

THE CONSTITUTION *VULTUM DEI QUAERERE*
IN THE LIGHT OF THE TERESIAN CHARISM
Meeting with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the USA

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I.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE AND ENCLOSURE

Dearest Sisters and Brothers in the Lord Jesus and in Carmel,

As I am honoured to begin this Course on Formation, I would like, first of all, to say thank you, and I include Frs. Daniel and Raphael in this, for having invited us to share with you our reflections and experiences and to compare them with your own. The exceptional number of participants makes this meeting all the more significant and valuable. I honestly believe that I have never met so many sisters all together. The fact that you have wanted to be here in such numbers is an indication both of your affection for, and deference to, the Central Administration of our Order, as well as of your lively interest in the themes we are about to discuss. My joy at seeing this is tempered by a fear of not quite fulfilling your expectations which will be understandably so high. May the Spirit of the Risen Lord “straighten that which is crooked” and enlighten what is obscure in what I am about to share with you.

By way of giving a general title to this course, I would see it as an attempt to study the new Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (VDQ) in the light of our Carmelite-Teresian charism. It is by no means an easy task. First of all we have the variety and complexity of the subject matter of the Constitution. Then there is the additional difficulty that we still do not have an explanatory document defining and clarifying some of the declarations in it. For the moment we have often to rely on various hypotheses and interpretations which may be confirmed or denied in the practical Instruction that is now being prepared by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life.

We do not intend to directly deal with all the twelve headings that appear in the Constitution. As you are aware, the three of us have been assigned two themes each. Fr. Daniel will speak about Formation and Prayer (VDQ 13-18). Fr. Raphael will deal with the questions of the autonomy of monasteries, their inter-communion and, finally, Federations (VDQ 28-30). I myself will address the issue of enclosure or, better, the relationship between contemplative life and enclosure, as well

as the centrality of the Word of God (VDQ 31; 19-21). We will, obviously, touch on other themes indirectly. In my own case, for example, there will be inevitable references to questions such as silence (VDQ 33) and modern means of communication (VDQ 34).

1. *Women's contemplative life*

The first thing that we can note is that the subject matter of the Constitution is “women's contemplative life”. For some this might seem quite obvious, but, in reality, this is not the case. The pontifical document maintains continuity with former and, indeed, the very recent tradition of the Church, in reserving to female contemplative life a place and consideration, that differs, at least in some respects, from male contemplative life. However, especially in the monastic world, there are those who hold that distinctions between nuns and monks is past history and is the result of a view of women that no longer corresponds with today's culture and sensitivities. In this view, consideration of contemplative religious life should be re-formulated on the basis of its intrinsic characteristics which are common to both nuns and monks.

VDQ does not comment on the validity or otherwise of the distinction between male and female contemplative life but appears to accept automatically the traditional stance. Dating from the Instruction *Venite Seorsum* of 1969 the specific nature of female contemplative life is seen in relation to the following characteristics of the female “nature” itself:

- the spousality of a woman, as an expression of the mystery of the Church, the Spouse of Christ¹;
- female receptivity, signifying that a woman would be usually more open to receiving the Word than to proclaiming it in a missionary role²;
- her acute sensitivity to the needs of her neighbour³;
- finally, the Virgin Mary is presented as «a splendid model of the contemplative life», insofar as it was she who received the Word of God and conceived it «first in her mind before in her womb».

Successive documents, particularly *Vita Consecrata* (n. 59) and *Verbi Sponsa* (n. 4) simply repeat the same arguments. Similarly, the present Apostolic Constitution recognizes in female contemplative life «a sign and prophecy of the Church, virgin, spouse and mother» (n. 3). Reference to spousality is also repeated in the paragraph on enclosure, «which is the inner sanctum

¹ «These women, in fact, by their very nature, portray in a more meaningful way the mystery of the Church, the “spotless womb of the spotless Lamb”».

² «It is woman's role to receive the word rather than to carry it to the far ends of the earth, even though she can be summoned successfully to the latter vocation. It is her place to become thoroughly and intimately acquainted with the word and to render it fruitful, in a very clear, vivid and feminine way»

³ «For, in fact, once she has attained full maturity, woman intuitively more keenly the needs of others and the assistance which they hope for».

of the Church as spouse: “a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things” (VC 59) ». And obviously a reference to the Virgin Mary as a model of contemplation is also made again (n. 10).

The argument might stop here with the conclusion that VDQ does not present any change from preceding Magisterium on this point. But while this may be true on a theoretical and purely linguistic level, other factors would seem rather to point towards a transcendence of the distinction between male and female contemplative life. The first indicator of this is the decision not to confine the theme of female contemplative life merely to enclosure (and as a sub-ordinate to federations of monasteries), as was customary in the past. In the context of VDQ, enclosure and federations are only two of the twelve elements that are deemed essential for the life of contemplative nuns. It can be said that what is stated about the other ten themes (formation, silence, work, asceticism etc.) can apply equally to both women and men contemplatives (and, obviously, where the men are considered as monks and not as ordained ministers). In actual fact, I find it is virtually impossible to discover any affirmation in VDQ concerning the life of nuns which could not be re-formulated for men, as having the same value and significance for the lives of monks.

I must point out that the transcendence of this distinction I am talking about would not refer to the different ways of thinking, feeling and acting that occur automatically as a result of the distinct natures and temperaments or sensitivities of males and females. These are precious gifts to be respected and safeguarded zealously. We are speaking rather of an “equality” on a juridical level, following the principle established in the elaboration of the new right of religious, to «avoid, at a normative level, any discrimination whatsoever between male and female institutions»⁴. Such an equality between monks and nuns certainly has not existed before this. I can think, in particular, of the limited faculties granted to a Prioress. Although she is the equivalent of a Major Superior, directly dependent on the Holy See⁵, she cannot give permission, for example, to any of the nuns to be absent for more than one week, nor can she dispense from temporary vows. So, with regard to this point, I wonder if the next Instruction will include new regulations resulting in a closer correspondence between the definition of a monastery as being *sui iuris* and the Prioress as a Major Superior and the actual realistic powers granted to the Prioress and to the community chapter.

Another indication or sign from the Apostolic Constitution is its frequent reference to the responsibility of the nuns. In many cases – and in a particularly significant way with regard to enclosure – the Constitution invites monastic communities to assume an active role, to engage in careful discernment and, as a result, to make suitable decisions regarding their own actual

⁴ Cf. *Principia quae iuris Religiosorum recognitionem dirigant*, in “Communicationes”, 2 (1970), p. 176: «Praeter principia directiva supra exposita, aliud adiungi potest quod constanter in mente Consultorum fuit: **illud nempe vitandi quamlibet discriminationem in statuendis normis inter instituta perfectionis virorum et mulierum**».

⁵ Cf. CIC 613 par. 2.

situation⁶. The idea that «each monastery» must «examine, evaluate, decide» re-occurs constantly⁷. In a certain sense, this is one of the most important innovations of the Constitution: inviting the nuns themselves to make decisions regarding the most salient aspects of their life. This obviously presupposes sound and thorough initial and on-going formation, as well as constant contact with the life of the Church, with the charismatic family which it is part of, and with other monasteries, «to avoid “the disease of self-absorption” » (VDQ 29).

It would be anachronistic to ask ourselves what St. Teresa might say about this “equality” between nuns and monks. There is no doubt, however, that Teresa, in a prophetic manner considering the times she lived in, energetically defended the autonomy of the nuns against excessive interference from male religious and various prelates. It can be very enlightening to read her letters to Fr. Gratian especially. On quite a few occasions, Teresa repeats that she has every right to express her opinions regarding the nuns: «In what regards nuns I can have a say, for I have seen many things»⁸; «In matters concerning the nuns you can trust me, for from what is happening here I can see what is going on there»⁹. She is particularly opposed to the burdensome and useless impositions of Visitors who think «they haven't made a visitation unless they have set down some decrees»¹⁰. Teresa makes one observation precisely about one such Visitor's decision and it captures exactly what she thought of clerical power that penalizes non-priests: «If the friars were not to have recreation on the days in which communion is received, then those who say Mass daily would never have recreation. And if priests don't observe such a rule, why should the other poor friars have to?»¹¹.

In general, while Teresa is very demanding on obedience and fidelity to the Constitutions, she holds that, unless there is a necessity, the liberty of the nuns should not be curtailed, especially in matters concerning their spiritual life. Again she writes to Gratian with motherly wisdom: «I understand the great importance this has for these nuns and their consolation, and how disconsolate they become in other monasteries when held spiritually bound. Souls that are restrained cannot serve God well, and the devil uses this restraint to tempt them. But when they have some freedom, they often pay no attention to it and make no use of it»¹². That is a golden rule that she has written

⁶ Cf. VDQ 12: «As a means of assisting contemplative women to attain the goal of their specific vocation as described above, **I would invite reflection and discernment** on twelve aspects of consecrated life in general and the monastic tradition in particular».

⁷ VDQ art. 4: «**Each monastery is to review** its daily horarium to see if it is centred on the Lord»; art. 5: «Given the importance of *lectio divina*, **each monastery is to establish** fitting times and means for respecting this requirement of reading and listening, *ruminatio*, prayer, contemplation and sharing of the sacred Scriptures», etc.

⁸ Letter 374 to Fr. Gracián, February 1581, n. 4: »En esto de monjas puedo tener voto, que he visto muchas cosas».

⁹ Letter 247 to Fr. Gracián, May 1578, n. 10: «En cosa que toque a estas monjas puéderme dar vuestra paternidad crédito, que veo lo que acá pasa».

¹⁰ Letter 150 to Fr. Gracián, 19th November 1576, n. 1: «Extraña cosa es que no piensan es visitar si no hacen actas».

¹¹ *Ibidem*, n. 1: «Si no han de tener recreación los días que comulgan, y dicen cada día misa, luego no tendrán recreación nunca. Y si los sacerdotes no guardan eso, ¿para qué lo han de guardar los otros pobres?».

¹² Letter 376 to Fr. Gracián, 21st February 1581, n. 3: «Según lo mucho que entiendo a estas almas y a su consuelo, y

in those lines: «Un alma apretada no puede servir bien a Dios». It is not more or less rigour or austerity that is important, but the freedom with which one offers oneself to God. When we enjoy this freedom, there is less risk of temptation and, usually, such freedom is not abused.

2. *Contemplative and entirely contemplative life*

On quite a number of occasions, the Apostolic Constitution makes the distinction between “contemplative life” and “entirely contemplative life”¹³. This terminology originated in Vatican II's Conciliar Decree *Perfectae caritatis* where no. 7 refers to «communities which are entirely dedicated to contemplation» and no. 16 distinguishes between «nuns engaged exclusively in the contemplative life» and «other nuns applied by rule to apostolic work outside the convent». It would be more appropriate that these latter nuns should have a type of cloister regulated by their own Constitutions rather than having papal cloister. It was on the basis of this Council text, which later became executive in the applicative norms of *Ecclesiae Sanctae*¹⁴, that the distinction between major and minor papal enclosure, ratified by *Sponsa Christi*¹⁵, was abandoned. As well as papal enclosure, a new concept, so-called constitutional enclosure, was introduced to describe enclosures that were compatible with external apostolate. In Canon 667, par. 3, the Code of Canon Law assumed and codified the distinction between «monasteries of nuns which are ordered entirely to contemplative life» and «other monasteries of nuns».

It might be said, accordingly, that this present Apostolic Constitution does not offer any innovation but simply re-confirms traditional categories. But again in this case, a more attentive reading gives rise to some questions. Is it really true that VDQ leaves untouched the canonical distinction between “monasteries of entirely contemplative life” and “other monasteries” with a different, or less exclusive, contemplative orientation? According to the Code of Canon Law (can. 667 par. 3), the difference between the two categories of monastery depends on the type of enclosure adopted: the monasteries of entirely contemplative life are those with papal enclosure, while other monasteries observe the type of enclosure defined by their own Constitutions¹⁶. Nowhere in VDQ, however, can we find this connection between the types of contemplative life and the modality of enclosure adopted. In principle, then, we cannot exclude that from now on it would be possible to speak of monasteries of entirely contemplative life even in the event that they

los grandes desconsuelos que hay en otros monasterios por tenerlas tan atadas en lo espiritual; y un alma apretada no puede servir bien a Dios, y el demonio las tienta por ahí, y cuando tienen libertad muchas veces ni se les da nada ni lo quieren».

¹³ Cf. VDQ nn. 5, 8, 33; art. 2 par. 1.

¹⁴ ES, II, no. 32.

¹⁵ *Sponsa Christi*, art. IV.

¹⁶ «Monasteries of nuns which are ordered entirely to contemplative life must observe *papal cloister*, that is, cloister according to the norms given by the Apostolic See. Other monasteries of nuns are to observe a *cloister adapted to their proper character and defined in the constitutions*».

do not observe the rules of papal enclosure, but have some form of Constitutional enclosure. If such were the case, the Constitution would waive par. 3 of Canon 667. It would seem extraordinary, however, that a derogation of such magnitude would not be formulated explicitly in the regulations of the Constitution.

On the other hand, the possibility of different types of enclosure in the same Order is an innovation that is explicitly introduced by the new Constitution. Until now, the choice of a particular kind of enclosure characterized the entire Order as “entirely contemplative” or simply “contemplative”. Instead, VDQ makes provision for the possibility of different ways of observing enclosure within the same Order. Such a plurality – in the words of VDQ – «should be seen as an enrichment and not as an obstacle to communion» (no. 31). As a result, we can deduce that the plurality of types of enclosure may be considered as a legitimate plurality of interpretations and incarnations of the same charism and should not cause internal divisions or rifts in the same religious family: «it is a matter of reconciling different approaches to a higher unity» (no. 31). Article 10 of the Constitution goes so far as to allow each individual monastery the possibility of requesting permission from the Holy See to adopt its own type of enclosure, even though this may differ from the type generally in use by the Order it pertains to¹⁷. As I see it, this sub-division of types of enclosure could be reduced in the event that the Constitutions of Carmelite nuns might envisage, apart from papal enclosure, another kind of enclosure, somewhat different yes, but still faithful to the charismatic Teresian identity. In such an hypothesis, we would have to consider this innovation as “constitutional enclosure” insofar as it would be in conformity with the norms established by the Constitutions but, in my opinion, this would not necessarily signify a switch-over to a way of life that is not entirely contemplative. This is a matter, however, that requires further research and clarification.

3. *Enclosure and contemplative life*

We have inherited a long tradition that has regarded enclosure as the determining and discriminating element of female contemplative life, even up to the point of identifying one with the other¹⁸. We have taken part in burning debates on the issue, leaving behind them a trail of polemics,

¹⁷ «<Each monastery, following serious discernment and respecting its proper tradition and the demands of its constitutions, is to ask the Holy See what form of cloister it wishes to embrace, whenever a different form of cloister from the present one is called for».

¹⁸ Cf. for example what a cloistered nun writes in *I diritti di Dio. Vita contemplativa e clausura*, “Rivista di vita spirituale” 23 (1969), p. 188: «Enclosure is not so much a part of the life of contemplation, and much less – as it may seem from a superficial perspective – one of its safeguards, it does but one thing only. It is an integral, essential expression of contemplative life: this means (...) that to touch enclosure means undermining contemplative life itself; and it is for this reason that enclosure is to be observed *sine glossa*». Positions like this, moreover, are not far from what John Paul II himself affirmed in his *Discourse to the Plenary meeting of CICLSAL* of 7 March 1980: «The abandonment of enclosure would signify the diminution of that which is more specific in one of the forms of religious life through which the Church manifests to the world the pre-eminence of contemplation over action, of that which is eternal over that which is temporal».

reciprocal judgements and condemnations without a court of appeal. Being aware of all this, I do not wish to trivialise it, nor to reduce it to a marginal and negligible question. We all understand its importance, however, and why monastic souls become so impassioned about it that they often prefer not to discuss it (somewhat like it was considered a rule of good manners among gentlemen not to speak about politics, religion or football!). But we must face up to the question and attempt to do so with sensitivity and objectivity, trying to understand before making judgements. This is particularly necessary at this moment as the traditional juridical-canonical position is being modified.

In effect, the first question we must put to ourselves regards the whole idea of enclosure itself: what are its contents? What elements should be held as essential and what can be considered marginal? What aspects should be common to all Teresian-Carmelite communities as being part and parcel of their charismatic identity and what other aspects can be interpreted more freely and could be subject to change? When confronted with the pluralism that obviously exists in the manner of living enclosure among Discalced Carmelite nuns, I have already stated on other occasions (using an expression of a Cistercian General Chapter), «agreed diversity is more valuable than discordant and enforced uniformity»¹⁹. I think that fundamental agreement, while respecting legitimate diversity, is also the basic intention of VDO.

The Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*, developing Canon 674²⁰, defines the entirely contemplative life – to date corresponding to papal enclosure – as being qualified by three characteristics: total dedication to the search for union with God; exclusion of any kind of external apostolate and physical presence at events or ministry of the ecclesial community; separation from the world that is practical and effective and not merely symbolic²¹. I feel that that presentation provides a good starting point for answering the questions I have just posed. Effectively, the first two characteristics, the first positive, the second negative, are like the two sides of the same coin. Contemplative life is defined by its absolute gratuitousness and “inutility”: it exists only as a search in faith and without this it would be meaningless. Should we remove or even minimize the intrinsic scandal of the entirely contemplative life, we would change its identity and squander all its power. The scandal of

¹⁹ *La vita cistercense attuale*, n. 13.

²⁰ «Institutes which are entirely ordered to contemplation always hold a distinguished place in the mystical Body of Christ: for they offer an extraordinary sacrifice of praise to God, illumine the people of God with the richest fruits of holiness, move it by their example, and extend it with hidden apostolic fruitfulness. For this reason, members of these institutes cannot be summoned to furnish assistance in the various pastoral ministries however much the need of the active apostolate urges it».

²¹ *Verbi Sponsa*, n. 11: «An Institute is considered to be of wholly contemplative life if: a) its members direct all their activity, interior and exterior, to the fervent and constant quest for union with God; b) it excludes external works directed, even in a limited way, to the apostolate, and physical participation in events and ministries of the ecclesial community; such participation therefore should not be requested of nuns, since it would become a counter witness to their true participation in the life of the Church and to their authentic mission; c) it involves a separation from the world that is practical and effective, and not merely symbolic. Every adaptation of the forms of separation from the outside world must be carried out in such a way “that physical separation is preserved”, and must be submitted to the approval of the Holy See».

the contemplative life is the scandal of a “waste”²², a waste that confirms the primacy of God and of His grace with relation to human works.

As I see it, the heart of contemplative life is to allow space for the living God, for His presence and for His activity in the world. Judging by any human experience, this obviously presupposes a separation from the world and not only a radical simplifying of our way of living and emptying of oneself, but a cosmic change in one's whole way of being («ser tales» “to be the kind of persons”, as St. Teresa writes²³). We know that this involves a long, complex and trying process, during which one has to confront a whole series of temptations with both internal and external obstacles. Precisely here lies the dynamic of the contemplative life, which is in no way either lazy or inactive. Contemplation is sometimes confused with inactivity, while, in reality, it is an extreme kind of activity, although – or precisely because – it is focused on the internal rather than the external. There is also the danger that we substitute interior activity, which is the core of contemplative life, with a host of domestic chores. These latter, while being necessary, should not absorb all one's mental and spiritual energy. The life of a contemplative nun is the life of a searcher, of an explorer in the path of the Spirit, not that of a pious housewife, of a Martha so preoccupied with a welcome for her guest that she forgets the guest himself and her relationship with him.

Contemplative life has obvious need of an ambient, of a contemplative space/time that has numerous components. If we call this entire complexity “enclosure or cloister”, it means we are describing the whole with the name of a single part (synecdoche in rethorical language). That is true if we see enclosure in its very strictest sense as a set of norms that separate the nuns materially from the outside world and confine them in a determined, physical space. Such norms are important and are part of the discipline that goes with contemplative life but they must be integrated into a wider and richer prospective, taking into account all the ramifications of the human and spiritual journey of the individual and of the contemplative community.

Very appropriately, VDQ treats of contemplative life under twelve different headings, only one of which is enclosure strictly speaking. The numbers that follow the heading on enclosure, with regard especially to silence, means of communication and asceticism, are all, however, very closely associated with enclosure.

The Constitution recommends that particular attention be paid to silence. Silence establishes a way of life that helps us in being receptive and ready to listen to others: «Silence entails self-emptying in order to grow in receptivity» (no. 33). It does not mean merely being restrained in speech (staying shut-up!), but rather a way of being less self-centred (a loving silence). Insofar as it eliminates external sound and, more importantly, internal interference, silence leads to a fuller

²² Cf. *Mt* 26, 8-9: «When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, “Why this **waste**? It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor».

²³ *C* 3,2; 4,1.

experience of the realities that surround us and of our own selves. I feel that such silence, which is under so much threat these days, must be restored to our contemplative religious lives. I agree, whole-heartedly with what a Carmelite nun, Christina Kaufmann, wrote a few years ago:

The intensity of communication increases proportionately with the intensity of the solitude experienced in contemplation. I think there is a style of living together (life in common) that does not favour communication, nor gain nourishment from silence or solitude, nor even encourage these. It is just a way of living together that any group of women, with goals quite different to ours, might experience. On this point I feel that the Rule and all the teaching of our Saints are in agreement and that they invite us to deepen the eremitical aspect of our common life, «not only nuns, but hermits» (C 13,6)²⁴.

Teresian enclosure, effectively, «the extremely secluded life»²⁵, which characterized her foundations, has an irrefutably eremitical orientation. Teresa bears within herself an ideal image, exemplified by the original eremitical community of Mount Carmel: «Let us remember our holy fathers of the past, those hermits whose lives we aim to imitate»²⁶. As such, the contemplative community of her daughters is a community in which «the main disposition required for always living in this calm is the desire to rejoice solely in Christ, one's Spouse. This is what they must always have as their aim: to be alone with Him alone»²⁷.

I find a synthetic statement of Fr. Tomás Álvarez about the Teresian understanding of enclosure very balanced and profound: «Enclosure [for Teresa] expresses the community's desire for solitude, just as the cell expresses it on an individual, personal level»²⁸. St. Teresa constantly recalls the Rule and the eremitical roots of Carmel, believing that «the style of life we aim to follow is not just that of nuns but of hermits, and thus you detach yourselves from every creature»²⁹. The fundamental principle of the Rule of St. Albert: «Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's Law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers» (R 8), is extended to the whole community, called to remain in its own house to maintain a constant contemplative disposition and to safeguard fraternal (sisterly) communion. Teresian enclosure is basically an expression of “community eremitism”. Saying this, I do not exclude other ascetical and penitential motivations for the choice of a stricter enclosure³⁰, but these would not appear to be the fundamental or predominant reasons from a charismatic point of view. In short, this would be the specific of a Teresian community: to combine an authentic experience of common life with a deep and intense grounding in eremitical solitude.

²⁴ C. KAUFMANN, *La fascinación de una presencia*, Madrid 2007, pp. 216-217.

²⁵ C 2, 9: «el mucho encerramiento».

²⁶ C 11, 4: «Acordémonos de nuestros Padres santos pasados ermitaños, cuya vida pretendemos imitar».

²⁷ V 36, 29: «[...] el gran aparejo que hay para vivir siempre en él las que a solas quisieren gozar de su esposo Cristo; que esto es siempre lo que han de pretender, y solas con El solo».

²⁸ Cf. T. ALVAREZ, “Clausura” in *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2006², p.143.

²⁹ C 13,6: «Porque el estilo que pretendemos llevar es no sólo de ser monjas, sino ermitaños, y así se desasen de todo lo criado».

³⁰ I refer especially to what Teresa says in C 1,2-5, where she speaks of the generous offering of oneself for souls that are being lost.

How can such an eremitical orientation be compatible with the use of modern means of communication that are becoming more and more a factor in our lives? This is certainly one of the challenges that the times we live in present to contemplative life. VDQ, no. 34, recommends: «a prudent discernment aimed at ensuring that they remain truly at the service of formation to contemplative life and necessary communication, and do not become occasions for wasting time or escaping from the demands of fraternal life in community». There are no concrete prescriptions on the use of means of communication in the regulating sectors of the Constitution. Perhaps these have been postponed until the practical, normative Instruction. In any case, the question needs serious consideration since it concerns one of the crucial realities of today's world. These means of communication are no longer merely instruments for the user's benefit. It would be absolutely minimizing to define internet as an instrument. In reality it is an open doorway to today's world, presented in a virtual way with its whole wealth of stimuli, plus its complexity and ambiguity. I don't think we can pretend that this digital revolution of our culture has not taken place, especially given that the new generations that present themselves to our communities will be already “practiced digital users”. We must simply accept the challenge of digital communication and instruct ourselves in how best to live a contemplative life in this digital age. We need time to familiarize ourselves with this new reality, to come to a better understanding of it and to test and discern different experiences: a journey to be taken together³¹.

Conclusion

The theme I have attempted to present is undoubtedly vast since it deals with the conditions for living a fully contemplative life in the Church and world of today. I am firmly convinced that we cannot reduce the whole question to canonical norms on enclosure, even though this is obviously vitally connected with the demands of the contemplative life. The Apostolic Constitution, unlike earlier documents of the Holy See on the same question, leaves the argument on enclosure open and allows for possible internal pluralism in the same religious family regarding the kind of enclosure to be adopted. In this sense, some absolute set points of the past are no longer automatically so and what seemed obvious before is not quite so obvious now.

As I conclude my reflections, I would like to ask you a few questions that the new Constitution pose for me and to hear your answers:

1. May we still consider as legitimate a normative diversity between female and male contemplative life? Or, put in another way, do differing female and male sensitivities also justify a divergence in normative prescriptions?

³¹ Cf. *La vie spirituelle à l'heure du portable*, “Carmel”, Septembre 2010 (see especially the account of the experience of Frère David, abbot of the abbey of En Calcat, pp. 70-72).

2. The distinction on “entirely” contemplative life and contemplative life was based traditionally on the different kind of enclosure adopted. Do you think that this distinguishing criterion is still valid in the light of the new Apostolic Constitution? And, in your opinion, what would be the absolute, irrevocable (*sine qua non*) elements of an entirely contemplative life?
3. Silence and the use of means of communication are challenges for contemplative life today. In your experience, what risks and what opportunities do they pose for you?