



Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart

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

The Contemplative Vocation

By Rev. Thomas Nelson, O.PRAEM.

Religious life is at the heart of Christ's Mystical Body, and its authentic renewal has universal significance for the entire Church. Experience teaches that every reform in the history of the Church is marked by a reform of the clergy and religious life. Thus, it is not surprising that the Church's newest legislation on renewing women's contemplative life—namely Pope Francis' 2016 Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere* ("Seeking the Face of God"—VDQ) and its implementing Instruction *Cor Orans* ("Praying Heart"—CO) (2018)—caught the immediate attention not only of contemplative nuns, but also of the Christian faithful from every state in life far beyond the cloister walls. This is manifest by the large number of journal articles, conferences, webinars, and online articles which have already examined or discussed these documents. Although many monasteries of nuns have willingly and joyfully embraced these new norms, though perhaps not without some challenges regarding interpretation and implementation, many others continue resist or reject the new norms as they struggle with confusion, doubts, objections, and/or fears.



Addressing Misinformation

In my capacity as the National Director of the IRL, I have been blessed to interact with countless nuns who have freely and frankly shared their experiences regarding how they have received, studied, sought counsel about, perhaps even greatly struggled with, and then successfully implemented various aspects of VDQ and CO. One concern that has repeatedly been voiced to me regards the "misinformation" about VDQ and CO that all-too-quickly pops up online when searching for new articles or commentaries about the documents. Fortunately, nuns sometimes find it very easy to discern when an article completely "misses the mark" about what VDQ and CO actually say and aim to ac-

complish, such as when incorrect terminology is used and false conclusions are therefore made. For example, one online article I read condemns CO for mandating a nine-year novitiate, but in reality, CO requires an initial formation of 9-12 years, which includes the combined time in aspirancy, postulancy, novitiate, and temporary vows. Other times, however, nuns find it difficult to determine when an article is inaccurate or misleading, such as when an author does not cite sources, but nonetheless claims to quote senior officials at the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) as saying this or that condemning thing about women's contemplative life; in such articles, the author often tries to argue that VDQ and CO are the Vatican's new tools to "destroy" the contemplative vocation. Unfortunately, I have come across several articles like this.

In a recent meeting with the religious members of the IRL Board, it was agreed that it would be beneficial to have a series of articles on VDQ and CO in forthcoming issues of *Religious Life* magazine, some written by cloistered nuns themselves who are eager to share

their wide and varied experiences regarding this new legislation. Although these articles will be limited in scope—primarily focusing on the four main topics of CO (i.e., autonomy, federations, the cloister, and formation)—we pray that this modest contribution to the ongoing discussion about the renewal of women’s contemplative life will be a helpful and supportive supplemental resource for nuns who may be seeking examples of how these norms can be authentically and practically applied.

In this “introductory” article to this new series, I would simply like to briefly introduce VDQ and CO, especially highlighting the continuity of these documents with previous papal legislation on the vocation of nuns. In my next article, I will identify and address some of the questions, concerns, doubts, and fears that have arisen in response to these new norms, and offer some suggestions as to how implementation challenges could be overcome.

Embracing the Old with the New

As noted above, in 2016, Pope Francis issued VDQ to help update or renew women’s contemplative life in accord with the signs of the times, and in 2018, CICLSAL issued VDQ’s implementing Instruction CO to help further address shortcomings in the law regarding the vocation of cloistered nuns.

VDQ consists of two main sections. The first, longer section has been characterized by various commentators as being foundational, theological, doctrinal, and reflective. Archbishop J.R. Carballo, secretary of CICLSAL, has pointed out that the first main section of VDQ is sig-

nificantly filled with over 140 references or citations as follows:

- Sacred Scripture (51 times)
- The 1983 CODE OF CANON LAW (31 times)
- Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis* (18 times)
- The Magisterium of the Church, mostly from Popes John Paul II (18 times), Benedict XVI (9 times), and Francis (13 times)



- Some Founders and Foundresses, namely St. Benedict of Nursia, St. Clare of Assisi, St. Francis of Assisi, and St. Teresa of Avila.

The second major section of VDQ is of a legal nature. It is notable that there are over 31 references to the 1983 CODE but none of these citations should be overlooked. Carballo explains:

These [citations] are more important than we realize. THE CODE OF CANON LAW situates the

contemplative life within a juridical frame, which is normal, while all the others situate it within the path of the Church. This is especially true of the Second Vatican Council, which Pope John Paul II called the compass which guides the Church of the 21st century. Since we are the Church, we must be attentive to this compass.... These citations, therefore, place the feminine contemplative life within the context of the Church today, as well as of the religious life. Because there is also cited, for example, not only *Vita Consecrata*, but also six documents from the Congregation [i.e., CICLSAL], and many others that refer to religious life.¹

Therefore, from the citations mentioned, we can conclude that there is no rupture with the Church’s past thought and practice but VDQ and CO are in continuity with the past theologically and juridically.

Prior to VDQ, the most recent papal legislation governing nuns had been Pope Pius XII’s 1950 Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*. However, VDQ “is not so much a departure from previous legislation as movement along a continuum that was initiated by Pope Pius XII in the 1950s.”²

¹ J.R. Carballo, “On *Vultum Dei Quaerere*,” Conference for Contemplative Nuns in Madrid, Spain, November 2016, English translation J.M. Sanchez, unpublished conference talk, 5. See also J.R. Carballo, *Vultum Dei Quaerere: per crescere nella fedeltà creative e responsabile*, Libreria editrice Vaticana, 2017, nn. 22-23.

² N. Bauer, “*Vultum Dei Quaerere*: New Norms for Nuns,” in *The Jurist* 76 (2016), 380.

Pope John Paul II affirms and references aspects of *Sponsa Christi* in his 1986 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, and Pope Francis in turn echoes and organically develops some of John Paul II's thoughts in VDQ and CO (e.g., see CO nos. 13, 86-93, 174-175, and 183-218). *Vita Consecrata* no. 59 states:

“The Synod’s suggestions in this regard and especially the desire that provision be made for giving Major Superiors more authority to **grant dispensations from enclosure for just and sufficient reasons**, will be carefully considered, in the light of the path of renewal already undertaken since the Second Vatican Council. In this way, the various forms and degrees of cloister—from **papal and constitutional cloister to monastic cloister**—will better correspond to the variety of contemplative Institutes and monastic traditions. As the Synod itself emphasized, **associations and federations of monasteries are to be encouraged, as already recommended by Pope Pius XII and the Second Vatican Council**, especially where there are no other effective forms of coordination or help, with a view to safeguarding and promoting the values of contemplative life. Such bodies, which must always respect the legitimate autonomy of monasteries, can in fact offer valuable help in adequately resolving common problems, such as appropriate renewal, initial and continuing formation, mutual economic support and even the reorganization of the monasteries themselves” (*bold emphasis added*).

An organic development of the law in response to the challenges and circumstances of the present age is nothing new. When the 1983 CODE OF CANON LAW abrogated the 1917 Code, religious law expert Rev. Francis G. Morrissey, O.M.I., JCD, noted that this “*must be regarded as a means of consolidating the experience of the past to enable the Church and its members to look forward in joy and hope toward the future. [Hence the 1983] Code could be considered as the consolidation of the various experiences lived in the Church throughout its existence,*

those experiences which have proved to be beneficial to the community, and those which have not demonstrated their value” (F.G. Morrissey, *A Handbook on Canons 573-746*, 1985, p. 14).

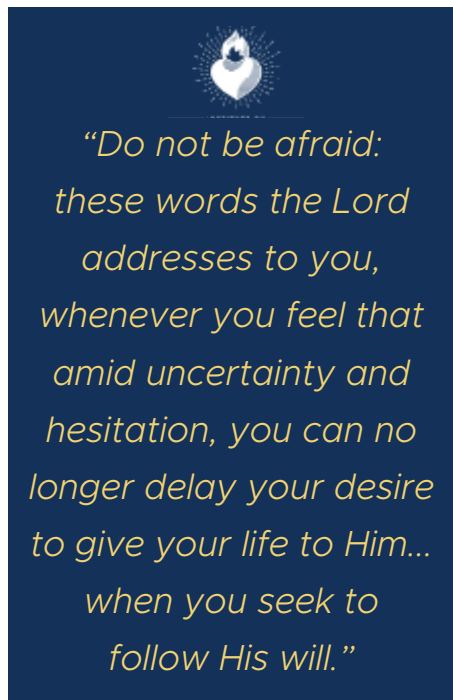
However, VDQ does contain some healthy “novelties.” For example, Carballo has emphasized there is a very intentional language shift from “cloistered nuns” to “contemplative nuns” in order to highlight the fact that a nun’s vocation should not be defined by a single element, such as living in the cloister, but rather by the reason why nuns enter the monastery, which is to become contemplatives. VDQ does speak of the cloister, but nuns are repeatedly referred to as “contemplatives.” Carballo has further explained that *Sponsa Christi* was promulgated in a post-war period when it was necessary to give strong structures, such as a strict enclosure, and that historians of the contemplative life have noted that this was to avoid its disintegration. However, even *Sponsa Christi* acknowledged that “frequently...the strict law of cloister easily gives rise to serious³ difficulties,” therefore the Church’s past insistence or preference that nuns embrace papal cloister has developed to the increasing acknowledgment and endorsement of the constitutional or monastic cloister when it is best-suited for a monastery’s charism and mission in the life of the Church. This is a welcomed evolution of thought and practice.

VDQ responds to the current “difficult and delicate moments that are [currently] being lived,” and so it focuses on strengthening twelve roots or essentials of women’s contemplative life.⁴ VDQ no. 12 lists these twelve aspects of consecrated life in general and monastic life in particular: formation, prayer, the word of God, the sacraments of the Eucharist and Reconciliation, fraternal life in community, autonomy, federations, the cloister, work, silence, the communications media and asceticism.

Keeping in mind the legislative continuity of VDQ

³ Pius XII, *Sponsa Christi*, English trans. in *Canon Law Digest*, vol. 3, Milwaukee, WI, Bruce Pub. Co., 1954, p. 228.

⁴ Carballo, “On *Vultum Dei Quaerere*,” Conference for Nuns in Madrid, p. 6.



and CO can be helpful for cloistered nuns struggling to understand and embrace certain new norms, such as the development of nuns' participation in federations from being "highly recommended" in *Sponsa Christi* "not only as a safeguard against the evils and inconveniences which can arise from complete separation, but also as a means of promoting regular observance and the life of contemplation" (*Sponsa Christi*, art. VII §2, 2^o) to a firm "mandate" in VDQ and CO "to promote the contemplative life in the member monasteries, in accordance with the demands of their proper charism, and to ensure assistance in initial and continuous formation as well as in practical needs" (VDQ, 30).

The Need for Patience, Prudence and Prayer

I wish to close with a reminder that the Congregation has a much broader picture of the issues facing women's contemplative life on a global scale than we may be able to imagine. If certain norms seem to initially make no sense or perhaps may even seem "harmful" to

Pope Francis (cont. from pg. 22) nious diversity, where everyone can actively participate and where everyone has something to contribute.

When we speak of "vocation," then, it is not just about choosing this or that way of life, devoting one's life to a certain ministry or being attracted by the charism of a religious family, movement or ecclesial community. It is about making God's dream come true, the great

women's contemplative life, I pray you will take the time to: read the documents with patience and great care "in accord with the proper meaning of the words considered in their text and context" (see CODE, can. 17); prudently seek counsel from qualified fellow religious, canonists, or other advisors as needed;



and above all pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance, docility, and enlightenment as to how to authentically assimilate and apply the new norms for the benefit not only of your own monastery or order, but of the entire Church. I also ask that you pray for all of the officials, canonists, and staff serving CICALSAL, for as Archbishop Carballo stated in 2016:

"Right now, we are overwhelmed with work, you could

vision of fraternity that Jesus cherished when he prayed to the Father "that they may all be one" (Jn 17:21). Each vocation in the Church, and in a broader sense in society, contributes to a common objective: to celebrate among men and women that harmony of manifold gifts that can only be brought about by the Holy Spirit. Priests, consecrated men and women, lay faithful: let us journey and work together in bearing witness

not even imagine it. You may be asking things from the logic of your own time, but perhaps time does not only respond to the logic of cloistered monasteries. For example, right now we are trying to find ways to respond to the situations of exclaustrations and divisions, and making enormous sacrifices to do it in a month. According to Curial regulations this is required to be completed in three months, and we are trying to do it in a month. There are days in which I sign as many as 100 documents. We are, after the Secretariat of State, the Congregation that has the largest number of documents made. And as a Congregation, we are a very limited number of people. And then we deal with every form of consecrated life, all of them. And we are also approving new ones as well. Just recently there is a movement to approve an Order of Widows. All of this takes much time..."⁵

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

to the truth that one great human family united in love is no utopian vision, but the very purpose for which God created us.

Let us pray that the People of God, amid the dramatic events of history, may increasingly respond to this call. Let us implore the light of the Holy Spirit, so that all of us may find our proper place and give the very best of ourselves in this great divine plan!