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**LETTER FROM FATHER GENERAL TO THE DISCALCED CARMELITES NUNS  
ON THE IMPLEMENTING INSTRUCTION *COR ORANS***

Rome, July 16, 2018  
Our Lady of Mount Carmel

Dearest Sisters in Carmel,

The awaited for Implementing Instruction of the Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* (VDQ) on Women's Contemplative Life was published last May 15. As you have already noted, it is an extensive and dense document that requires attentive study and assimilation, then put into practice. With the present letter, I wish to accompany you along the path of renewal that today the Church asks you to undertake, but indirectly also to us friars and to our whole Order.

Despite the apparent difference of style and language between the Constitution and the Instruction, it is important, first of all, to emphasize *the existing unity between the two documents*. The Instruction concentrates on four of the twelve aspects of women's contemplative life presented in VDQ: the autonomy of monasteries, the Federations, separation from the world, and formation. A new and detailed normative is given for each one of these, that in not a few points modifies what up to now was in force. What constitutes the unitary basis of the two documents is **the intention to realistically confront the present problems of women's contemplative life acknowledging to the nuns an active role in discernment and in assuming responsibility before them**. The path of renewal begun in 1950 with the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* that first sanctioned the juridical autonomy of each monastery of contemplative nuns and instituted the Federations of monasteries continues and is reinforced with two documents approved by Pope Francis. For this, very appropriately, the Instruction affirms that VDQ "did not intend to abrogate *Sponsa Christi Ecclesia* that was derogated only in some points. As a consequence, the two pontifical documents are to be held as normative in force for monasteries of nuns and must be read in a unitary vision." (CO, Intro.)

**Fundamental Formulation**

From a distance of almost seventy years from *Sponsa Christi*, it was necessary to restore the two innovations introduced by it, and thus the juridical status of monasteries (for each monastery is *sui juris* and the prioress is the major superior) and the competencies attributed to the Federations and

Associations of monasteries,<sup>1</sup> with the aim to integrate them and give them full development. In fact, experience has shown the limits and the potential of both. Juridical autonomy, which in itself is the juridical condition of a contemplative community in good health, can become an obstacle and a danger when it is used as a means of closing itself off from relations with other monasteries and with the ecclesial bodies called upon to watch over the community. As for the Federations, they also constitute a valuable tool for the life of the monasteries, a stimulus for their maturation, an aid in discernment and in solutions to problems. Nevertheless (apart from the not inconsiderable number of monasteries of our Order not yet federated),<sup>2</sup> it is not uncommon for weak or weakly motivated Federations not to take advantage of the opportunities offered by this structure of communion and even to consider it a useless and burdensome complication. In part, this weakness was also due to the almost total absence of juridical obligations linked to the fact of belonging to a Federation.

In short, the risk that has been observed is that a contemplative monastery will isolate and close in on itself, especially in situations and aspects in which it would be more urgent and necessary to have an objective look and the fraternal accompaniment of persons outside the reality of the monastery. The fact of depending juridically only on the Holy See inevitably determines a void of immediate points of reference, which are really effective. In this void, often aggravated by insufficient formation, there are risks of drift which can compromise the authentic identity and witness of a contemplative community.

If this was the most serious risk to which the previous regulations exposed, it is clear that the most important novelty introduced by CO concerns precisely the Federations, whose role is decidedly reaffirmed and strengthened. Although the juridical status of the Federations has not changed, they remain what they were, namely “structures of communion between monasteries that share the same charism so that they do not remain isolated” (VDQ 30; cf. CO 86); nevertheless, the extension of the competencies of the President and the Council of the Federation means that these structures are configured as intermediate instances between the individual autonomous monastery and the Congregation. This change is not intended to call into question the juridical autonomy of the individual monastery, which is also reaffirmed. What the Apostolic Constitution and the Instruction aim at is a relocation of the individual monastery in a context of relationships between several monasteries in order to develop the ecclesial and communal dimension of the contemplative communities.<sup>3</sup> To use an image, we could say that the vertical dependence of the monastery on the direct superior and on the Holy See is enriched and balanced by the horizontal belonging to a “community of monasteries” which share, each with its own specific modalities, the same charism.

For my part, I observe that this vision of the contemplative community as a member of a larger body, part of a family and a subject co-responsible for the same mission in the Church, is in full harmony with the will of our Mother St. Teresa. I will limit myself to quoting n. 103 of your *Constitutions*:

*The communities, founded on Christian fraternity, should not turn in upon themselves. On the contrary, in the spirit of Holy Mother, the monasteries will be sure to take practical steps to foster communion with one another and the rest of the Order. All the brothers and sisters of the Teresian Carmel belong to one single family of the Virgin Mary. By virtue of their union in charity, they will help one another by*

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<sup>1</sup> From now on, following the Instruction, I will only use the term “Federations,” meaning also Associations (cfr. the final instruction, n. 2).

<sup>2</sup> According to recent statistics, 717 monasteries follow the 1991 Constitutions, 553 (77%) of whom are federated, and 164, (23%) are non-federated.

<sup>3</sup> Cfr. CO 86: “...so that the monasteries which share the same charism do not remain isolated but keep it faithfully and, each giving each other mutual fraternal help, live the indispensable value of communion.”

*their prayers, by their example, and by mutual collaboration. In this practical way, all will work together for the good of the Church and of the Order.*

The importance, not only spiritual, but also “structural” of these statements appears today clearer in the light of the new pontifical documents. The text of the Constitutions also refers to what Saint Teresa herself wrote to her daughters of the monastery of Valladolid in a letter dated May 31, 1579: “*This is why we all wear the same habit, that we might help one another, for what belongs to one belongs to all. And she who gives all she can gives a great deal.*”<sup>4</sup>

In Teresa’s vision there is clearly a basic unity, the visible sign of which is the habit, but also a particular “style of fraternity” (F 13:5) which comes first and goes beyond the diversity and autonomy of the individual houses. This is also why Teresa wanted the fundamental unity of the Order from the spiritual and juridical point of view to be represented and guaranteed by the figure of a head of the family (MV 4), who has “the task of promoting their unity in fidelity to the contemplative-ecclesial ideal established by Saint Teresa of Jesus, and of fostering communion among all the monasteries and with the rest of the Order” (C 200). It must be honestly said that this aspect, that is, the unity between the female and male branches of the same religious family, is not developed by the new Instruction, which nevertheless reiterates what has already been affirmed by VDQ art. 9 § 4: “The juridical association of monasteries of nuns with the corresponding male order must be favored, as far as possible, in order to protect the identity of the charismatic family.” (CO 79) Of course, the fact that a theme is not developed does not mean that it is excluded or ignored. It seems reasonable to me that the forms of communion and collaboration between the two branches of a religious Order should be more adequately addressed within the same charismatic family rather than in a document addressed to all contemplative nuns indiscriminately.<sup>5</sup>

I would now like to go into a little more detail on some points in the Instruction that introduce important changes in the legislation and practice to date followed by the Discalced Carmelite nuns in the four areas dealt with by *Cor Orans*. I will not follow the order of the chapters in the Instruction, but I will try to proceed according to what seems to me to be the logical scheme of priorities.

## 2. The Federation

I will start from the Federation, because it is here that most of the innovations introduced by the VDQ and CO are concentrated. First of all, belonging to a Federation, until now free on the basis of *Sponsa Christi*,<sup>6</sup> is now made obligatory for all monasteries (VDQ art. 9 § 1; CO 93), except in special

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<sup>4</sup> “Por eso traemos todas un hábito, porque nos ayudamos unos a otros, pues lo que es de uno es de todos, y harto da el que da todo cuanto puede.”

<sup>5</sup> Cfr. CO 78: “As regards the monasteries of juridically associated nuns, the scope and modalities for carrying out the service of vigilance by the religious Ordinary are established in their own Constitutions, approved by the Holy See, in which must be defined the rights and duties of the associate Superior and of the associated female monasteries, according to their own spirituality and traditions.”

<sup>6</sup> *Sponsa Christi*, art. VII § 2, 2nd: “The federations, although not imposed by general rule, are nevertheless highly recommended by the Apostolic See, not only to remove the evils and inconveniences that can arise from complete separation, but also to promote regular observance and contemplative life” (*Enchiridion della Vita Consacrata* [EVC], 2272). It must be said that the subsequent *Inter Praeclara Instruction of Application* already provided for the mandatory nature of the Federation in some particular cases: “Even if federations are not normally imposed, however, the reasons for which they are generally recommended may in some particular cases be so urgent that they are considered by the Sacred Congregation to be all necessary” (IP XVII, EVC 2301).

cases of dispensation reserved for the Holy See. This means that the experience of almost seventy years has shown that this instrument is indeed of great importance in helping the nuns to live their contemplative vocation, to the point of making them understand that it cannot be left out of consideration.

For a considerable number of monasteries of our Order that are not yet federated, this decision by the Holy Father entails a new commitment to be welcomed with docility, humility and confident abandonment to Mother Church which characterizes the daughters of St. Teresa. Like all new things, at the beginning it will cost effort and raise doubts, fears and questions, but I am sure that in the end all this will be considered as the necessary labor for the birth of a new reality, bringing life, communion, and strength (cf. Jn. 16:21). The labor of change, moreover, is not spared even to the already existing Federations, since the Instruction gives to this institution a far wider scope and relevance than in the past. For all the nuns, therefore, "it is time to walk", to undertake with energy and hope this new stage in their history with the will to learn and to be formed. I invite you, therefore, to accept the new orientations with heart and mind free from prejudices as faithful disciples who let themselves be instructed by the Magisterium of the Church and not who judge it before they have even understood it.<sup>7</sup> It is clear that what is required of us is not a formal and external act of obedience, which does at least what is ordered, but an attitude of authentic "*docibility*", that is, a readiness to learn from the teaching of the Church. All those who have worked in the service of formation know the great difference between obeying by force and not contradicting authority and obeying with trust in the formator, as in the person whom the Lord has placed beside us to make us grow humanly and spiritually.

This is not the appropriate place to examine all the norms present in the Instruction, which are, moreover, formulated in a fairly clear and precise way (which, obviously, does not exclude that in practical application, doubts or situations not explicitly dealt with in the text may arise). I shall confine myself to a few more general remarks.

### *2.1 The Federation in itself*

Neither the Instruction nor previous documents specify the minimum number of monasteries required to form a Federation. It should be noted, however, that the structure of the Federation includes a president and a Federal Council composed of four councilors (CO 123), a Federal Treasurer (CO 142), a Federal Secretary (CO 144), a task that can also be entrusted to one of the councilors, and a Federal Formator (CO 148). Such an organization requires a large group of monasteries, which in my opinion, should normally not be less than 6/7. In some way, what is said about the individual community applies to the Federation, namely that in order to function well in its various articulations, it must be composed of a sufficient number of members. Currently, the vast majority of the Federations range from a minimum of 7/8 monasteries to a maximum of 15/16.

Normally, the Federations are established on a geographical basis, also taking into account the affinity of spirit and traditions of the monasteries. This principle has been appropriately reaffirmed by CO in n. 87.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Const. mon. ocd, n. 45: "As true "daughters of the Church" the Discalced Carmelite Nuns will willingly receive everything that the Church proposes to them through the Magisterium and legitimate authority because they are obliged to obey the Supreme Pontiff as their highest Superior, because they are also obliged to do so by the holy bond of obedience."

<sup>8</sup> "The Federation is made up of several autonomous monasteries that have affinity of spirit and traditions and even if they are not necessarily configured according to geographical criterion, as far as possible, they must not be geographically too distant."

Each Federation is erected by the Holy See (CO 86) and is governed by its own Statutes which must be approved by the Holy See. The Statutes must be in conformity, not only with what is established in the Instruction, but also “with the nature, laws, spirit and traditions of the Institute to which they belong” (CO 91). This important clarification<sup>9</sup> leaves room for a certain plurality of forms of Federation among Institutes of Contemplative Life, on the basis of the charismatic diversity that distinguishes them. As far as Discalced Carmelite Nuns are concerned, although the criteria or methods proper to our charism for Federations have not yet been explicitly and formally defined, we do have a reasonable patrimony of life experience of Federations which can and must be put to use when drafting Statutes.<sup>10</sup>

The Federation, besides being a moral person of pontifical right,<sup>11</sup> must seek “juridical recognition also in the civil sphere and places its juridical See in one of the monasteries belonging to it” (CO 94). Indeed, juridical personality and civil recognition are important since the Federation has the faculty “to acquire, possess, administer and dispose of temporal, movable and immovable goods, which are ecclesiastical assets” (CO 97). Until now, the Federations had a modest fund, generally financed by contributions from their member monasteries. CO n. 102 mentions another possible source of income for this fund, namely “income deriving from the alienation of the assets of suppressed monasteries, as established by the present Instruction”, especially in the case of completely extinct monasteries (CO 109). In fact, in n. 73, the Instruction states that “in the event of the suppression of a totally extinct monastery, when there are no surviving nuns, unless otherwise provided by the Holy See, the destination of the suppressed monastery’s assets, in compliance with canon and civil law, go to the respective higher juridical person, that is, to the Federation of Monasteries or to another structure of communion among the monasteries equal to it.” In this regard, the Instruction (nos. 52 and 108), in derogation from can. 638 § 4, no longer expects the need for the consent of the Bishop for the validity of the alienation or any other act from which the patrimonial situation of the monastery could suffer damage.<sup>12</sup> In the case of disposals of suppressed monasteries carried out by the Federal President and the Council, there is a need “always and solely for the written permission of the Holy See.” (CO 108)

Although, since *Sponsa Christi*, it has been the task of the Federations to promote mutual aid, including financial aid between monasteries, it seems clear that the new Instruction aims at greater communication of goods among the member monasteries, also through the establishment of the Federal treasury. The latter, in fact, is not only aimed at covering the ordinary expenses of the Federation itself, but also —according to CO 101— “to support the necessities of the subsistence and health of the nuns and to maintain the buildings and to support the new foundations.”<sup>13</sup> It is also clear from this that the scope of the responsibilities and tasks entrusted to the Federation has been extended.

## 2.2 The Federal President

*Cor Orans* reiterates that the Federal President, elected by the Federal Assembly for a period of six years, “is not a major superior” (n. 110). However, it is true that she has been assigned some tasks

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<sup>9</sup> In reality, this was already present in *Sponsa Christi*, art. VII, 8,1 (EVC 2278).

<sup>10</sup> Let me give you an example. The Instruction does not establish any incompatibility between the office of Federal President and that of Prioress. However, given the importance of the role of the Prioress in the Carmelite-Teresian community, it would certainly be preferable if the two positions were separated.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Norms The Federation of the Congregation for religious of 1974, n. 1 (EVC 4936).

<sup>12</sup> Therefore, n. 253 of the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns has also been modified.

<sup>13</sup> Note the consonance with what St. Mother Teresa wrote to the nuns of Valladolid in the above mentioned letter.

which until now were proper to Major Superiors, first of all, the canonical visitation<sup>14</sup> to the communities belonging to the Federation. With an exception approved by the Holy Father, it is now established that the canonical visitation will be carried out by the so-called “Regular” Visitor (be it the Superior of the monastery, if this is the bishop, or the religious superior), accompanied by the Federal President as Co-Visitor: “The Federation President, within the established time, accompanies the Regular Visitor in the canonical visit to the federated monasteries as a co-visitor” (CO 111). The frequency of the visit is not determined (“in the established time”), but according to the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns it must take place “at least once in the three-year period.”<sup>15</sup> The term “co-visitor” might suggest a subsidiary and auxiliary role. In reality, this is not the case. On the contrary, n. 115 of the CO states that, at the end of the canonical visit and after consulting the Federal Council (CO 125), the Federal President has two very delicate tasks, namely to indicate “in writing to the Major Superior of the monastery the best solutions to the cases and situations that emerged during the visit,” and from this “informs the Holy See”.

In addition, according to CO 113, the President can visit monastery communities “whenever need requires it”, accompanied by a councilor and the Federation’s Treasurer. This visit, in so far as it is distinct from the maternal and sisterly visits mentioned in n. 114, would also seem to be of a pastoral or canonical nature. The fact that the President is accompanied by a councilor and, above all, by the Federal Treasurer, clearly gives this visit the character of a review of the situation of the monastery, also from the administrative point of view. A particularly important aspect of the life of the monastery, which is entrusted to the vigilance of the President, concerns “the real possibilities that the monastery has or does not have of guaranteeing initial formation” (CO 117). Specifically on this point, “at the end of the visit [the President] will inform the Holy See” (ibid.).

The global evaluation of the real autonomy of life of a monastery, drawn from the visits mentioned above, also falls to the President, who must report the matter to the Holy See (cf. CO 121 and 43). Before deciding, the Holy See will listen to the President even in the particular case in which the Major Superior of the monastery denies a nun’s consent for passage to another monastery (CO 122).

Participation in formation courses organized by the Federation for formators and superiors is considered by the CO as an obligation that must be respected by the communities of the member monasteries. It is up to the President to require participation and, if it is found that a monastery has failed to do so, to refer the matter to the Holy See (cf. CO 118-119).

I understand that the concentration of so many tasks and responsibilities in a single person, and moreover a contemplative, for a rather long period (six years), may create fears and perplexities in you. Certainly, great human and spiritual maturity is required so that the management of so many complex and delicate situations does not disturb your peace of heart or cause you to lose your roots in your fundamental relationship with the Lord. All of you, however, will remember what our Mother Saint Teresa wrote in Chapter Five of the *Foundations*: it is not external tranquility or an escape from responsibility that leads us to true contemplation, but obedience to God’s will: “But love has this strength if it is perfect, we forget about pleasing ourselves in order to please the one we love.” (F 5, 10). Everything depends on how we live out the responsibilities that obedience entrusts to us. If we take them as opportunities to offer ourselves out of love for our brothers and sisters, they will not harm or distract us from the goal of our vocation, which is union with God. On the contrary, we will find God precisely in the performance of our labors and at times risky orders: “Here, my daughters, is where love will be

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. CJC 628 §2, 1: “It is the right and duty of the diocesan Bishop to visit the monasteries *sui iuris*, mentioned in can. 615, also with regard to religious discipline”.

<sup>15</sup> *Cost. mon. ocd*, 244-245.

seen: not hidden in corners but in the midst of occasions of falling. And believe me that even though there may be more faults, and even some slight losses, our gain will be incomparably greater.” (F 5. 15).

### 2.3 The Council and other Federal Offices

The President of the Federation, in the exercise of her functions, is assisted by a Council composed of four councilors elected by the Federal Assembly, who must be solemnly professed (other possible requisites for the election may be specified in the Statutes, with regard to age, seniority of profession or compatibility with other offices). This means that the governing structure of the Federation is not collegial. The President leads the Federation with the help of the Council. For some decisions the President needs the consent of the Council,<sup>16</sup> for others—as specified in paragraphs 125-126, 128—she must listen to their opinion.

Regarding finances, however, the wording used by CO suggests collegial management: “The Federation’s finances are managed by the Federal Council, presided over by the Federal President, who makes use of the collaboration of the Federal Financial Administrator.” (CO 103). In any case, “for expenses and acts of extraordinary administration, the authorization of the Federal Council and the Federal Assembly is required, according to the value of the sum established in the proper law.” (CO 105). Similarly, for the validity of the sale or any other transaction that may damage the finances of the Federation, the authorization of the Council or the Federal Assembly is necessary. (CO 107).

In addition to the Council, the Instruction provides that the structure of the Federation also includes the following offices:

1) The Federal Treasurer, who is elected by the Federal Assembly for six years (CO 142-143). This is a particularly important office, both in terms of the administration of the Federal Treasury and in terms of the supervision and support of the communities in the management of their assets. It assumes that the Bursar is a religious in solemn vows of the same Institute, even if this is not explicitly stated. However, it is necessary to keep in mind what is affirmed in the recent document of the Congregation on Economics, that is that “the growing complexity of economic-administrative situations often makes it indispensable to have recourse to *collaboration with external professionals*.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, the experience of some Federations shows how necessary this collaboration is after careful discernment of the people and the ways in which it takes place.

2) The Federal Secretary, who is appointed by the Federal President for six years (CO 144). This office may also be performed by one of the Federal councilors. It is required, “as far as possible”, that she reside in the monastery indicated as the juridical seat of the Federation, which must also house the archives of the Federation (CO 145). The Federal Secretary fulfills the functions as archivist of the Federation and secretary of the Federal Council.

3) The Federal Formator is appointed *ad nutum* by the Federal President with the consent of the Council (CO 148). In n. 129 the task of the Formator is described, saying that she “carries out and

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<sup>16</sup> The Council’s consent is required for the selection (and removal) of the Federal Formator (CO 129, 148), for granting the second and third year of exclaustation, and for the request of its possible extension (CO 130-31, 178), for the convening of the Extraordinary Federal Assembly (CO 137). In the case of the foundation of a monastery by the Federation, the consent of the Council is required for the admission of candidates to novitiate, temporary profession and solemn profession (CO 35); and for the decision to erect the foundation in a monastery *sui juris* (CO 39). In the case of a monastery affiliated to the Federation, the consent of the Council is required for the appointment of the local superior of the monastery (CO 59) and for the admission of candidates to the various stages of formation (CO 61).

<sup>17</sup> CIVCSVA, *Economy at the Service of the Charism and Mission*, n. 66.

coordinates initial formation in common”, referring to VDQ art. 3 § 7, which allows for the creation of “houses of initial formation common to various monasteries” in order to ensure quality formation. Certainly, one of the aims of the Federation is to guarantee “assistance in initial formation” (CO 92). This assistance is particularly concretized in the Federal Assembly’s decision to choose a monastery as a place of initial formation (CO 141 h). However, the actual use of a common formation site seems to respond to situations of particular lacks and weakness, that is, when the canonical visit shows that there are monasteries incapable of adequately providing for this task with their own strength (CO 259).

4) The Religious Assistant, whose appointment “is reserved to the Holy See, but the Federation has the faculty to present candidates.” (CO 152) As you know, the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* had provided the figure of the religious Assistant of the Federation, but it had not obligatorily imposed it on the Federations.<sup>18</sup> Only recently, the Congregation, with a decree approved on September 8, 2012, proposed again the figure of the Religious Assistant in the sense envisaged by *Sponsa Christi*, and introducing a new procedure of appointment by the Holy See. Federations were invited to update their Statutes according to this decree, but it was not explicitly stated that each Federation was obliged to have an Assistant. The Constitution VDQ, which would have had the authority to modify the norms of the previous Apostolic Constitution, ignored this question. The Instruction, even though it deals extensively with the Assistant, does not explicitly state whether or not this figure is compulsory. It is clear that it is assumed that the Federations have a Religious Assistant, but it is not formally required that the Federations that do not have one have to fill this gap (unless required by CICLSAL in approving the revision of their Statutes).

With regard to the duties of the Assistant, it reaffirms what *Sponsa Christi* already stated, namely that he will promote “the preservation of the genuine spirit of the Institute” and that he will help the President in the running of the Federation “particularly in formation at the federal level and in the solving financial problems of greater importance” (CO 151). I would like to point out that with regard to the latter aspect, since the Assistant must necessarily be a presbyter, his competence in financial matters is not taken for granted. Since the Assistant is appointed *ad nutum Sanctae Sedis* (CO 153), the mandate is indefinite, until the Holy See deems it appropriate to appoint another. The Assistant is required to present a brief report to the Congregation each year “on his work, on the progress of the Federation, reporting any particular situations” (CO 155). Only at the end of his term of office should he send a more detailed report on the state of the Federation.

### 3. The Monastery

A second set of normative indications of the Instruction has to do with the canonical condition of the individual monastery, as a juridically autonomous community. Trying to summarize and systematize the somewhat detailed text of CO, I will concentrate on two points that I consider fundamental: the notion of autonomy and its management within the community.

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<sup>18</sup> *Sponsa Christi* art. VII § 7: “The Holy See can, according to the circumstances, exercise immediate vigilance and authority over the federation through a religious assistant, whose office will be not only to represent the Holy See, but also to promote the preservation of the genuine spirit proper to the Order and to help with the work and with the advice of the superiors in the right and prudent government of the federation” (EVC 2277). See also *Inter praeclara* XXV (EVC 2309).



### 3.1 The concept of autonomy

N. 15 of CO clearly and exhaustively defines what is meant by an autonomous monastery or *sui juris*:

*The monastery sui juris is a religious house which enjoys legal autonomy: its superior is a Major Superior, its community is permanently established for the number and quality of the members; by the law it is the place of the novitiate and of formation, is considered a public juridical person and its assets are ecclesiastical goods.*

As can already be seen from the analysis of this dense paragraph, the notion of autonomy entails, on the one hand, the faculty to exercise autonomously a series of tasks (governing, training, administering), and, on the other hand, the need to satisfy a series of requirements (number and quality of members). Faculties are granted because the community is capable of fulfilling certain conditions. The Instruction, first of all, calls for a correct and balanced notion of autonomy, which takes into account two aspects: that of the faculties granted and that of the conditions under which one can enjoy those faculties. The canonical condition of autonomy is neither an ontological datum nor an irrevocable privilege, but a historical condition which is reached through a path of growth and which unfortunately can be lost as a result of a process of quantitative and/or qualitative decline. In this respect, the most important contribution of the Instruction is to have developed the notion of autonomy, considering it not only in its abstract juridical definition, but also in its concrete ascending and descending parabola.

The ascending parabola, namely the path of growth towards autonomy, is presented in the paragraphs dedicated to the foundation of the monastery (CO 20-38) and to the canonical erection (CO 39-53). The most important innovations with regard to these two phases are the following:

- The minimum number of nuns necessary to begin a new foundation is specified: 5 nuns, of whom at least 3 are solemnly professed (CO 29).
- The new foundation will be led by a local superior, whose appointment is the responsibility of the Prioress of the founding monastery or the Federal President in the case of a foundation built by the Federation.<sup>19</sup>
- In order that the new foundation may also be the place of the novitiate, there must be at least 5 solemnly professed nuns (CO 33).
- The period of time between the start of the foundation and the canonical erection may not exceed 15 years (CO 38).
- For the canonical erection, it is required that the community be composed of at least 8 nuns in solemn vows, provided that the majority is not of advanced age (CO 39 a).<sup>20</sup>

According to the Instruction, to request the authorization of the Holy See for a new foundation or for a canonical erection, it is sufficient to present the written consent of the diocesan bishop (CO 29, 83 c). However, I recall that, according to the law of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, the beginning of a new foundation also requires the consent of the General Superior of the Order (Const. 204), while the canonical erection requires the consent of the General Superior in the case of monasteries under the

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<sup>19</sup> The Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, n. 207, provides that the local superior, referred to as Vicarress, can be appointed by the Superior of the monastery (Bishop or religious superior.)

<sup>20</sup> The Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, n. 205, indicates 8 nuns, of whom 6 are chapter members.

supervision of the Order, or his opinion in the case of monasteries under the supervision of the diocesan bishop (Const. 206). These provisions, which are not contrary to the Instruction, must not be abrogated.

In this regard, point 76 of CO, which excludes the so-called double dependence of a monastery on two distinct juridical authorities, must also be well understood. This exclusion applies, as the same number explains, to “simultaneous and cumulative” dependence on the diocesan bishop and the regular superior. The Instruction does not, however, deal with the role of the General Superior, which is an expression of the unity of the Order as “a united religious family in the Church” composed of nuns and friars (Const. 199). This is a charismatic element of its own which goes back to the explicit will of Saint Teresa (cf. Const. 200, 241-246), to be kept in mind in the application of the Instruction to the life of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns.

The descending parabola, that is the possible loss of the conditions necessary to enjoy juridical autonomy, is dealt with in nos. 43, 45, 54-64 and 67-73 of the Instruction. Quite synthetically, these are the points that seem to me to be the most important for understanding this section:

- First of all, the correspondence between the juridical autonomy and the vital autonomy of the monastery will have to be constantly verified by the Federal President (CO 43). This is probably the most “uncomfortable” point of the whole Instruction, both for the monastery that is placed under the President, as well as for the sister called upon to perform this unpleasant function. But it is precisely here that the connection between the monastery and the authority on which it depends, namely the Congregation, becomes concrete. This connection has so far been rather weak and ineffective, and this has allowed the creation of numerous situations in which autonomy was “merely asserted, but in reality very precarious or, in fact, non-existent” (CO 54). It was therefore necessary to find effective solutions, which the Apostolic Constitution and the subsequent Instruction identified in the federal structure and in the figure of the Federal President. This is why any exemption from the Federation requirement can only be exceptional and must be firmly justified (see CO 93).
- In the event that the President assesses that the conditions required for juridical autonomy no longer exist in a monastery, “she is obliged to inform the Holy See with a view of the nomination of an *ad hoc* Commission” (CO 43).
- “When the number of professed members of solemn vows falls to five, the community of the monastery loses the right to the election of the Superior.” (CO 45). The Instruction therefore specifies the “minimum number of sisters” that VDQ (art. 8, § 1) set as its first requirement for it to be possible to say that a monastery has a real autonomy of life. When the number of solemnly professed nuns drops to five (or fewer than five), the community loses the right to elect a Prioress and enters a phase of “attention” on the part of the Congregation, which must be duly informed of the situation by the Federal President. The Congregation authorizes the Superior of the monastery to appoint, after listening to the nuns, “an administrative superior”, and assesses whether it is necessary to establish an *ad hoc* Commission.
- The *ad hoc* commission, made up of the Ordinary (bishop or religious superior), the Federal President, the Federal Assistant and the Prioress of the monastery, is a consultative body that the Congregation can use, if it deems it appropriate, in cases in which the vital autonomy of the monastery is at risk (CO 56, 69).
- In concrete terms, when it is ascertained that the conditions for autonomy<sup>21</sup> no longer exist in a monastery, the possibility of affiliation to another monastery or to the Federation is envisaged.

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<sup>21</sup> The criteria for evaluation are indicated in n. 70 of CO: “the number of the nuns, the advanced age of the majority of the members, the real capacity for government and formation, lack of candidates for a number of years, lack of necessary vitality in living and transmitting the charism in dynamic fidelity.”

The affiliation serves to “evaluate whether the inability to manage the life of the autonomous monastery in all its dimensions is only temporary or irreversible, helping the community of the affiliated monastery to overcome difficulties or to put into place what is necessary to bring about the suppression of the monastery” (CO 55). This is an interim condition that ends with the restoration of juridical autonomy or the suppression of the monastery (cf. CO 67).

- If it is found that the situation of incapacity of the monastery is irreversible, “the solution, as painful as it is necessary, is the suppression of the monastery” (CO 67). One may ask oneself: why is the suppression of the monastery necessary? Can we not continue until the natural extinction of the community, which will continue to live its life within the limits of its possibilities, possibly with the help of external aid? Number 68 of CO refers to the capacity that every monastery must have “to express, according to the contemplative character and the aims of the Institute, the particular public witness to Christ and to the Church His Bride”. A monastery is a public reality, which belongs to the Order and the Church. The tendency to continue to the bitter end, even when the conditions necessary for fulfilling one’s ecclesial task no longer exist, derives from an erroneous understanding of the monastery as “private property”, which only nuns resident in it are authorized to dispose of. This privatization of the monastery leads to a deformation of the spirit and behavior that should characterize a contemplative religious community. For this reason, suppression is as painful as it is necessary for the good of the Church and of the nuns themselves.

### *3.2 Extension of faculties in the internal management of the community*

The extension of the faculties granted to the Federation, and particularly to the Federal President, as well as the greater attention paid to the real autonomy of life of the individual monasteries, must not lead one to think that the Instruction intends to reduce the juridical autonomy of the monasteries of contemplative life. It is not only repeated several times (CO 6, 15-17), but it is also strengthened. There are at least three areas in which the Instruction grants greater authority to the Prioress and Chapter of the community.

1) In the context of the administration of temporal goods, by way of derogation from the provisions of can. 638 § 4 (and from the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns in n. 253), the written license of the Ordinary of the place or of the Regular Superior is no longer necessary for the alienation of goods (sale or donation) or for other business which could result in damage to the patrimonial situation of the monastery (such as contracting debts or bank loans, granting mortgages, leases, etc.), unless the value of the business is such as to require the authorization of the Holy See (CO 52-53). From now on, the validity of such acts of extraordinary administration shall be determined by the written permission of the Superior with the consent of the Chapter<sup>22</sup> and the opinion of the Federal President.

2) With regard to the regulations on papal enclosure, what is established by canon 667 §3 is confirmed, that is, that the papal enclosure characterizes the monasteries of entirely contemplative life (CO 185).<sup>23</sup> However, a number of innovations are being introduced with respect to the legislation in force so far:

<sup>22</sup> CO speaks of the consent “of the Council and of the conventual chapter,” but based on n. 253 of the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, it is the Chapter that must give consent.

<sup>23</sup> The Instruction, approved by the Holy Father, returns to the traditional distinction between papal and constitutional cloister, bringing the so-called monastic cloister within the scope of forms of constitutional cloister (CO 211). Nor does it mention art. 10 of the VDQ and the possibility that a single monastery might ask the Holy See to

- Physical participation in events and ministries of the ecclesial community is excluded “ordinarily”, but may be permitted on particular occasions by the diocesan bishop or the religious Ordinary (CO 188 b).
- “It is the responsibility of the Conventual Chapter of the monastery to determine the modality of separation from the outside” (CO 166). It is no longer necessary, therefore, to submit these decisions for the approval of the Holy See, contrary to what was stated in the previous Instruction *Verbi Sponsa* (n. 11 c) and in the Constitutions ocd (n. 113). The modality of separation, however, must be “material and effective, not only symbolic or spiritual” (CO 166, 188 c).
- It is the responsibility of the Prioress “to allow a sister to perform the services of the extern sisters for a limited period of time” (CO 198). The Instruction specifies that this faculty applies where “the law does not provide for the presence of extern sisters”. It is true that the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns provide for the possibility of having extern sisters (n. 182). Since, however, in the vast majority of monasteries there are in fact neither extern nuns nor lay people who act as custodians, it would be appropriate, in my humble opinion, to extend this faculty to all monasteries, where nuns are obliged out of necessity to perform external services.
- As an exception to can. 667 § 4 (and *Verbi Sponsa* 17 § 2), neither the diocesan bishop nor the religious Ordinary (CO 174) intervene in the dispensation from the enclosure. “The dispensation from the cloister rests solely with the Major Superior who, in the event that such dispensation exceeds fifteen days, can grant it only after obtaining the consent of her Council” (CO 175).

3. Regarding the norms that regulate granting permission of a leave of absence and an indult of exclaustation:

- The Major Superior, in accordance with canon 665 § 1 (the application to cloistered nuns was excluded by *Verbi Sponsa* 17 § 2), “for just cause [...] with the consent of her Council, may authorize the absence from the monastery of a nun in solemn vows for not more than one year, after hearing the diocesan bishop or the competent religious Ordinary” (CO 176).
- The Major Superior may also grant, with the consent of the Council, an indult of exclaustation to a solemnly professed nun for not more than one year, after having heard the advice of the Ordinary (bishop or religious superior). The granting of the indult also requires the consent of the bishop of the diocese where the nun will dwell (CO 177). The indult may be extended for a further two years by the President of the Federation with the consent of her Council (CO 178-179).

#### 4. Formation

As many as 71 numbers, about a quarter of the entire Instruction, are dedicated to the path of formation in the contemplative life and develop the recommendations contained in VDQ 13-15 and Art. 3. The report is divided into four sections: after setting out a number of general principles, it deals with ongoing formation, the means by which it is implemented and the various stages of initial training. Finally, number 289, the last issue of the CO, announces the publications of further Orientations, useful for the formation of the superiors of monasteries, formators and finances, “following and completing this Instruction.”

The general principles take up themes already set out in other documents of the Magisterium, beginning with Consecrated Life: the continuous character of formation, which is reduced neither to the

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embrace a form of enclosure different from that in force in the Institute, which would legitimize “the plurality of ways of observing the enclosure within the same Order” (VDQ 31).

time of initial formation nor to the specific occasions of ongoing formation or updating (CO 223, 231); the need for personal and integral formation that embraces all the dimensions of the person, without forgetting the most elementary and basic ones (CO 224-228); the Christological orientation of the formative journey, which —by continuing and deepening the baptismal vocation— aims at the assimilation of the “sentiments of Christ” (CO 222).

In the section dedicated to ongoing formation, it is made clear that its purpose is not so much to broaden or update intellectual knowledge as “to nourish and preserve the fidelity, both of the individual nun and of the community [...] so that the consecrated person may fully express his or her gift in the Church, according to a specific charism” (CO 233). In other words, it is about caring for oneself and one’s vocation, without which one inevitably falls into *acedia* (lack of self-care), tiredness and lack of motivation. For this reason, the habitual locus of formation is daily life, made up of prayer and work, but above all of relationships with God, with the sisters within the community and with the outside world (CO 235). As Saint Teresa admonishes: “I am not beseeching you to do something new, my daughters, but only that we observe what we profess, to observe them is our vocation and obligation, although there are many degrees of observance.” (W. 4.1).<sup>24</sup> Teresa knows very well that one can be faithful outwardly to what is prescribed by the Rule and by the Constitutions, without this really transforming the being of the person. True fidelity is that which makes the fulfilment of duties the opportunity for continual growth and conversion, which descends ever more deeply, and this is precisely the best definition of ongoing formation.

Turning to the specific instruments for ongoing formation, the Instruction, following the example of the VDQ,<sup>25</sup> refers to the “plan of community life” (CO 232, 238, 170). Although it is not explained more precisely what such a plan consists of, it is clear that “it is not a simple community life schedule, but a community life and mission path [...] in order not to lose its dynamism, must be periodically verified, so that it can be adapted flexibly to the changing situations of the community.”<sup>26</sup> I believe that all the twelve aspects of the contemplative life dealt with in the *Vultum Dei quaerere* must be part of this project, so that the community can fraternally and collegially define its particular way of realizing them, in its own specific historical and geographical context. It is a way of awakening each member’s responsibility in building community, in their commitment to witness, and in their missionary tension. Routine can blur awareness of the values that lie behind daily acts and weaken generosity and creativity in performing them. The plan of community life, as well as a personal one, are tools that help to re-motivate our daily life, to not take for granted that what has always been done in a certain way, cannot be done differently, in a more attractive or more meaningful and effective way, and that we can begin to do something that has never been done, verifying, subsequently, the validity of experience. What is most important is that the life of a contemplative community is not an automatic mechanism, but the expression of a dynamic and searching fraternity. Collaboration between different monastic communities is also “highly recommended” (CO 241), since the exchange and sharing of other experiences enlightens and enriches us by providing stimuli and asking new questions, which protect us from the risk of becoming self-referential.

Regarding initial formation, the document first of all gives some general orientations on the articulation of the stages of formation and their duration (251-253), on the discernment of vocations, in

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<sup>24</sup> “Que no os pido cosa nueva, hijas mías, sino que guardemos nuestra profesión, pues es nuestro llamamiento y a lo que estamos obligadas, aunque de guardar a guardar va mucho.”

<sup>25</sup> VDQ art, 3,1; 6,1; 7, 2; 13

<sup>26</sup> J. Rodríguez Carballo, *Vultum Dei Quaerere: una opportunità per crescere nella fedeltà creative e responsabile*, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2017, p. 62.

particular those coming from other countries (254-257), and on the requirements for a monastery to be a house of initial formation (258-261). The duration of the initial training shall be fixed at a minimum of nine years and a maximum of 12 years (CO 253).<sup>27</sup> Broadly speaking, the outline of the stages of formation is as follows:

- One year of aspirancy (that can be extended to two years).
- One year of postulancy (extendable to two years).
- Two years of novitiate, the second of which is the canonical year.
- Five years of temporary vows (extendable according to can. 657 § 2, but “taking care that the initial formation does not exceed twelve years” CO 288).

Since, according to the first final provision, the Instruction “applies in the present [...] from the moment of its publication”, it follows that these norms also apply to candidates currently in formation, unless they have already reached the end of their formation journey (for example, they have already been approved for solemn profession).

As far as vocational discernment is concerned, the Instruction insists above all on its objectivity, speaking of a “serene discernment, free from the temptations of number and efficiency” (CO 254). If one allows oneself to be influenced in judgment by other interests and subjective criteria, other than the good of the person and the search for God’s will for her, one risks committing errors, which subsequently have serious repercussions on the person herself, on the community, and on the whole Institute. Each candidate must be known in depth and accompanied personally, paying attention to all the dimensions of the person. In the case of vocations coming from other countries, it is necessary to be aware of the greater commitment that cultural difference entails for adequate formation (and it is therefore more convenient that these vocations be accepted in solid and vital communities). However, the acceptance of them is encouraged, especially “with a view to spreading monastic life tomorrow in particular churches where this form of following Christ is not present” (CO 256). On the contrary, the practice of recruiting candidates from other countries “for the sole purpose of safeguarding the survival of the monastery” (CO 257) is decisively rejected.

## 5. Conclusions

I do not claim to have exhausted the material treated by *Cor Orans*. I have confined myself to the elements that I believe to be most essential. Moreover, only with time and experience will we be able to assimilate and adapt the new provisions to the life of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns. As I said at the beginning, it is a necessarily long and demanding journey, which we want to undertake with confidence and hope in the Good Shepherd who guides us along the roads of history.

The center of the Order, especially in the person of myself, the individual Definitors, and the Secretary for the nuns, is at your disposal to help you on this journey, as far as we can. I would like to note, in this regard, that the Instruction provides, among other things, for the possibility of setting up an international commission of nuns, which must be approved by the Holy See, “with the aim of encouraging the study of themes relating to the contemplative life in relation to its own charism” (CO 96). It may be

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<sup>27</sup> The Instruction refers to VDQ 15, where, however, it was said in a more nuanced way: “for initial formation and for that after temporary profession “a wide space of time must be reserved” [VC 65], as far as possible not less than nine years, nor more than twelve”.

that this is still too early for our Order (as was evident from the meeting with the nuns at the General Chapter of Avila), but it is nevertheless a possible instrument to keep in mind for the future.

A final question arises, which I cannot avoid answering, concerning the revision of your Constitutions. As you know, the Apostolic Constitution VDQ states in art. 14 § 2: "The articles of the Constitutions or Rules of the individual Institutes, once adapted to the new dispositions, will have to be submitted for the approval of the Holy See". Note that the text speaks not of the Constitutions in general, but of "articles of the Constitutions" that must be adapted to the new dispositions. At first glance, of the 256 articles that make up your Constitutions, only a small part will necessarily have to be revised.<sup>28</sup> For the moment, I think that the priority is to assimilate and put into practice the Instruction. Only at a later date will it be possible to proceed with the work of correcting and integrating the Constitutions on the basis of the procedure provided for in art. 17.

Dear sisters, we are all aware that the work that awaits us is demanding. Precisely for this reason we need to face it together, animated by the same Teresian spirit, by the same love for Christ and for the Church. We entrust ourselves to the protection of her who is the Beauty and Splendor of Carmel, to her intercession and guidance, so that our path of renewal may proceed safely on the path that the Church indicates to us.

Fraternally



*P. Saverio Cannistrà*

P. Saverio Cannistrà OCD

General Superior

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<sup>28</sup> In the appendix to this letter you will find a comparison table between the Constitutions and *Cor Orans*, in which I have marked the articles that need to be revised. I have not inserted the innovations of the Instruction which do not correspond in the Constitutions (affiliation, Federations, etc.).



Table of comparison between OCD Constitutions and *Cor orans*

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P. II	<b>Ch. 1 Discernment of Vocations and General Principles of Formation (nn. 131-134)</b>		<b>IV. Initial Formation (nn. 255-257, 262-268)</b>
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	<b>Ch. 2. The Internal Government of the Monasteries (nn. 223-240)</b>		
	n. 226	The right to elect the Prioress	n. 45
	<b>Ch. 3 Relations with the Superiors of the Order and with the Diocesan Bishop (nn. 241-246)</b>		<b>nn. 74-85</b>
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	<b>Ch. 4 The Administration of Temporal Goods</b>		<b>nn. 46-53</b>
	n. 253	Alienation, debts, etc.	nn. 52, 81 d