

*Sr. Joseph Maria Sanchez, of the Rochester Carmel, translated this Conference of Archbishop Carballo given to a group of contemplative nuns in Mexico, as well as the Q & A Session which follows. The main theme of the Conference is formation.*

#### CONFERENCE TO CONTEMPLATIVE NUNS

Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M.

Mexico -- April 2016

I would like to begin by referring to the Questionnaire the Congregation sent to contemplative monasteries. We were able to send this only to the monasteries that are federated. It is not possible to maintain contact or dialogue with monasteries that are not federated. However, we did receive some responses afterwards from a few of the non-federated. But I do want to point out that in the up-coming Constitution (which by the way was supposed to have been promulgated on the Feast of Saint Joseph) federations will be practically an obligation. I know that perhaps there may be some resistance to this, and they may be justified. But it is difficult today to understand how a monastery can be 100% autonomous. This situation of the *sui juris* autonomy was also included in the Questionnaire. In reality, how many monasteries exist that are 100% *sui juris* autonomous? Because those that are not dependent on the bishop, are dependent on the provincial; and whoever does not depend on either of them, depends on some benefactor, on someone who does this or that for them. So in the end, everyone else commands but the prioress.

And so, I ask myself, when a monastery no longer has the requirements necessary, what good is it to maintain this title? Just because it has to be kept? This cannot be. In the Questionnaire, many of you suggested to us certain requirements by which a monastery could be considered truly autonomous. And yet there does exist now a certain "limbo"(if we can call it that way), in which the monastery in difficulty could cease to be autonomous and becomes affiliated to another one, as a formal structure, in the attempt of strengthening it or of eventually suppressing it.

About the Questionnaire itself, let me point out first that there was an enormous number of responses; we received close to 10,000 responses. Some of were responses from a Federation and not the monasteries they represented, which means behind that response there were perhaps an additional 10 or 12 monasteries. Others were responses that came from an individual Sister who thought it was an opportune moment to be heard. The largest number of responses came from Spanish-speaking monasteries, that is from Spain and Latin America. All these responses were summarized three times. These summaries have been helpful to the Holy Father in his work in formulating the future Apostolic Constitution. And they will also be helpful to us at the Congregation to formulate the future *Verbi Sponsa*. We do not know how it will be called. You may be aware that we have been commissioned by the Holy Father to write a new *Verbi Sponsa*. And this future document will not only address the cloister, but also formation and autonomy, as well as the cloister. These will be the three themes that this future document will address.

I can promise you that this document will be developed by all of you. This is why we did the Questionnaire. It will most likely be one of the first documents elaborated by those to whom it is addressed. The first document that was done this way was the one on Religious Brothers in which we worked with the Superior Generals of the Religious Institutes. And now the second document will be this one for you. We will do our best to take these responses and formulate a consensus from among them,

because the truth is that there is not much unity in the contemplative life. The world of the contemplative life at this moment is very, very pluralistic. To this reality, we now have the task of seeking harmony.

Keeping in mind the responses to this Questionnaire, I would like to speak to you about formation. For even though in some ways we may differ about formation in its practical aspects, we cannot deny that formation plays such an essential role in everything, both the present reality of contemplative life, as well as its future. Without formation there will be no future, regardless of how many vocations there may be. The contemplative life lived will be a "decaffeinated" contemplative life, one that does not say anything to God or to the world. That is why I say to you that before investing in grates and walls, invest in formation! The greatest thing a prioress or an abbess can leave to her successor is not so much a beautiful building, but a well-formed Community. This is the greatest legacy.

In the responses to the Questionnaire, we have seen that there is a wide-spread disorientation just on the concept of what formation is. Therefore, the first question that must be addressed is: "what do I understand formation to be?" Because it is to be expected that if I start with a faulty understanding of what formation is, the consequences will be negative.

Now, to grasp a correct understanding of what formation is, we can begin by looking at *Vita Consecrata* n. 65. Here, Pope John Paul II gives a definition of formation that is very, very appropriate. The Pope defines formation as a "christification", a transformation of the heart and therefore of one's life, in such a way that one's life reproduces the same life of Christ. It recognizes formation to be "a process" of assimilation of the sentiments of Christ towards the Father. The Holy Father then cites Philippians 2:5 as a reference text.

First of all, we must understand that formation is a process. It is a process that goes from less to greater. And here we find a paradox in our present way of formation. Often, we demand more from a postulant or from a novice, than we do from a solemnly professed sister. This is a distortion. To do this is to form towards a double life. And this does not mean necessarily a life of sin, but simply that our postulants or novices come to think: "well, now I have to tough it out, but later, things will be easier, like it is for the rest." However, if we see formation as something that goes from lesser to greater, we should not demand something from a simply professed sister or a sister in formation, which we should be demanding from the solemnly professed.

As such, any *Ratio* on formation must begin with on-going formation first, even before addressing initial formation. Generally, we begin formation programs with candidacy, postulancy, novitiate, simply-professed and then solemnly professed. But this should not be. We must begin the other way around. We must understand that we will only be able to give a valid formation to the young women who come to our monasteries if they find an appropriate environment within. A monastery that does not have a serious orientation towards on-going formation will not be able to, nor should they, receive vocations. Otherwise, it will happen to us what Jesus said to the Pharisees: You go through land and seas in search of a disciple and yet, what do you do with him? You convert him into someone who is worse off than yourselves.

I often share this little true story. When I was Minister General of the Franciscans, I had a meeting with the newly professed men in an area that has many vocations, that is Bosnia-Herzegovina and Croatia.

There were many young people there. I asked the formators and superiors to leave us alone so as to give the youth greater freedom of expression. Towards the end of our time together, one young man stood up and addressed me in what could almost seem like a “high-handed manner”. He said: “Father, do not worry. Today we do what we are told. But tomorrow, we will do just as they do.”

Thus, a truly perfect program of formation includes both on-going and initial formation. This is why the first word about formation is so important, it is a process of assimilation. It is not that I personally like this word (assimilation) very much. Rather, I would translate it with another word I find more agreeable: personalization. But they are both very similar. That is to say: “Everything that I receive, I have to make my own.” It is like the animals. Cows, for example, when they graze, cannot just stop there. They must continue assimilating the nourishment by ruminating it, and this is a long process. We, too, must assimilate things little by little, making what we receive our own; as flesh of my flesh. And it is a *long* process. Here, we find also, another difficulty within monasteries. Speaking from my experience at the Congregation, often there are Superiors who, if they could, would give solemn profession to some of the young women who come to their monasteries the day before they enter! And this because they often think that with this profession, everything will be worked out. No so. Today, the processes of formation need to be long ones. This was also told to us by Pope John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* (n. 66). It is so because the young women who come to our monasteries today are not the same people as those from yesterday. They often have psychological problems that must be addressed. Or affective difficulties that can be hidden or ignored. Or they may have many other wounds that must be cured before their solemn profession. All of this takes time. Do not be in a hurry.

Formation is not so much an accumulation of concepts but rather, an assimilation of the sentiments or attitudes of Christ. Therefore, formation must be geared to a change of heart, to the transformation of the heart, that is, to conversion. Years ago, in the early forms of monasticism, there was really only one vow that was professed, that of conversion. Everything else was a consequence of this. How is it that today we can make a vow of poverty, chastity and obedience, if we do not first make a vow of conversion, that is to say, without first entering into path of conversion?

From all this we can make a very important deduction. If formation consists in the assimilation of the sentiments of Christ towards the Father, then this formation will never end. We know when it begins, yet it only ends after our death. Therefore, we must be attentive to those sisters who would like to say, “This does not concern me anymore”. It does. Formation is permanent or it is not formation. This becomes therefore a criterion for not admitting someone to final profession, even if they are very “pious”. Because anyone who renounces on-going formation, renounces personal growth and holiness itself.

In order for this assimilation and this process to take place, we have to start from a serious vocational discernment. Before I came to work at the Congregation, I never realized that the contemplative life had so many problems. It is also true that there is a lot of holiness in this way of life. Yet, many of these problems come because you have accepted vocations that should never have been accepted, ones that were so obviously unfit. But because we are going through moments in which vocations are scarce, almost anyone is taken. And it is only afterwards that we see the results of this. Many of our problems would be reduced through a good and serious vocational discernment.

I don’t know if you are aware of this, but one day, a bishop had an encounter with another one. Bishop A said to Bishop B, “Look here Bishop, I have here a priest from your diocese who wants to become

incardinated into ours, what is your opinion"? Bishop B responded, "My dear Bishop, sure, with eyes closed!"\* So six months later, the two bishops meet each other again. And Bishop A says to Bishop B, [\*Translators note: The original Spanish phrase says: which is a play on words and can be taken in either a positive or negative sense. It is difficult to find a comparable phrase in English.]

"Hey, you really gave me a *winner*. This priest of yours is a disaster!" Bishop B responded, "No, my brother, not so. I told you to do it with closed eyes, because were they open even a little bit, you would never have accepted him!!" And so, all of you must also keep your eyes wide open!

I remember well the day I was named Archbishop, it was the 6<sup>th</sup> of April. I now have three years completed. The Holy Father received me in audience on the 8<sup>th</sup> of April. And the first question I asked him was, "Your Holiness, what is your greatest concern about consecrated life at this moment"? His response was "What I am most worried about in consecrated life (and he then added, "and in diocesan life as well") is that these become a refuge for people who should never have professed in consecrated life nor have received Sacred Orders."

How necessary is vocational discernment today! Do not allow yourselves to be deceived by pretty words or nice expressions. To have good discernment there must necessarily be good accompaniment. And this is why it is so necessary to form our formators. We think often that to be a formator it is enough to be a good person, but this is not enough. There must be a minimal of qualities, and I am not referring to titles, which often do not mean much.

What is a formator? Pope John Paul II tells us in *Vita Consecrata*. A formator is someone who knows how to transmit the beauty of the *sequela Christi* within a distinct charism. Therefore, this person cannot be someone who is bitter herself, or in some form of personal crisis, because this is what she will transmit to those being formed. How I would like to see a study done within consecrated life on the "departure" of formators while they are formators in the community (and there are many). What have they transmitted? Crisis. We must choose our formators well and also the formation they receive.

The epitome of what a formator should be is found in the Scripture passage about the disciples of Emmaus. In Jesus we find the model for everyone who accompanies another. He makes Himself present in the life of the disciples; a formator must be present in the life of those being formed. He rouses them, "What were you talking about on the way"? Be attentive to those formators who think they know everything, and when a young woman comes they say to her, "this, and this, and this is your problem". And the young woman immediately closes herself up. And perhaps nothing of what is told to her is true. Rather, Jesus provokes the disciples so they would respond. We must allow the young people to talk, and the formator must learn how to listen.

Continuing with this passage, we see that Jesus interprets. This is a very important role of the formator. From her own experience, she begins to interpret what is being presented to her and what is going on in the heart of the young woman. But this must be done from the formator's own experience. Because a young person who is being formed is not an idiot and can tell if what is being said to her comes from "a book" or if it comes as the fruit of a true, lived experience. Unfortunately, we can say that religious life often has many, many teachers but very few formators, that is to say, men and women with experience.

Then Jesus manifests himself to the disciples in the breaking of the bread. The formator must lead the young person to Jesus. Therefore, to be a formator, one must be very humble. The formator is a bridge between the freedom of the one who is called and the freedom of God who calls. But for a bridge to be able to lead from one side to the other, it must allow itself to be stepped on. The formator is not the goal of formation. We must be very attentive so that a dependency is not created. We must watch when a formator says: "How good is this candidate, she even asks me permission to eat." The formator must lead to Jesus not to herself, because it will be Jesus who transforms her heart!

In the final stages of accompaniment, the formator should lead the young person towards making her own commitment. As far we know, Jesus never told the disciples of Emmaus that they had to return to Jerusalem. He opens their minds so that they themselves realize they have to return to Jerusalem. And they run back!

Recently, I received some petitions for the dispensation of vows to the consecrated life. In some cases, when a young man or woman asks for a dispensation, they will say "It was not I who made the profession, my Mistress (or Master) did it for me." What kind of service is this? Be attentive to those abbesses who say: "Of course, you have a vocation. The Lord is calling you!" How does she know? Could it be that what is really sought is cheap labor? That to lose a young person should be avoided as it means losing the work she can do? This is not the gospel criteria for discernment!

Allow me to share with you the following saying: "For the Fathers, the monastic life was not a reality to which someone was able to form himself, but rather, it was seen as a manner of life for which a person allows himself to be formed." This is perhaps a very profound saying, but it could be helpful to you. It is a fundamental criterion. It entails going from being available to that of allowing oneself to be formed. The monastic life is formation towards the constant seeking of God. This you will also find in the new Apostolic Constitution. Who is a nun? Pope Benedict XVI asked this question during a well-known discourse he had in Paris while he was at an historic Benedictine monastery. And his response was that a nun is a person who is seeking God.

What are the objectives of formation?

Fundamentally it is to have the sentiments of Jesus Christ, as we have already said. It is to create a vital center around which revolves one's entire life. This vital center is none other than the Paschal mystery, the Cross of the Son, which lifted up from the earth, draws all things to Him. This is why, the fundamental objective of formation is conversion. Without this, there is no monastic formation, nor formation to the consecrated life. The monastic tradition, as that of consecrated life, indicates to us some means by which we can form ourselves. I will mention them briefly.

What are the instruments you should have on hand for a true formation, both initial and on-going? Firstly, I will begin with silence. And when we speak of silence, we are not referring simply to an absence of words. It is more. It is a means by which we can find ourselves, others and God. It is an instrument for encounter. This is why when we speak of silence, we are referring to an "inhabited solitude". Because an un-inhabited solitude is inhuman. Who is the monk or nun? One of the Desert Fathers tells us it is the person who is alone with the Alone, and in silence. Another text tells us that a nun is one who allows herself to be inhabited by the Solitary One who is God. Therefore, place great emphasis on this dimension, which for me is very important to human life in the consecrated life and in particular, to your form of

contemplative life. I doubt very much that without silence, the hours that you spend in the chapel are fruitful.

Another instrument for formation is *lectio divina*, or the prayerful reading of the Word of God. *Lectio divina* is of capital importance in the life of a contemplative nun. Love for the Word of God has always been present in monastic life. It is what allows you to dwell and live within the Word of God. It guarantees the authenticity of one's spirituality. A strong spirituality is one that is based on the Word of God, on the sacraments and on the Magisterium of the Church. There is a particular monastery in Spain where we had to intervene because of a person who became involved with them and who is in jail now. This person was practically directing the Community. He was supposedly having visions and revelations. We have to be very careful of this, of looking for the extraordinary.

Place the Word of God at the center of your spirituality. This is what young people desire the most. Monasteries ought to be schools in which those who want to, are able to find God through His Word. This of course, also involves study, so that we will not interpret the Word of God to our benefit.

Another instrument of formation is the liturgy. In the responses to the Questionnaire, many of you stated that a monastery is truly autonomous only to the extent that it is capable of celebrating the liturgy properly. This speaks of the reality of autonomy. How can we expect a proper monastic liturgy when there are only two Sisters and they are both infirm? This is not monastic life. And at such a point, there is no longer a guardianship of the charism but rather simply the effort to keep up four walls. A proper liturgy enables those who come to benefit from its beauty.

Another instrument of formation is asceticism. (And I believe that the Holy Father will be speaking about all of this to you in the Apostolic Constitution.) Asceticism is indispensable if there is to be conversion; it is indispensable for a contemplative so that she may fulfill her vocation and learn the mystery of the Cross. It is to be formed in the wisdom of the Paschal mystery of the Christian life. Of itself, it is an initiation into silence and solitude. It is necessary to give attention to this dimension, not considering it as something "outdated", but rather seeking ways to implement it in accordance to our times. You cannot renounce asceticism. Rather, seek those forms which respond to our times. Do not make as sacred one form of asceticism over another, otherwise it will lose its purpose. New wine for new skins. Asceticism is a path of purification that has as its intention the conforming of our lives to the life of Christ.

Another instrument of formation is work. Mendicant orders have committed a grave error throughout history. We have forgotten that asking for alms should be done only after one's work. First, it is necessary to do work. And if, after working we do not have enough to live on, then we are to ask for alms. Work has always been essential in the monastic world. I call your attention to this because in the Questionnaire we found something that was a cause of concern, which is the activism taking place in so many monasteries. Sometimes it is not done with the intention of accumulating much, but because there is not enough to live on, and so there is the need to work day and night, and sometimes even on Sunday. But by doing this contemplation is weakened, and this cannot be. If activism is a bad thing in the active life, it is even worse in the contemplative life. Please be on the lookout for this.

There is need of an ecological project of life. What this means is having a schedule in which there is time for oneself, to be alone, to pray, to study freely. Time for fraternal life in community. I have known

communities in which, because of the need to work on ceramics, there was a Sister who would never be present at recreation. I was the Visitator there so I had to intervene. Our time is for God! If you do not dedicate time for God, what are you doing in the monastery? Do not deceive yourself. We must give time for the mission that is proper to one's Order and is faithful to the contemplative life.

Another instrument in formation is community life or fraternal life in community. Please make sure that the fraternal life in your community is human and humanizing. A community life that is not human is not religious nor is it evangelical. I remember when Pope Francis visited the Proto-monastery of Poor Clares in Assisi, he spoke to them of fraternal life in community. And he told them that he was going to speak to them of their rival: St. Teresa of Avila. He asked: When there was a nun who was having all kinds of visions, etc., what did St. Teresa tell her Sisters? Give her a good piece of steak and you will see how she comes down to earth! The saints were very human! I remember an event in the life of St. Francis. One day they were fasting and it seems that on a particular night, when they were sleeping in their common dormitory, a young friar's stomach was making loud noises of hunger. What did St. Francis do? He got up, went to him and said to him: "Brother, please wake up, I am hungry. Could you accompany me?" St. Francis did not only allow him to break the fast, but he asked the young friar to do it for him, not for himself, so as not to humiliate him.

This is why we must give so much weight to human values: education, manners, amiability. To achieve this, from the moment of initial formation, the young woman must learn how to say at least three words: "thank you, please and I am sorry." Someone who is not capable of using these words cannot be in community life. This is what the Holy Father told young married couples at one point. And we should greet each other in the morning at least with a good smile, not with a sour face.

There is a study made which shows that 99% of the problems we have in community life are affective problems. Of course, when we speak of affectivity we are not referring to sexuality. Affectivity is the capacity a person has for relating with others. Thus, on-going and initial formation must pay close attention to the formation of affectivity. Otherwise our monastery might become a very undesirable place. And we know that there are places in which community life is unbearable. And we cannot have this. The Church without the contemplative life would be like a body without a much-needed organ.

Now, when we speak of affectivity, we have necessarily to include sexuality. And in formation we must give the needed attention to this dimension. Let me ask you: do we have affectivity? (Yes, was answered). Do we have sexuality? (Again, yes.) Well you must all repeat the lesson, because we do not *have* affectivity and sexuality, we *are* affective and sexual beings. This is much more. I can put on my habit, and then take it off and nothing happens. But I cannot put on my affectivity and sexuality and take it off when I want.

There are four criteria of a healthy and normal affectivity.

1. To feel that one is loved. Today, there are many young people who do not feel they are loved. The same is true even of some professed. Thus, it is necessary to see what can be done so that they feel themselves loved... loved by God and by the other Sisters.
2. To feel oneself called to love. This is the first and most fundamental vocation of every consecrated person. The person who does not feel they are called to love others will be a terribly selfish person, and this type of person is not needed in a monastery.

3. To love one's own vocation. If a person has felt herself called to be a Dominican, for example, she should love this vocation. It is useless for her to be thinking, "If only I were a Carmelite." No. One needs to love and be happy with the choice of life that was made. The person who does not love her vocation will play at hiding, and there is no room for someone like this in a monastery.

4. To love according to one's vocation. If I have chosen a life that demands chastity, I cannot be playing with my sentiments, because these may betray me.

If you remember these four criteria you will find much help in them.

Fraternal life in community must be an instrument of formation. And to be so, it must obey the laws of the spirituality of communion. A spirituality that leads me to feel that I belong and that others belong to me. How sad it is if in our communities, we feel that we are orphans: I belong to no one. This is very sad.

Because of this sense of belonging, fraternal life in community leads me to emphasize the positive things in others. A brother or sister may have a long nose or little ears, but she or he has beautiful eyes. Well then, let us emphasize this beautiful aspect in her, and not the negative. And the fact is, that it is not necessary to be too intelligent to point out the negative aspects of a person; but to see and bring out the positive, it is necessary to have a look of faith and a sincere heart.

You must foster a fraternal life where there is communication. Not everything should be a secret between Mother and whomever. We must change this way of doing things. It should not be that things in the monastery are done between Mother and the Holy Spirit, or Mother and her Council. Because, where does this leave the other Sisters? Are they simply chess pieces that are moved around as I please? No, no. There must be open communication and it must be on three levels. First, on the level of what needs to be done, which is something in place already. Second, on the level of what we think. And here we must improve a lot. We go to Chapter, the dialogue begins, but no one says anything. We leave Chapter without saying anything. This cannot be. We have to be free to say what we think. If something needs to be told to Mother, then it should be said humbly and with charity. If she accepts it, very good and if she cannot, then this is a sign that she is not in the proper role. And third, on the level of one's sentiments. To speak on this level, we must first be a mature community and one that is discreet. Because, if I know that if I share something with Mother, and later see it referred to on the bulletin board, what I will choose to do is stay silent. And then, I may be tempted to find outside what I don't find in the monastery. Or I may transform the sacraments, mainly Confession, into an outlet.

I would like to finish by speaking about the cloister. Not everyone lives the cloister with the same expression, nor is everyone concerned about the cloister to the same degree. During this period, when the monasteries became aware that we were going to revise *Verbi Sponsa*, we began to receive an enormous influx of letters, especially to the Holy Father. They would write to him asking him to "defend" them from the Congregation that wants to do away with the cloister! I do not even know where they got such an idea! And of course, the Holy Father shares these letters with us. So if you have any complaints about the Congregation, it will be best if you write to us directly (it saves everyone time!)

I believe in the cloister. The cloister speaks to the person of today. But this is so only with some conditions. First of all, it must be a free choice. I should not feel obligated to do it. I know of a monastery, that received an inheritance. The Sisters wanted to go to see the property that was given them and were at odds as what to do. It so happens at that time, a major appliance broke. So, then Mother goes out to see about getting



a new one, but could not find one that was satisfactory. And since they were already out of the enclosure, she and the Sister with her decided to go by and see the inherited property. And then on the following days, the same thing was repeated with other Sisters, until they all went out supposedly to buy an appliance and went by to see the property. It turned out that they never found a satisfactory appliance. And when everyone had gone, Mother went out again with a Sister and they bought the appliance they had seen at first. We cannot play with the Lord. If you need to go out, then go out. If you need to stay in, then stay in. The cloister is a sign of maturity. There are monasteries in which the Sisters go out for the most ridiculous and unnecessary things, and then, when there is a course offered by the Federation they will not go, "because we are cloistered." But these are the nuns we have seen on the street, and now say they are cloistered! Therefore, have as a norm the following: if there is a need to go out, then do so, but if there is not a true need, then don't. You cannot take a portable grate with you, as the Holy Father told one nun. You cannot always be out. I have always said that you must live the cloister as an adult and not as an adulteress.

Also, we cannot confuse cloister with "grates" only. Because I can be within the grates and yet not be cloistered. Today in the cloister, there must also be an appropriate use of the means of communication, especially the internet. We must be very careful to not enter into that world, nor allow that world to enter into us.

The new Apostolic Constitution will most likely offer more options, though I can assure you that the cloister will remain. There will be papal enclosure as there has always been, there will be constitutional enclosure as there has always been, and there will be monastic enclosure (which was not always recognized). This area is still being worked on. Yet, whatever cloister you have, you must live it fully. If you have papal enclosure, live it faithfully. If you do not feel capable of this and if the Church allows it for you, you may choose another form of cloister, so that you may live in line with what you have chosen.

I hope I have been very clear with you. If I have said something with greater force than others it is because of the great love I have for cloistered life. I owe much to the Poor Clare Sisters. The Church too loves you and owes much to you. These two documents that you are to receive, one before the other, the Apostolic Constitution first and then the Instruction from the Congregation, are simply a manifestation of the love we have for you. The Apostolic Constitution that you have now is 63 years old and it is almost as if Vatican Council II does not exist for you. This is what moved us to ask the Holy Father for a new Constitution.

**The following are some of the more pertinent questions and answers during this session.**

*Why is it not possible to find on the Congregation's website the Conferences from the Closing of the Year of Consecrated Life?*

In Rome, or better said in the Vatican, I would say that websites are still not so up-to-date as we would like. I will take this concern with me back to the Congregation. You have reason to ask this. However, it is not so easy because we do depend on the "approval" of the Service of Communications and things in Rome follow a different time frame (more biblical than Roman!).

*What can we do to lead monasteries that are not associated to a federation to become federated?*

The upcoming Apostolic Constitutions will make clear that not being a federated monastery will be an exception. I am against non-federated monasteries because this does them much harm. There are monasteries that exist which are fertile ground for fundamentalist groups (sectarian) and who are not in communion with the Church, and this cannot be. They may make a show of being very faithful, but it is a fidelity to their own idea of the Church. They show fidelity to the bishop, but only to the extent that the bishop thinks as they do; to the Pope, but only if the Pope approves what they think.

And so what is happening is that there are Institutes and Orders that are changing their spirituality. They wear a habit that would identify them with the existing Orders, but they then live another spirituality that is very different. They promise to bring vocations to the Order, but often at a great price. Vocations need to be formed in their proper spirituality. This is happening with newer Congregations and spiritual movements. If a spiritual movement offers you vocations, but with the condition that they be the ones who dictate what is to be done in the monastery, don't accept them. Do not renounce to your identity! This is happening very, very much.

This is why federations are helpful. They can help a monastery in their formation and in living their identity faithfully. Any monastery that is not federated now must prepare themselves to become federated because this will be the norm and the presidents of the federation will be given more authority.

In reference to association to male institutes. The Apostolic Constitution will speak about promoting the vigilance or association with the proper male branch. We have to recognize that the present situation of monasteries was born because of certain historic situations. For example, in both Spain and Italy (where we find the largest number of contemplatives), up until the 1860's, the monasteries depended totally on the male branch of the Order. The bishops did not have much to do with them until the male institutes were suppressed. So, our present situation is an historical reality. We, in the Congregation, are of the opinion that the male and female branches form a family. This is why we are stressing this charismatic relationship. It is not necessarily a juridical dependence, but rather a complementarity bond because the masculine part of an Order is not fully understood without the feminine and vice versa.

*It is often difficult to receive an answer from the Congregation. Would it not be better for monasteries to ask for permissions from their Order?*

Perhaps it would be better, I agree. But I do have to say that the permissions from the Congregation do not take a long time. I am not sure where the problem is. I give you this advice, when you send something to the Congregation, please send it through certified mail. We try to answer those things that are most important in a month. If you see that it is taking a lot of time, I ask you to send me another copy of the petition by fax.

*How can the contemplative life respond to the Holy Father's request to "go out to the peripheries" and embrace a missionary spirit, knowing that St. Therese of Lisieux is the patron of missions?*

Taking the example of St. Therese, the first manner in which a contemplative can be missionary is prayer. You need to have present in your prayers the needs of the Church, but also of those of the world. I can assure you that the Holy Father, as he is working on the Apostolic Constitution, has reflected carefully on how contemplatives are to respond to the needs of society today. You will find a section in the Constitution referring to this. He will exhort you to be very sensitive to the needs of others through your prayer.

Secondly, monasteries should be schools of prayer, schools that foster the search for God. All those who come to your monasteries should leave feeling blessed by their visit and not saying "oh, the poor nuns!" You have to form the consciences of others. This is the importance of the prayer groups which monasteries should foster: i.e. liturgical groups, groups for the prayerful reading of the Word of God, and which you should advise. It is not necessary for you to leave the monastery to do this. Yet, your monastery will become a monastery that reaches out to others.

Also, allowing oneself to bear a part of the challenges that the world faces today, which means it is necessary for you to be aware of them. When I was a novice master, every year I would take the novices to spend a week at the Cistercian monastery in my area of Spain. Why did I take them? In order to see if perhaps they had a vocation to the monastic life. But mostly to teach them how to pray. I would find that just having long conferences with them about prayer was not enough. After being at the monastery a week, during which the novices would see how the monks prayed, they began to have a different experience and practice in their own prayer. One thing I liked very much about the monks was to see how, during community prayers, the monks were always interceding for the various needs of the Church, (even of things I myself was not aware of!). This was a community that was open to the world.

Lastly, you know that the Holy Father has asked that we use some of the extra space we have in our monasteries to help those in need or for some charitable work. This should be so, even if the nuns themselves do not do the work directly, but have some lay person involved. The monasteries can also help the poor churches. Don't do as we friars often do. When a parish cannot sustain itself economically, our first thought is to close it, without thinking instead of the needs of the local church. And as many institutes are now having to re-structure the location of their convents, they often abandon the poor churches and instead head to the larger cities. For me it is important that monasteries be a special place where those people who are in need of spiritual support may find it. Many times, they may not be able to give bread to the hungry, but they can give them Jesus. This is the greatest hunger there is.

*How do we tell a sister in initial formation that she can no longer continue or that she has to prolong her formation?*

Do it with clarity and with charity. But it must be done. She must be told. What you cannot do is wait until it is almost time for her solemn profession and then tell her she cannot continue. She would be justified at that moment if she were upset and hurt with the community for not having said something before. This is why it is so important to accompany a vocation.

*What can you tell a person in formation who is concerned that the formation program they are following is somewhat "pre-Vatican II" in its content and methods and yet, who wants to continue in the community but with a program that is more up to date?*

I don't like to speak of pre-Vatican II or post-Vatican II. Simply, we must form our young people according to the directives of the Church today. In the contemplative life, we must be very careful when nothing moves, when nothing changes. Formation has to be up-to-date, not modern. We are not seeking to make our founders and foundresses modern, but we must have communities that are up-dated, that is, that they are capable of speaking to persons today. I ask you to be open, to be actualized. Realize that the young people today are not the same as those who entered years before.

*What tools can you suggest for offering a good pedagogy of formation to our sisters in formation, leading them to the love of Jesus?*

I believe it is necessary that there be formation for formators. I know that this is a sore wound to pick at, but I can tell you that there are many monasteries that do not have the capacity for formation. They are thus sacrificing these young vocations that come to them. This is one of the reasons why I feel so strongly about federations. The federations should feel responsible for forming the communities, and at the same time, they can prepare a group of formators. If there is a community that does not have the capability of providing formation, why not send them to another community where she can receive adequate formation? The important thing is that she be well-formed. I know that there is a strong tendency towards distrusting this practice. First, because some think: "I am the only one who can form well; no one else can." Second, because there is the fear that if we send the young woman to another monastery, she may want to stay there. Yet, if this does happen, well what can be done? The important thing is that now we have a new vocation and that she is well-formed. But to sacrifice her formation, this cannot be. All of this will be found in the new document. We must understand that it is important to form in the charism and not "for my monastery".

*What advice can you give to novices so that they will take advantage of their time of formation?*

Seek God. Be in the monastery because you are seeking God. Be open with your formators, but do not look towards them for they are simply instruments.

*How do we offer a more attractive encounter with contemplative life but without losing the essentials?*

By living in the essentials. The essential elements are: fraternal life, work, prayer, liturgy, sacraments, *lectio divina*. And all of this must be lived in joy, giving to others the presence of Jesus.

*With aging communities and lack of vocations, what can we do to provide for on-going formation?*

First, let me say that I am aware that there are structures that are already obsolete. Often I see in some monasteries that I am familiar with, how the nuns live simply to keep the monastery clean. It is so large and there are so few sisters or they are sick or elderly, that it is impossible for them to care for it. Choose a particular wing of the monastery that is adequate to your needs, for I understand the need for space in the contemplative life and leave the rest for the use of the local Church. It is a scandal to find enormous monasteries with only four sisters living there.

On-going formation must not be understood as going to a university nor as reading a lot of books. On-going formation is also washing the dishes. It is everything that can help us have a transformation of heart. I am not saying by this that one should not go to formation courses. This is the actualization of formation and it is also helpful. But I am speaking of on-going formation as a whole. You should be studying something, of course. I have a dream, though I do not know if it will ever become a reality. It is that the Congregation offer formation courses on-line or through distance learning, with exams and diplomas. So that the Sisters can be actualized in theology, pastoral theology, etc. Then they, in turn, can form others within their communities or give them retreats.

*Is it valid to accept a young person who has left another monastery and have her skip a process of formation because of her years?*

Before anything else, I would be very careful in accepting Sisters from another monastery. With the thirst that you have for vocations you sometimes don't see that when a Sister leaves a monastery it has to be for a reason. And then, instead of lessening their time of formation, you should prolong a time of trial. This way you can see why she left.

*When a young woman comes to the monastery and asks for a live-in experience what is a good process?*

You need to see if the young woman has a foundation for making such an experience. There are many who want to make this experience moved more out of curiosity than anything else. And then they want to publicize what they have seen inside. I think you must respect each particular stage and before you invite her in, you should already have a certain degree of assurance that there is truly a possible vocation. Do not however, shorten any of the stages. Of course, there is no set time frame. It depends on each person. Adapt yourselves according to the individual needs of each person.

*Can you speak about the difference in the types of cloisters?*

Papal enclosure is strict enclosure so that one is able to go out only out of necessity. It excludes having direct apostolates. Constitutional enclosure is regulated by the Constitutions. For example, all Poor Clare monasteries have papal enclosure (except perhaps the Capuchins and others). They all have a vow of enclosure, even though this does not appear in the Rule. This vow came later in its history. But today, all Poor Clares have this vow. Nonetheless, I have seen the Poor Clares go out of the enclosure. In reality, abbesses and prioresses have more authority over the enclosure than many realize and for which they are responsible. The monastic enclosure is similar to the constitutional enclosure. Here, enclosure is not so strict.

*What is the meaning of sui juris?*

It means you are a self-governing monastery in that the prioress of the monastery is a major superior whose only immediate superior is the Holy Father and the Holy See (the Congregation). The bishops are not your major superiors.

*Is it grave for a nun to visit her family?*

Religious have made a serious option of life. In conscience, you have to decide about a visit, of course, with the approval of your superior. And if the visit is an extended one, then you must have the permission of the Congregation. Each situation is so different. Especially when a nun is an only child and the parents are elderly and sick. This is why formation is so important.

*How does one understand being a family with the male institute.*

You can take St. Clare as an example. She promised obedience to St. Francis. This has to mean something. She did not consider herself a foundress, but him alone. And he promised to care for the nuns in the same way that he would for the friars. There is a complementary aspect to this. We have to grow in awareness of being a charismatic family and to live communion respecting the differences. One difference, for example, is that the friars are men and the nuns are women. Another is that the friars exist for direct evangelization and the nuns for evangelization from their cloister. Yet, these differences do not erase that there exists a complementariness between the two.

In conclusion, I just want to mention that I am writing a book entitled: *Questions on the Consecrated Life*. Hopefully it will be published in the coming months.