



Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart

Reflections on *Vultum Dei
Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*

Cloister and Community

By Sr. Gabriela Hicks, O.C.D.

I want to thank the Staff of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE for offering us contemplatives the opportunity to express our thoughts on Pope Francis's recent documents *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (VDQ) and *Cor Orans* (CO). I especially want to thank Rev. Thomas Nelson, O.PRAEM., for his excellent introductory articles.

In the previous article, Mother John Mary of the Passionist Nuns in Whitesville, Kentucky, shared with us the experiences of her Congregation in applying the directives of VDQ and CO. Our St. Joseph's Association has already shared our experiences in our newsletter *Amigas* so I won't repeat them here. For those interested, they may read the *Amigas* articles on the Flemington Carmel's website FlemingtonCarmel.org in the Posts entitled "Living the Challenges of *Cor Orans*," Parts 1, 2 and 3, and "The Truth About *Cor Orans*."

"I will lead her into the desert and there I will speak to her heart."—Hosea 2:14

At some point in their life, every human being hears these words in one way or another. It may be in a moment of loneliness, in a time of sickness, when a job opportunity closes or a move to a new home is necessary. It may happen in the breath-taking beauty of a sunrise or in the exquisite harmony of a song. Finally, it will certainly happen when we come to the end of our life and are called to leave this world. Whenever and however God speaks these words to us, we sense, however dimly, that we are called to follow a path that I must walk alone and that leads to an unknown place.

Each of us answers that call in our own way because each call is heard by our ears alone. Nevertheless, because this call into the desert is a part of the life of each person, it is also an essential part of the life of the Church. It is incarnated into the fabric of the Church and manifests itself

in various expressions; we see it most strikingly in the Order of Hermits, but it is also found in the retreats given to individuals and to groups of the faithful. Finally, it is manifested in a very special way in the various orders and congregations of contemplative nuns, and this has been highlighted and brought to the attention of believers by Pope Francis's recent documents *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*.

God's voice calling us to the desert can easily be drowned out by the turmoil of modern life. Because of this danger, communities of contemplative nuns are an essential reminder of the need to tune our ears to that voice and to follow it. Our communities—Benedictines, Poor Clares, Carmelites, Adorers of the Precious Blood, Passionists and all the other communities of women solely devoted to contemplation—we are all heralds standing on the watch tow-

ers reminding people that God loves each of them and calls each of them to intimacy with Himself. We need to make our own call resound, not to put ourselves forward, but to alert the faithful to the Voice whispering in their own heart "Come and rest in Me."

Going to God in the desert is a call that each one follows by themselves, yet it is never done alone because nothing in the Church is ever done alone. Everything in the Church is done in communion because the Church exists to live here on earth the life of the Trinity, and nothing in the Trinity is ever done alone. Everything in the Trinity is an act of communion, and so must everything in our life be.

This is where the witness given by hermits and the witness given by contemplative religious differs. Hermits live solely for God. They witness to the total immersion in God

that each of us is made for. Contemplative nuns are not hermits; we are women religious, and religious, unlike hermits, live in a community. We witness to the Church as a communion. The Church is a multiform reality, yet all the different facets of the Church have an essential unity. Saint Paul compared the Church to the human body, and, just as each cell of the human body, though it may be as different from other cells as the cell of a fingernail is from a cell of the eye, still each cell contains in itself the DNA of the whole body. Each cell contains the plan of the whole body.

I'm sure Saint Paul would have loved that analogy, for it applies perfectly to the Church. Each facet of the Church contains the essence of the whole Church. "It is of the essence of the Church that she be both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 2). Hermits are "intent on contemplation." The laity are called to bring about the Kingdom of God in this world, and therefore they need to be "eager to act." The active religious orders share in this eager activity and add to it the witness that the Church's activity is always done in communion. No member ever acts in isolation.

And where do the contemplative orders and institutes fit in? What aspect of the Church do we witness to? We are witnesses to the reality that contemplation and communion are inseparable. We are called to be wholly devoted to contemplation and to live it in communion with one another and with the Church. Contemplation, that deep intimacy with God, is truly an experience of the desert where God speaks to the heart of the listener in a place where no one can come near. "*De internis neque Ecclesia.*" Only the Holy Spirit can plumb the depths of the human heart.

Yet we human beings are created in the image of the Triune God, and God, to quote our beloved Pope Benedict XVI, is "a relationality" (*Caritas in Veritate*, no. 54). God is communion. And His Church is a communion. Each member of the Church lives in the solitude



of the desert and in the communion of the Trinity. This seeming contradiction creates a tension that needs to be resolved. The two apparent contradictory poles of solitude and communion need to be held together as the two ends of a violin string need to be held in the right tension for the violin to be in tune.

This balanced tension can be achieved in

a multitude of ways, as we see from the various contemplative orders, but both aspects of solitude and communion must be present and harmoniously interacting. On one end of the spectrum there are the Benedictines with their charism of hospitality. Such a witness shows forth notably the facet of communion essential in every religious institute while establishing it in the framework of the solitude of the cloister. At the other end of the spectrum, we have the mendicant Orders such as the Poor Clares and the Carmelites who have little or no face-to-face contact with outsiders. Yet this seeming isolation contains a outward influence that was shown conclusively by the proclamation of St. Thérèse of Lisieux as the Co-Patroness of the Missions. In between these two poles there are the various Orders and institutes who carry on an outreach that is expressed in retreat houses and various publications. Every contemplative community needs to find its own balance of solitude and outward witness.

But there is more that needs to be said. A community of contemplative nuns not only needs to live in communion within itself and to witness to communion to the Church and to the world, but it must also live in communion with its own charismatic family. There are certainly communities of contemplative nuns that are the first establishments of their charism. Every religious order starts out with one house and then, if God prospers it, that one house sends forth shoots and establishes new foundations. But most contemplative orders have a number of communities that share the original charism and this sharing in the original charism of the founder or foundress makes of these communities members of that

(Continued on page 12)

Cloister and Community (cont. from pg. 9)

unique family. Even a single house existing as a diocesan institute exists as part of the diocese. To paraphrase John Donne, “No Nun is an island, sufficient of herself.” And no community is an island either.

This brings us to the matter of autonomy, a subject that has raised the most questions and aroused the most resistance to the directives of *Cor Orans*. The objections were that belonging to an association or federation risked compromising the autonomy of the individual monasteries. This fear came from a failure to read the document attentively and from not recognizing the difference between numbers 7 and 8 of *Cor Orans*, which

speak of a Federation and an Association of monasteries, and number 12, which speaks of a Congregation of monasteries. A Congregation is “a structure of government, erected by the Holy See, among several autonomous monasteries of the same Institute, under the authority of a President, who is the Major Superior according to law, and of a general chapter, that in the monastic Congregation is the supreme authority, in accordance with the Constitutions approved by the Holy See” (*Cor Orans*, no. 12). A federation and an association are “a

structure of communion” between several “autonomous monasteries of the same Institute... so that in sharing the same charism,” the monasteries “collaborate among themselves” and also “overcome isolation and promote regular observance and contemplative life” (*Cor Orans*, nn. 7 & 8). Here, there is no mention of government, of a major superior or of a chapter with supreme authority over the member monasteries. The president of a federation or an association has no authority. She is a Sister of all the members with a ministry to help foster communion among the member monasteries.

We need to stress the importance of communion among monasteries. Federations and Associations are “structures of communion among monasteries of the same Institute.” That is, they exist to foster sisterly relationships among communities of the same family. The charism given by God to the founder or foundress

of a religious institute is not a small gift. It shares in the immensity of God’s own life and, as we see in the ancient Orders, needs a number of communities to express itself in its full flowering. For any community to say that it has no need of the other members of its own religious family is to say that it is incapable of growth, that it has no riches to share with others and that itself cannot be enriched by anyone else.

This isolation mentality runs two risks: the first risk is that the community will stagnate. Feeding only on itself, it will inbreed and weaken until it resembles a pool of dead water covered over with algae. Running water flows clear. Standing water stag-

nates and has nothing of life to share.

A more common danger is that of outside influence. We are made for communion, and, if a community refuses to share in the life of its own religious family, it will turn to those outside of its proper charism and, whether it realizes it or not, it will imbibe their spiritual outlook. Every Catholic institute can be enriched by the charisms given to other members of the Church, and, among Carmelites, Saint Teresa fought vigorously for the

right of her nuns to have contact with other preachers besides their own friars. But one’s own brothers and sisters have the first place in sharing communion with the members of an Institute. Without this familial sharing, a community can be taken over by a spirituality and a viewpoint that is alien to its own founding charism.

Communion and solitude in God; contemplative nuns are given to the Church to witness to the richness and beauty of both, to the God-given life that flows from answering His call into the desert. For those who do answer this call, the moment will come when they will “come up from the wilderness leaning on the arm of their Beloved” (Song of Songs 8:5).¹

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