

*The following is a conference AB Carballo gave to a group of Spanish contemplative nuns in Madrid at a conference organized by the Bishops of Spain. Sr. Elena of the Carmel of Albacete, Spain, sent a copy of the conference to Mother Therese of Rochester. Sr. Joseph Maria Sanchez, of the Rochester Carmel, translated it. Mother Therese shared it with all the Coordinators encouraging us to send it to our respective communities.*

### Conference on *Vultum Dei Quaerere*

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Secretary of the CIVCSVA  
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I greet all of you with the Franciscan greeting: May God give you peace!

I come to give to you a presentation on VDQ and I have put as a subtitle for this talk: An opportunity to grow in creative and responsible fidelity. This is the light through which I have read and will comment on this document. I believe this Constitution is a great gift of the Successor of Peter, who is consecrated as we are. This is how the Pope presents himself at the beginning of his *Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, at the beginning of the Year of Consecrated Life, and now to those who are of the contemplative life, which he loves greatly and knows deeply.

The Constitution is a great gift which comes to fill in a great lacuna that exists. As we well know, the Constitution, which until recently was in force, was that of Pius XII. It is 63 years old, which for a document is really an extensive time. Especially if we keep in mind that, in recent years, consecrated contemplative life has changed. I know that there are some who are not in agreement with this, but it's "face" has changed greatly which justifies the need for this new Constitution.

But we also have to realize that after the previous document, the Second Vatican Council has also taken place. And it would almost seem that the contemplatives are "outside of the Church" during this time. As such, it is necessary, even urgent for us to have a new Apostolic Constitution for the contemplative life of women, one that would draw especially on two Conciliar documents: *Lumen Gentium*, chp. 6 and *Perfectae Caritatis*. I am of the opinion that the sixth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* is even more important than *Perfectae Caritatis*, because it places consecrated life within the context of the Church. Therefore, whatever reflection is made on consecrated life today, cannot do without this sixth chapter, and also, of course, PC.

Before I enter directly into the text of the Constitution, please allow me to speak briefly on a context of the contemplative life today which could give some explanation, though it does not really need it, for this Constitution, namely, the mission of the contemplative life in the world today. This is a most sublime mission. I would like to point out to you some expressions that appear in the document, by which the Holy Father demonstrates his great appreciation for your vocation and for the mission you have in the Church. Why? Because of the precious fruits of "grace and mercy" (n. 5) which has generated from it. And I quote: "Women's contemplative life has always represented in the Church, and for the Church, her praying heart, a storehouse of grace and apostolic fruitfulness, and a visible witness to the mystery and rich variety of holiness." (*ibid.*)

While contemplatives are called to be witnesses which signify their total consecration to Christ, and tend towards total transformation in the image of the Lord, monasteries are called to be schools of prayer and

contemplation. Otherwise, and please pardon my directness, they have no purpose. This is why the Constitution says that they must open the windows, so to speak, so as to share a little the fruits of their contemplation and prayer. Far from separating you from humanity, and particularly suffering humanity, it must lead you to being experts in “the art of listening” (n. 36) as the Pope says, which “is more than hearing”, and in the “‘spirituality of hospitality’, by taking to heart and bringing to prayer all that concerns our brothers and sisters made in the image and likeness of God.” (*ibid.*)

The Pope concludes, referring to previous statements that, “intercessory prayer does not divert us from true contemplation, since authentic contemplation always has a place for others”. (*ibid.*) This is why we all have to change our mentality somewhat. Even before my novitiate, I was formed that when I entered the Choir, I had to leave everything within the holy water font [tongue-in-cheek statement]. Today I ask myself, then with what did I enter into the Choir? This is a mistake. That contemplation which does not lead you to bear the pain of suffering men and women and to rejoice with their joys, is a delusion, it is a pseudo-contemplation.

The Pope asks you most concretely to become beacons, torches and sentinels. “Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away.” (n. 6) Those who are near we already have in the sacristy everyday [so to speak]. We have to go to those who are far. He adds: “Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time. Be sentinels of the morning, heralding the dawn.” (*ibid.*) The Pope says that this is why you are a necessary complement to those who are dedicated to the apostolate of the word and of action. The Constitution also cites a quote from one of your foundresses: Be a support and help to the weak members of the Church, that is your mission.

You are thus called to a very sublime mission and therefore are in need of a very strong, dynamic and solid contemplative life. And this is what the Constitution is aiming at. It is not enough to have any form of contemplative life to fulfill this mission.

#### *Failing numbers among Contemplatives*

There are also other aspects that warrant a change. Such, for example, has to do with the “population” as I call it, of the contemplative life. It is true that we have very flourishing monasteries, in what refers to their numbers. And it is also true that we assist in the erection of new monasteries. I can tell you that from the year 2003 to 2015, there have been 154 new foundations. However, you cannot close your eyes to a reality that is right at your doorstep, as the thief, who comes when we least expect him. And this refers to the reduction in vocations, to those monasteries with mostly elderly members and therefore, the urgent and almost desperate need to close monasteries. I know that you do not like this and neither do I. But it must be done.

In the same period of time that I mentioned, there were 154 monasteries that opened, but 180 were also closed. And in 2015 alone there were 21 monasteries that were closed. Thus there is an increase in the need (as in 2003 there were only 4 that were closed). Then there are monasteries that are on the borderline. We have communities of a very reduced number, sometimes even only 2 or 3, and with a median age of well over 65 years of age. I am thinking of one in which the abbess or prioress (so as not to single out anyone) is over 80 and the other two members are in their 90’s.

Even though numbers are not everything and do not always indicate the real situations, they can somehow lead us to them. For instance, the number of members definitely influences the quality of

evangelical life. If all the Sisters in a monastery are elderly and also sickly, without a doubt the liturgy will be affected. True, they can have the liturgy, but it's quality will remain to be seen. We can say the same thing about the fraternal life in community and so many other aspects. And on top of this, they complain that they do not have vocations. The Pope has said many times that people go to the cemeteries only out of obligation, out of gratitude for our elders. However, we expect young people to follow us when they can certainly choose another community!

At the present moment we have 38,000 contemplative nuns (approx.), those of solemn vows, simply professed and in formation. Of these, more than half are in Europe, particularly in Spain and in Italy. There are approximately 4,000 monasteries in the world, more than half of these are in Europe. The countries that have the most monasteries are Spain with 850 monasteries, Italy 523 monasteries, France 257 and Germany 117. This is important data so as to evaluate the future. Because we are referring here to those countries with the greatest crisis in vocations. As such, the population of the contemplative life will diminish greatly in 10 years (unless of course, Our Lord miraculously intervenes). We must be aware of this if we are to adequately prepare the future. If there are no children here, what are we to do? I recall right now a phrase that I meditated on, perhaps we have made much of what in reality should have been of lesser importance; we have made a situation of masses [a multiplication of monasteries]. Religious life, and especially monastic life has to be a minority, otherwise we will run the risk of lessening the quality of life. It is a crisis which I am convinced is global for both masculine and feminine communities, although I am ignorant of the cause. When the *Sponsa Christi* was published, there were 55,834 nuns and this refers only to those with Solemn Profession.

So, where is consecrated life growing, particularly contemplative life? Certainly outside of Europe. In Latin America, in Asia and Africa there is taking place an opening of monasteries. In these last 10 years, in Latin America, 9 monasteries were closed and 62 were opened. In Asia, 19 were closed and 48 were opened. In Africa, 9 were closed and 34 were opened.

Another factor involved is that of the perseverance of vocations. Since I have been in the Congregation for Religious I have been taken aback by the great number of nuns who are leaving the monastery. This is not something you only see in the active religious life.

So, those of us who love the feminine contemplative life cannot close our eyes to these things, regardless if we are criticized for it. And if it is necessary to close monasteries, then we will continue to do so. But what we cannot do is reduce the exigencies of the feminine monastic life simply because we want to keep up "four walls". I know that this brings criticism upon us because it hurts. But if we love this vocation, then we have to insist more on the quality of the vocation than on the number of monasteries present.

I perceive at this moment, above all, two temptations, though these do not pertain only to the contemplative life. The first is the auto-referentialism. Often a monastery considers itself as its own Order because of their being in a *sui juris* situation, and as such, no one is allowed near. And the second is the struggle for survival.

*Authorship of the Apostolic Constitution*

Everything we have spoken about until now shows how it is necessary to have a new Apostolic Constitution. And the first thing we need to answer is: who is the author of this document? There are those who say that VDG is not a document written by Pope Francis. I say to them that if they doubt it, they should have the courage to go directly to the Pope and ask him if he did it. It is really a lack of respect towards the Holy Father to say that he would sign a document without having knowledge or approval. Yet, there are those who tell the communities not to read it. If they obey these things, they themselves will reap the consequences. I am speaking of very concrete situations. The Pope recently told me, "Jose, do not let anyone rob you of Gospel freedom."

It is obvious that this document has various "material" authors. (I am sure you know that, for example, when an Episcopal conference writes a document, it is not necessarily the President himself who writes the whole thing.) Yet, we must recognize that in this document the principal author is the Pope, because he is the one who has signed it and because he has intervened with his annotations in the very text of the document. I could show you these if I had to, but I don't out of respect for the Holy Father. But I have the proof of how he would write, on the back of the sheets, entire pages. Therefore, he did not only sign it, he wrote much of what you find here. And, you can undeniably see that the style of this letter is that of the Holy Father; this is very obvious.

In second place, there was a small commission of contemplatives (women) who put together a draft. This draft came as a result of the responses that were received to the Questionnaires sent to all the monasteries of the world. Initially, from these responses, three summaries had been made (by women! men were not involved) and were sent to the Holy Father. He read them and he also gave them to that small commission of contemplatives (which I just mentioned). This commission then came up with the draft. Then this draft went back to the Holy Father, who then made his own annotations and additions to it (many of them). And the draft was also sent to the Congregation (even though we had very little to do with it). Then the second part was done by a group of canon lawyers, independent of the Congregation. In summary, the author of the document is the Holy Father. It is only logical that he will make use of those whom he thinks it is appropriate to do so and who can help him.

#### *The Title of the Constitution*

*Vultum Dei Quaerere* seems to me to be a very significant title. And if in anything, perhaps it is in this that the Congregation has had some input. This title was taken from a famous discourse which Pope Benedict XVI made in France when speaking to the Bernardines [a branch of Franciscans]. He said that from the beginning, monastic life was characterized by a "seeking of the Face of God".

To me it seems important to take account of the title. Because this title places us in a dynamic of continual growth. The Constitution will, in fact, confirm that this search never comes to an end. It is a search that once begun will continue without end. It will only find its fulfillment when we come to see Him, face to face. This gives to the feminine monastic life, a very important dynamism. It can no longer be content with fulfilling the hours of a well-defined schedule, but rather, with the *constant* search for God. If we look at St. Benedict, and this is quoted in the document, we see that he placed as a fundamental criterion for an authentic vocational discernment of a monk, "'si revera Deum quaerit', whether he truly seeks God". (n. 3) And this is also the fundamental criterion in the Constitution. Do you want criteria for vocational discernment? Here is the most fundamental. If the person is coming

simply to find a personal refuge, she is not qualified to be a nun. If she is coming to work intensely in seeking the face of God, even if she is imperfect and has her limitations, then she is a worthy candidate.

*"You have made us for Yourself, Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You. The contemplative knows by experience, the truth that lies behind this confession of St. Augustine. This is why you do not give yourselves rest in this search. Deeply in love with your Lord, you live totally orientated to the seeking of the face of God (not, my dear Sisters, to the keeping together of four walls). This is your vocation and your theme should be that of St. Paul: "I live, but it is not I who live, but Christ who lives in me."*

The contemplative is, therefore, a woman who, motivated by a profound desire of the heart, enters into a dynamic process of seeking for the Beloved, in a 'pilgrimage' (expression used in the Constitution), in search for the living and true God. She knows that this search does not originate in her, for she is simply responding to a vocation, and that "it is God Himself Who takes the initiative; He seeks out men and women and mysteriously draws them to Himself". (n. 1)

The title also points out to us that it is in this criterion that we ought to pursue vocational discernment. The Constitution reminds us that this is the principal sign of authenticity. It therefore places us before an experience of "falling in love". The Pope speaks of your life as a "story" of a passionate love for God and for humanity. A contemplative who is not in love with Christ and with the many "faces" of Christ [in the world], I think, has made a mistake in her vocation.

#### *The Structure of the Document*

There is fundamentally two parts to the document. The first one is a descriptive and foundational type of the contemplative life. It is here where we find most references to the Scripture. For example, there are 51 biblical citations. There are also many texts (31 times) drawn from Code of Canon Law. From the Second Vatican Council, there are 18 citations, mostly from *Lumen Gentium* and from *Perfectae Caritatis*. There are 39 citations from the Magisterium of the Church, mostly from John Paul II (18 times), mostly from *Vita Consecrata*; Pope Francis cites himself (13 times), mostly *Evangelium Gaudium*; and Pope Benedict XVI, (9 times). Lastly, there are some citations from a few founders and foundresses. These facts are more important than we realize. The citations from the Code of Canon Law situate the contemplative life within a juridical frame, which is normal, while all the others, situate it within the path of the Church. This is especially true of the Second Vatican Council, which Pope John Paul called the compass which guides the Church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Since we are the Church, we must be attentive to this compass. I never thought there were so many who cast into doubt the sincerity of the Second Vatican Council, almost as if it were the cause of all evils. This is to deny the action of the Holy Spirit through the centuries. Jokingly I say, that if we admit that the Holy Spirit moved in the Council of Trent, and this with great force, well, then all the more so in Vatican II and this because there were more Council Fathers present, so there was a greater force of movement, a hurricane we could say.

These citations therefore, place the feminine contemplative life within the context of the Church today, as well as of the religious life. Because there is also cited, for example, not only *Vita Consecrata*, but also 6 documents from the Congregation, and many others that refer to religious life.

## VDQ and *Sponsa Christi*

Let us now take a look at the relationship between VDQ and *Sponsa Christi*. I refer to it as a continuity within a discontinuity, in what is new. Firstly, there is continuity because we are speaking of the feminine monastic life. And there are two things which SC insists on which continue in force in VDQ, even though there are some adjustments. For example, the Federations. There may be nuns today who are not happy because the document states that federations are obligatory. However, it was Pius XII who instituted federations many years ago. Something which they seem to have forgotten.

The reference frame of the Constitution (VDQ) is all the theological reflection that has been done on religious life since Vatican Council II. Of course, the Apostolic Constitution (SC), in speaking of your vocation, referred to it as a state of perfection. And the more exacting the Constitutions were, the greater was the supposed perfection to which you were called. It has been said [jokingly, of course] that four Benedictines are necessary to make one Poor Clare; however, six Poor Clares are necessary for one Carmelite! Today, however, things are different. Today, we speak of the following of Christ from our Baptism. Therefore, contemplative women are women who share in the common destiny of all baptized persons. In the Constitution, contemplative life is not presented as something superior to other realities, but rather as a life in which the following of Christ proper to all the baptized and consecrated, acquires a totally particular expression. This is the first novelty.

A second novelty is the language of the document. We can easily lose sight of something: while SC constantly spoke of “cloistered nuns” (and language is not superfluous), this Constitution does not speak that way, even though it does speak of the cloister. Rather, it simply speaks of contemplative nuns. This is a great change. Because before, your vocation was defined by a single element, overlooking so many other elements as well, and especially of the reason why the nuns were in the monastery. They are there in order to become contemplatives.

At the time, SC came about during a post-war period, when it was necessary to give strong structures: the monastery, the Federation, the enclosure, etc. This was in order to avoid its disintegration, as told to us by those who have studied the history of contemplative life. VDQ recognizes difficult and delicate moments that are being lived, referred to in *Vita Consecrata* as a “season of winter”. And for this reason, it seems that what is necessary is to *strengthen the roots*, that is, what is essential.

The third novelty refers to the elements that characterize consecrated contemplative life. It is this area, that the Pope stresses the most: formation, prayer, centrality of the Word of God, sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, fraternal life in community, autonomy, federations, the cloister, work, silence, means of communication, asceticism. Some of these elements are common to all consecrated life, which should be a cause of joy for us. There are not two, estranged bodies of consecrated life. All are following Christ, each according to the vocation they have received.

Behind all this, we find a refreshing breath of air of true novelty. The contemplative life is no longer identified with one or two elements, as for example, the cloister or autonomy, which, as the Pope said in a recent encounter with Vicars and Delegates of Religious life celebrated in Rome, would be detrimental to the contemplative life. I cite the words of the Holy Father which he gave us on this occasion: “To center all of one’s attention on one element, regardless of how important it may be, (as in the case of the cloister or of autonomy), could lead to a vital imbalance which could have sad consequences in the life of

the nuns.” This does not say that they are not important, but they are not the only ones, nor the most important. And because of this, we have said that the fundamental criterion is: seeking the Face of God.

### *Formation*

I am going to refer now to some novelties within the elements listed in the Constitution. The first is formation. It is curious to see that the Holy Father has placed this as the first element. This is because without formation there is no present, nor any future. And this is even more so in regard to on-going formation. Otherwise we will be forming our young people to say “Amen” to all things now, but then tomorrow, they will end up doing the same thing that the professed nuns do. This is possible in religious life.

In perfect consonance with *Vita Consecrata* the new Constitution defines formation as “a process aimed at configuration to the Lord Jesus and the assimilation of His mind and heart in the complete gift of self to the Father” (n. 13). It is not about having the intelligence filled with many ideas, and endless conferences, even though these are necessary. But these cannot leave the heart in a vacuum. VDQ makes it clear that formation is a process that lasts the whole of one’s life. Even elderly Sisters should continue forming themselves. It looks to the formation of the heart, the mind and life, facilitating the integration of all the dimensions of the human person. Therefore, I beg you, give great importance to human formation. Be women, and consecrated women, and consecrated contemplative women. But be women. This is human formation. Many of the problems in the monastery, as well as those in the active life, are purely a lack of human formation. How difficult it is to say those three words that the Holy Father asks: thank you, please, sorry. Christian formation is also necessary, formation in the faith, followed by formation in one’s charism. This is also a great novelty of the Constitution for it states that each Order must be treated according to its own peculiarity. In SC, everyone was simply a nun, now there are Dominican nuns, Benedictine nuns, etc. And we must be coherent in this, for if the Spirit has given a charism, who are we to annul it, making everyone the same.

Another important point that the Holy Father makes in the Constitution is that in formation one cannot forget the social and cultural context of today. It also insists on the formation of Formators; it is not enough to be a good nun. They must be formed to be able to accompany young women, who are not like those who entered many years ago when the older nuns did. For this reason, there is a new norm which allows the Formators to participate in specific courses on formation, even if they are outside of the monastery, keeping, however, a climate that is adequate to one’s charism.

There is also much reference to on-going formation of the Sisters. And this is because initial formation depends on the continual formation of the Sisters. If there is no on-going formation, there will not be any true initial formation. We must be very clear about this. Otherwise, we will be forming towards a double-life. The document likewise, treats of the formation of the abbess and the prioress; those who are called to the service of authority. And may I be permitted here to bring up those unending postulations. We permit them but often against our better judgement. But there are Sisters who seem to think they were born to die as prioresses or abbesses. They too must learn to obey. Therefore, after a period of service, they must change. At times, we are asked for a 10<sup>th</sup> postulation! Now, even the Pope resigns. Yet, the abbesses or prioresses want to go on indefinitely.

Then there is also a reference to the formation of the candidates. I ask you to please pay attention to your candidates. Often you have so many problems and it is because you will accept anyone in order to fill in your numbers. Also, it is necessary to be attentive to affectivity issues.

### *The Cloister*

I am glad to see the definition given in the Constitution for the cloister: “the inner sanctum of the Church as spouse: ‘a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord’” (n. 31). The cloister is greatly important. I have always said that it can be a prophetic witness in this world, but it must be lived as such, with a certain degree of dignity.

In the document, the novelty of living the enclosure is found in two ways. First, the monastic enclosure. Certainly, the day the document was published the Benedictines probably sang a *Te Deum* because monastic enclosure was formally recognized. However, this is typical of the Benedictine tradition and the Church cannot deny this. The second is constitutional enclosure, which does not refer to the common enclosure, proper to every institute. For there were those who jumped for joy thinking that the two became one.

And another novelty is that the monasteries are able to choose. For example, the Benedictines can now choose the monastic enclosure, even though there are some Benedictines with papal enclosure. The document is not pointing out the highest degree, rather it is offering the minimum. This does not mean that the monasteries are necessarily going to choose what is minimum. But there is now the possibility of choosing between papal enclosure and constitutional enclosure. The Constitution gives a criterion that must be applied: that, after a *serious period of discernment*, taking into account the charismatic tradition as well as the situation of the particular monastery, they must choose. Pope Francis has said repeatedly that if a community chooses papal enclosure, they must live it. However, if a particular monastery does not consider that it has the sufficient strength to live papal enclosure, then they should choose the other one. What is important is to have coherence of life. Nonetheless, it is necessary to keep in view the charismatic tradition of the Order in this serious period of discernment.

It is also pointed out that if, in the same Order different choices are made, this should not lead towards division. If the cloister causes division it does not come from God. Division is never from God. We must walk in communion, respecting each other. Even though I may not prefer what they choose, why must that separate me from my brother or sister?

### *Fraternal Life in Community*

Here we find a very strong change, of going from community life to fraternal life in community, which is not the same. Because for community life it is sufficient to be under the same roof, but fraternal life is greater because everyone’s participation is required, as well as a strong spirituality of communion. This then becomes the first form of evangelization. Abbesses and prioresses must therefore be very attentive to creating fraternal life in community.

### *Means of communication*

Of course, these did not exist in the time of SC, but there is nonetheless a novelty here. There is a norm here which demands that the means of communication not become an occasion for distraction or of avoiding the demands of fraternal life and become harmful to one’s vocation, becoming an obstacle to a life totally dedicated to contemplation. And I beg you to be very disciplined in this. The cloister does



not belong only to the grates. Not too long ago I was told by an abbess, “Father, we are so happy because we have a postulant who can download the Pope’s homily in Santa Marta, then his Angelus, then his catechesis.” I told her I was more worried about what she did between the homily and the Angelus. We must not let the means of communication become a distraction or harmful, but rather an aide for formation. This is why the Constitution recommends the use of video-conferencing for on-going formation. I know of monasteries in Spain that are making use of conferences given in Italy.

In addition, the Constitution sees as normal the use of houses of formation. Because there are monasteries that are not capable of forming their new vocations. Of course, you all know well that if a young vocation is formed in a particular place, she may just want to stay there. But this would be to sacrifice the formation of the younger vocations.

#### *Federations*

Federations are an obligation of all monasteries. If there is an exception, that will be dealt with at the Congregation. They exist so as to avoid isolation of the monasteries. They are no longer formed only by geographical regions, but can be formed for other affinities, for example the type of cloister. I can assure you that right now we are debating much on the question of the federations. Because in the replies we received from the Questionnaires we were told by a great majority, that often the federation presidents can do very little. She goes to the monastery, says a few words, but when she leaves, everything goes on the same. However, we have to say that a federation president is not a provincial (for there are some who want to be a provincial or a general).

#### *International commissions*

As far as I know, only the Dominicans have an international commission. These do not have juridical value, but exist to study questions about their way of life.

#### *Conclusion*

The Apostolic Constitution is a document that, in my opinion, is open to the future, and here we must recognize two novelties which reveal this openness. First, is the presence of discernment, both personal and communitarian. All of the Sisters are called to participate in this, not just the Council Sisters. For me, this is very important for the future. This discernment is placed within the context of listening to the word of God with a renewed mind. Second, the stress placed on a “communitarian project” (referred to 10 times), which is the first time this is found in any magisterial document.

The document picks up the three major concerns of the contemplative life of women: formation, cloister and autonomy. The clarifications of these will be seen in the new Instruction that we will be putting together. And I tell you, please be patient. You have lived 60 years with the same document, you can wait another year! For if we want to do it quickly, it will not come out right (though it will always seem to someone as not right, no matter what we publish). For example, the Holy Father’s indication in the Constitution that we treat each charism in an individual form, demonstrates how this not an easy task. This requires much work and much respect.

The Constitution does not put a limit to the maximum of self-offering but it does to the minimum. It is a proposal for continual growth. For the gift of the contemplative life in the Church we sing, with Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, Lord!

## Question and Answer Session

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November 2016 – Madrid, Spain

*Following are the questions posed to Archbishop Carballo, listed in the order they were addressed.*

1. There are Vicars of Religious and Bishop's Delegates who recommend communities to not participate in the meetings or courses given by the Federations. Is it possible to remind them of the proper service and respect towards communities?

AC: I can only wonder where their recommendations come from. The Constitution is recommending this. Here, either we obey the Pope or we don't. But the communities themselves should not be listening to them, it is their own fault. And an abbess or a prioress cannot put as an excuse the decisions of the Vicar or the Delegate in order not to have to make a decision which they really wanted to make anyway, and then say, "We were told this by our Vicar." Rather, each one must assume their own responsibility. There are Orders in which their Constitutions give the abbess or the prioress a lot of responsibility in deciding when it is permissible to leave the cloister. Therefore they must assume their responsibility. So, whoever may tell you something like what this question is posing, I can only say, please do not listen to them. It is not the mind of the Church. And we must define ourselves properly, either we are with the Church or we are following "my idea" of the Church.

2. If we have chosen papal enclosure for many years, do we now have to question ourselves whether or not to change what we have already decided to be our vocation and have professed as religious?

AC: No one is asking you to change. Rather you are being asked *to discern*. If you want to keep papal enclosure, then continue with it; and for this you do not have to ask for permission. Only those monasteries who have papal enclosure right now and who decide to change to constitutional enclosure will have to ask for permission. And I repeat the criteria to keep in mind: discernment according to the tradition of the Order and the reality of the present community.

However, do not hide behind idea of "we have lived this way for years." Rather, it is appropriate to study some realities. First, how was it that autonomy came about and for what reason was it implemented? How was it lived in years past which perhaps today cannot be lived in the same way? Before, a monastery had its own provisions: milk, produce, etc. Today, monasteries go out to get their

food and other things. Therefore, they are not so autonomous as they used to be. This, of course, refers only to material autonomy, and there are many other forms of autonomy as well.

3. In what do the different modalities of enclosure listed in the Constitution refer to? Will they be explained? [translator's note: Two questions were joined here because they were of the same topic.]

AC: The Instruction which we are presently working on (with great care and without haste, and which is not so easily done) will probably respond to this question. Please wait for the Instruction. And yes, the Instruction will indicate the essential elements of each form of enclosure. But you must be patient. Right now, we are overwhelmed with work, you could not even imagine it. You may be asking things from the logic of your own time, but perhaps time does not only respond to the logic of cloistered monasteries. For example, right now we are trying to find ways to respond to the situations of exclaustations and divisions, and making enormous sacrifices to do it in a month. According to Curial regulations this is required to be completed in three months, and we are trying to do it in a month. There are days in which I sign as many as 100 documents. We are, after the Secretariat of State, the Congregation that has the largest number of documents made. And as a Congregation, we are a very limited number of people. And then we deal with every form of consecrated life, all of them. And we are also approving new ones as well. Just recently there is a movement to approve an Order of Widows. All of this takes much time. Recently we also just had a major Congress on the economic situation of religious institutes. So it is necessary to wait for the new Instruction.

4. Can there be one constitution for two different types of enclosure?

I think what [this question] is referring to is the constitution of the Order. And yes, there can be. The only difference is that when we speak of enclosure today, we may be referring to one or the other type. And each monastery will try to live according to the option they make.

Here, for example, the Poor Clares have a particular problem, which in reality is not a problem. They have a vow of enclosure. So many are now asking how this will be for them. But, for example, every religious professes three vows: poverty, chastity and obedience, yet each Institute lives them according to their own norms. In the same way, if there is a Poor Clare monastery which decides to continue with papal enclosure, then they will have to live it according to the demands of papal enclosure. If another decides to have constitutional enclosure, they too will have to live this. The vow remains. In no way have we even thought of touching this issue [of changing the vow], for if we did, we would literally have to "run for our lives"! [tongue-in-cheek]. So therefore, it is better not even to touch this issue. Therefore, the vow will not be changed for now. Each one will live it according to the enclosure they have chosen *after a period of discernment*. I want to re-emphasize this. We are not talking about seeking what is in vogue or what is more comfortable, but rather of a serious discernment.

5. Will there be a single federation and assembly for each type of enclosure?

AC: This will depend on the Order and upon the options that are available. There are Orders which have many federations, like for example, in Spain. It has been said in the Apostolic Constitution that one can have a federation based on the different affinities of life. But I must insist on what the Holy Father has said in the Constitution: please do not let a particular choice of enclosure break the unity within the

Order. For if a monastery does not consider itself to have the strength to live the papal enclosure, they can decide for the constitutional enclosure, and this is alright. Even today, there already exists within a single Federation, those who live the enclosure rigorously and those who don't. This is the reality. This is why I often say to the nuns, "live the enclosure as adults, not as adulteresses." Because there are times in which we play around with things. There may be times when we find sufficient reasons to justify going out of the cloister, but if the abbess or prioress does not agree, she will use as her excuse the norms of the cloister. However, when it is convenient for her to do so, she waives everything aside. This cannot be. How necessary it is to properly discern. Because ultimately, we will be giving an account of all this to God.

6. Should the federal prioress have greater authority to ensure initial formation when this cannot be offered within a particular monastery?

AC: Yes. However, this is not really a novelty anymore. For example, the Franciscan Conceptionists [from a particular federation in Spain] already have a common house of formation. What I want to point out is that when the Pope asks for houses of formation, he does it so as to avoid sacrificing the formation of the new candidates simply because a community wants to have "cheap labor" (please forgive my expression). We cannot do this; it is manipulation.

But right now, we are studying what role we should give to the federation president and to federations. It is not easy for us, because we do not want her to be like a provincial and even less, like a general. Yet, neither do we want things to continue as they are. Because there have been cases in which a monastery, on hearing that the federal president is coming in order to speak of certain issues, does not even receive her into the monastery. This is inexcusable! She could easily be received in the speakroom if that is preferred. Like, lately I found out that some nuns from a particular country (namely, Spain), who wanted to assist at the meetings of the Closing of Year of Consecrated life in Rome, when they asked for lodging within one of the monasteries in their Order, they were denied it! And then we talk about having communion!

Other cases are like when there is the need to close a monastery that is in crisis and the federal president and her council often find themselves without sufficient support. This is why we will set up legislation about this. As you know, in the Constitution there is already mention of the possibility of a commission in which the Ordinary, the federal president and the prioress or abbess will participate. But it is necessary to wait. So far we have a small draft on the role of the federation president made up; we have had three meetings about federations already. This is one area being worked on by the Dicastery. It will be necessary for us to make consultations and then to present everything to the Holy Father.

7. What can a federal president do in those communities where, despite their difficult situations, they do not want to seek help or solutions?

AC: Well, one possible solution is to wait for the Lord to solve the problem, that is through Sister death [said jokingly]. Like the example I posed before, of two or three Sisters who are well beyond their 80's and who refuse to leave their monastery. What else can be done? Yet, we know this is not a solution, and that it is a very grave problem. Each sister has the right to a dignified death as a religious! And, whenever we are able to assist a monastery that has these kinds of difficult situations and who were not

so willing but who finally gave in..., almost always they say to us afterwards, “thank you, now we feel that we are loved, accompanied and cared for again.”

8. To belong to a monastic institution excludes the need to belong to a federation?

AC: Right now we are studying this question of our dear Benedictine Sisters. This is why I cannot give a direct answer. Most likely, we will leave open different options.

9. It seems to us that if each monastery in the same Order chooses its own type of enclosure, this breaks its unity.

AC: I can only ask: please, do not let your unity be broken. The criteria by which the first Christians were recognized in the early Church was: see how they love each other. Each one may have their own preferences, formation, etc., but, do not let the unity among you be broken. Otherwise, what Gospel will we be practicing? This is more serious than we realize.

10. If postulations are not desired, how come the Holy See continues to grant them?

AC: Simply because we do not have any other choice. Because often the postulation comes to us with the warm recommendation of the bishop (more often than not), or by the Provincial if the monastery is under the Order. Therefore, we at the Congregation, if we are told that a monastery consists of 5 nuns, all over 80 except for one who is 70, we give in. But in reality this is not a solution. Yet often it is because we find ourselves obligated to act this way. However, now we are acting in another way. That is, instead of accepting the postulation, we ourselves name a superior. We may name the one who is postulated, but this is not the same thing. Because now the community has lost the ordinary manner of election. So, in order to put before them a strong “red light”, we deny the postulation and inform them that the Congregation will appoint a superior.

11. Could you please explain this statement from n. 31 of the Constitution: “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”?

AC: Well, the higher unity that is being referred to is Christ, it is contemplation. I think this is clear.

12. We are struck by the fact that the Constitution is directed to women contemplatives and not to both men and women contemplatives. Are we not at a moment in which women are to be treated equally as men?

AC: I had this question posed to me before. Of course, it could have been done for men as well, but it is also true that throughout the history of the Church, women have followed a different path than men. We have done our best to treat you as responsible women.

13. Some of us are seeking a form of cloister that allows us the adequate space to live our contemplative life in service of the Church, but without being perceived as cloistered nuns, as the cloister is one of many elements, but should not define us. The contemplation we seek goes beyond this.

AC: I have already told you this many times. You will notice that in this document you are no longer referred to as cloistered nuns. Though, it is true that until now this is how you were always perceived. Here, in a little town in Spain, do you know how the Poor Clares are called? *Las encerradas* [translated as: the “locked up ones”]. To me this is very undignified, yet this is how you have been known. Now, perhaps with the new document, something will begin to change.

14. We are grateful for the Apostolic Constitution we received from the Holy Father. But we are surprised to get a letter from the Congregation without having yet received the Instruction, warning us on the theme of enclosure.

AC: No, this letter was not a warning to you. It was simply asking you to be patient. Because, immediately after the Constitution was published, we received at the Congregation a “hurricane” of comments. So, this letter was simply a response to that. We would not have written it if we knew that you were all “calm and collected”. But instead, we were constantly receiving questions and concerns. In the letter, all we asked is for you to wait.

15. [In this letter referred to] Why are you speaking to us about choosing a form of enclosure when you have not as yet sent us the necessary dispositions?

AC: It is because you have asked us for this. I must say, if all of you would have had the opportunity to read the answers we received from the Questionnaire we sent out, you would be amazed. They go from “north to south” with such ease that it was so difficult to do a single summary... we had to do three summaries! Because the answers were completely contradictory to each other. We spoke of this in the letter we wrote because this is what was asked of us. So, until then, continue living the enclosure as you have had thus far.

16. Can you clarify the distinction between the monastic enclosure and the constitutional? Is the monastic enclosure only for the Benedictines or can this be chosen by any monastery whatever their charismatic tradition?

AC: These clarifications will come in the Instruction. But you must observe how this is lived by a Benedictine monastery and how it is lived by a monastery of a mendicant order. Here is where we come to see the great differences that exist. And it is necessary to keep in mind the tradition of the Order. As such, the monastic enclosure belongs properly to the Benedictines. If you want an enclosure that is more “elastic” then choose the constitutional enclosure. Whereas the monastic is typical of the Benedictine tradition.

17. What is being referred to when we speak of the “competence of the federal president and her council”?

AC: I cannot really answer this because, though I may tell you what we have considered so far, I cannot yet say what is going to come from the draft we have recently written. We just have to wait. But what I can tell you for sure is that she will not be a Provincial. Perhaps she may be like a major superior, but without all the competence of a major superior.

18. Is it possible for communities to assume affiliations?

AC: Certainly. But, there can be a trap here. We can lean on affiliations to continue as we are. Affiliations are often transitory. Either to revitalize or in order to close a monastery.

19. If federations are so important, how come there is the possibility of being exempt, an open door?

AC: No, there are no open doors. There are only extreme cases. You must understand that the world is a very large place, and if in a country there is only one monastery (like perhaps China), with whom will they form a federation? So, it is not that there is an open window for those monasteries who can federate but do not want to. Rather, there are situations that go much beyond, because of language, culture, or political situations.

20. Contemplative life is not present in CONFRE [the Conference of Religious women in Spain]. Can we become members?

AC: Well, I really don't think so. However, this does not impede you from creating a Conference yourselves. Poland has a Conference of Contemplative Woman. And I think there is another country as well. I do think you need to strengthen the contemplative aspect. And I think it would be good that you do something like this. I think it is easier for you to create a contemplative conference of religious than to participate at the general one, because you may not get much out of it.

Conclusion:

I can only say, please, insist on formation. About autonomy, I say, please, do not close yourselves to only maintaining the *sui juris*. Thank you very much. I have tried to be very spontaneous and open in my responses. I hope I have not caused you any confusion. Thank you for your attention. And I ask all contemplatives to pray for us.