means of communication, Pope Francis asks contemplatives: “I urge a prudent discernment aimed at ensuring they remain truly at the service of formation to contemplative life and of necessary communication, and do not become occasions for wasting time or escaping from the demands of fraternal life in community. Nor should they prove harmful for your vocation or become an obstacle to your life wholly dedicated to contemplation”. (VDq 34)

Although recognizing the usefulness of the means of communication for formation and communication, it is asked that there be a “prudent discernment” in their use so as not to jeopardize the fundamental aspects of the contemplative life such as the fraternal life in community and contemplation itself. In this sense, the means of communication have much to do with the cloister of the heart, and with the solitude that is inhabited by the Lord alone.

If a “prudent discernment” on the enclosure in general and on the use of the means of communication is done as indicated in VDq, there is little doubt that the cloister will serve to foster a new form of relating with oneself, with God, with others and with creation, in a way that is distinct from that which the world proposes. In this way the cloister can become a true prophetic sign. In any case, we are before fundamental challenges to the contemplative life at this time. To respond adequately requires that we be properly formed about them. Whether we use the means of communication adequately for formation or for other reasons will depend much on the formation that we have now and we give to future generations⁴⁸.

d) The two forms of cloister

We will speak of two forms of cloister because, even though in VDq there are four mentioned: cloister common to all religious, the monastic, the papal and the constitutional forms, the only ones of interest to us here are the last two (cf. CO 208-211).

In what refers to papal enclosure, what which was established by can. 667 §3 in the Code continues to be upheld; while constitutional enclosure is to be defined by the Constitutions and approved by the Holy See. The fundamental difference is that while the first “excludes external works of apostolate” (CO 183), the second refers to that form of contemplative life with some activity for the benefit of the people of God, or which practices wider forms of hospitality in line with the tradition of their own Institute” (CO 204, 205).

The most important novelties here are two. The first is that each Monastery “following serious discernment and respecting its proper tradition and the demands of its Constitutions⁴⁹, is to ask the Holy See for that form of cloister it wishes to embrace, whenever a different form of cloister from the present one is called for” (VDq, Art 10, 1)⁵⁰.

⁴⁸ Cf. COMODO VINCENZO, Vincenzo, *Cons@crati on line. Rotte per la navigazione dei religiosi in Internet*, Ancona, Milano 2006.

⁴⁹ In this context is helpful to recall that the *Instruction* does not speak of the revision of the Constitutions, but of the adaptation of “some of the articles of the Constitutions”. However, since it is not easy to adapt Constitutions, as the “nuns do not have such expressions of collegiality as a General Chapter”, the Holy See, in its letter of August 28, 2018 (Prot. N. Sp.R 5^a/2018), leaving freedom to foresee and provide for the revision of the Constitutions “in the forms and times judged more opportune”, has suggested “beginning the process of discernment” called for in VDq and CO by revising first the Statutes of the Federations/Associations.

⁵⁰ At the basis of this possible choice is the desire that there be greater coherence between the enclosure that is chosen and the way of life. This is why VDq affirms “Once one of the possible forms of cloister is chosen and approved, each monastery will take care to comply with, and live in accordance with, its demands.” (VDq, Art. 10, 2).

Some Monasteries –aware that *VDq* states there is the possibility of a change of the form of cloister from papal to constitutional by a decision made after “serious discernment and respecting its proper tradition and the demands of the Constitutions” –wonder how it is possible to have this change if the proper tradition of the Institute is for papal enclosure and their Constitutions indicate this as the single form of enclosure? The key here is found in that the discernment is to be made in the light of the Gospel, the proper charism and the signs of the times, “read with the eyes of faith” (Ctc, I,1). This will avoid succumbing to the temptation of what Pope Francis refers to as “doing archeology or cultivating unnecessary nostalgia” (Ctc, I,1); it will also avoid falling into a “a tomb psychology... [that] develops and slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum” (*VDq* 11). Rather it is to lead towards that “creative fidelity” which the Church has been inviting us to for many years, making possible to reproduce with the same “audacity, creativity and holiness” of the founders, as a “response to the sign of the times in today’s world” (VC 37). And, another equally important reason is that it is a question of coherence between the way of life and the form of enclosure that is chosen (cf. *VDq* II, 10, 2). Since the choice for one or another form of cloister will be the fruit of the discernment done by each Monastery, it becomes a commitment on the part of each sister to live it in a common fidelity.

The other novelty is that, permissions for both entrances and exits to the papal or constitutional enclosure is now given by the Mother Superior (CO 202, 203, 212, 216, 217). Although all the nuns should “guard, promote and observe papal enclosure” it belongs to the Major Superior the “direct and immediate guardianship” of the enclosure (CO 17, 196).

Finally, this new legislation speaks of a free, conscious and faithful option. It is important to note that neither *VDq* nor *CO* make an evaluation of one or the other form of cloister. With the publication of these documents, there is no longer one form of enclosure that has a greater intrinsic value over the other⁵¹. *VDq* and *CO* give to the nuns the freedom of choice and therefore, the Community is no longer a sum of individuals but the expression of persons who together are on a path of searching and discernment. Both *VDq* and *CO* invite contemplatives to choose what is most adequate to the reality of life in each Monastery, without it putting the unity of the Order into danger: “The variety of ways in which the cloister is observed within the same Order should be seen as an enrichment and not an obstacle to communion; it is a matter of reconciling different approaches in a higher unity” (*VDq* 31).

⁵¹ Anyone who had a minimal awareness of the contemplative life would never deny that in the past, the more radical form of an evangelical life was identified with the radicality of the cloister. Thanks to *VDq* and *CO* this criterion has been definitely redefined. Now it is a matter of becoming aware of this change.