



Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart

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

Addressing Doubts, Objections, Fears & Resistance

By Rev. Thomas Nelson, O.PRAEM.

In the last issue of *Religious Life* magazine, I wrote an introductory article on the contemplative vocation to inaugurate a new series of articles on the Church's most recent legislation for contemplative nuns, namely Pope Francis' 2016 Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere* ("Seeking the Face of God"—VDQ) and its 2018 implementing Instruction *Cor Orans* ("Praying Heart"—CO).¹

In this second article, I will identify and address some of the concerns, doubts, fears, etc., that have arisen in response to these new norms, and offer some suggestions as to how challenges to implementation could be overcome. Although the vast majority of the comments I have personally received about VDQ and CO have been positive, there has been no shortage of negative feedback from nuns. I am not alone. The officials at the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) have had a similar experience. Though the overwhelming majority of the feedback has been positive,² immediately after VDQ



was published, CICLSAL received a "hurricane" of comments—a constant inflow of questions and concerns about VDQ.³

Two Instructive Letters on CO

The Superior General of the Carmelite nuns, Rev. Saverio Canistrà, O.C.D., JCD, has also experienced something similar. Fortunately, he took careful note of the varied reactions among the Carmelite nuns, and in 2018 he wrote two very instructive letters to the Discalced Carmelite nuns to help them understand VDQ and CO, and to help them identify and overcome any obstacles to its implementation. He affirms that some of their questions and concerns have been legitimate, but then explains how some of their difficulties are subjective and could be overcome with a change of attitude and a more open mind. His letters are available online in English here:

¹ T. Nelson, "Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart—The Contemplative Vocation," in *Religious Life* 46:3 (May/June/July 2022), pp. 10-13.

² J.R. Carballo, *Vita Contemplativa*

Femminile: Custode di gratuità e ricchezza di fecondità apostolica, Libreria Editrice Vaticana (2019), p. 5.

³ J.R. Carballo, "On *Vultum Dei Quaerere*," Conference for Contemplative Nuns in Madrid, Spain (November 2016), English translation J.M. Sanchez, unpublished conference talk, p. 14.

- “Letter from Father General to the Discalced Carmelite Nuns on the Implementing Instruction *Cor Orans*” (16 July 2018), Prot. N. 200/2018 GM, https://www.carmelitaniscalzi.com/en/documents/superior-general/2018_letter-from-fr-general-to-the-discalced-carmelites-nuns-the-implementing-instruction-cor-orans/
- “More on *Cor Orans*: Doubts, Objections, Fears” (01 October 2018), Prot. n. 302/2018 GM, https://www.carmelitaniscalzi.com/en/documents/superior-general/2018_more-cor-orans-doubts-objections-fears/

Father Cannistrà’s letters are a great example of the CODE OF CANON LAW’s can. 592 §2 in action, which states that moderators of every institute (i.e., superiors at every level, including supreme moderators, provincial superiors, and local superiors) are to promote knowledge of the Holy See’s documents which regard the members entrusted to them, and are to ensure the documents are observed. (As an aside: The IRL office welcomes information about similar types of letters, articles, conference talks, etc., written by religious superiors or formators on VDQ and CO to help deepen our understanding of the reception and implementation challenges of these new norms.)

As stated above, the goal of this article is to identify and address some of the “negative” feedback to the new norms, and to offer some suggestions as to how challenges to implementation could be overcome. Because



Father Cannistrà’s second letter addresses this same topic—and so as not to “reinvent the wheel” with my analysis, so to speak—the remainder of this article will primarily focus on some key points of Father Cannistrà’s second letter, though I will also add some of my own considerations.

Objective Questions and Subjective Attitudes

Father Cannistrà begins with general observations about the initial feedback he received from the Carmelite nuns. Although he regarded some of the doubts and questions to be legitimate, he determined that some “underlying oppositions” were due to “erroneous perceptions.” One aim of his letter was thus to address both the “objective questions dealt with in the text” and also “the subjective attitudes of those who read it, which hinder a serene and fruitful reception” since the reader’s disposition is key for the comprehension of the text. He notes:

“Not all difficulties are to be found in the text, because not a few of them reside in the mind and outlook of the reader: Im-

portant new things are overlooked, dangers and threats are seen where there is an opening of paths and opportunities, indications that leave room for the freedom of the subjects are considered confusing or inadequate, while at the same time, complaints are made about the excessive minuteness of the rules.”

He concludes his introductory paragraphs by distinguishing three types of negative reactions to the new legislation, which “require different modes of response and clarification,” namely: (1) *doubts* and questions raised by CO; (2) *objections* which are due to the novelties in CO which nuns perceive will pose various risks to their way of life; and (3) underlying *fears* and resistance.

Distinguishing Doubts

Father Cannistrà distinguishes three types of doubts: (1) doubts in understanding the norms which appear to be unclear; (2) doubts about the application of certain norms which alter the traditions in place; and (3) doubts about some matters which CO does not explicitly address.

He then spends eight pages analyzing from a canonical perspective over 50 article numbers of CO. For example, he notes that CO, no. 72 uses the term “Fund for the Nuns”—a term which is not defined in church law. He responds to the question of “What is this Fund?” by stating he supposes it is the Fund run by the Nuns’ Assistance Secretariat, a body instituted in 1954 by Pius XII, of which the CICALSAL secretary is president, and which has the specific goal of assisting monasteries in financial distress and nuns who need medical help.

Since Father Cannistrà himself expresses a lack of certitude about the matter, this is a term which should be firmly clarified by CICALSAL. A recent article in *L’Osservatore Romano* explains the history of the Nuns’ Assistance Secretariat in Rome and how it currently supports nuns around the world, but unfortunately the term “Fund for the Nuns” is not used.⁴

Responding to Objections

The objections which Father Cannistrà received were based on the nuns’ personal experiences and way of life, and these objections were typically accompanied by a proposal for an amendment or greater flexibility of the norm for the Carmelite Order. He describes the main objectives and proposals he received, which regard CO, nos. 110, 135, 149-151, and 287. He duly acknowledges the merits of these objections, and he expresses his opinion that it would be reasonable to ask CICALSAL for a certain amount of “flexibility” for the Carmelite Order regarding certain norms.

He concludes this section of his letter by proposing that one way to present to the Vatican these apparently legitimate requests for “flexibilities” from the new norms would be to try to incorporate these changes (i.e., these deviations from the common law) into the Federations statutes and strive to get them approved. Once the Vatican approves the statutes, the proper law would prevail over the common law.

I add that the same could be said about trying to incorporate certain justifiable dispensations or flexi-

⁴ T. Campisi, “Support to Help Cloistered Nuns: The Secretariat of Assistance Created on the Initiative of Pius XII,” in *L’Osservatore Romano* (02 October 2021).



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bilities into an institute’s updated Constitutions since VDC art. 14, §1 mandates that the Constitutions or Rules of individual institutes are to be submitted to the Vatican for approval after they have been updated in accord with the new legislation.

It is unclear how receptive CICALSAL is to requests for deviations from the universal law for nuns, but CO does refer to the proper law of an institute 21 times. Moreover, the CODE OF CANON LAW requires proper law specification in 74 of the 153 canons that pertain to religious institutes—i.e., “in nearly half of the canons concerning religious, the institute itself must or may determine specific elements of the life of its members.”⁵ This frequent provision for proper law “represents the most striking implementation of the principle of subsidiarity” in the CODE’s section on

the People of God (i.e., *Book II*), and it has been argued that “this provision indicates the Church’s concern to preserve the uniqueness of the charism of each religious institute.”⁶ Indeed, CICALSAL has affirmed, “The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities. It is the reality of many members joined in a single body, the one Body of Christ.”⁷

Fears and Resistance

Father Cannistrà begins the section on the nuns’ fears and resistance by declaring that “*Nothing is new under the sun!*” (Eccl 1:9) and describes how Pius XII’s 1950 Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* evoked similar reactions. He notes that the “fears are always the same,” namely that: “we are becoming like Sisters of active life, the autonomy of the monastery is being affected, the Ordinary will have no more authority, we will be forced to have houses of formation in common, and so on.” Father Cannistrà hopes to see these fears dissipate

⁵ E. McDonough, “Canonical Considerations of Autonomy, and Hierarchical Structure,” in *Review for Religious* 45:5 (1986), p. 671.

⁶ R.M. Harrington, *The Applicability of the Principle of Subsidiarity According to the Code of Canon Law*, JCD thesis, Ottawa, Saint Paul University (1997), pp. 209-210.

⁷ CICALSAL, *Starting Afresh from Christ: A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (19 May 2002), no. 30.



and hopes the Church’s directives will be received more calmly and objectively so that the nuns can devote energy to the issues in CO which actually require attention.

He states that the widening of the Federal President’s authority is what causes the nuns the greatest worry and preoccupation. (I completely agree.) He enumerates five of their biggest fears, and then replies that contemplatives communities should instead fear the *absence* of people who take care of and watch over them (such as the Federal President in her role as visitor is appointed to do). He then quotes St. Teresa of Avila extensively to demonstrate that her humanism was neither “naïve nor conciliatory.” He writes:

“It is important to grasp the preoccupation Teresa had that there would not be repeated in the communities founded by her what she had seen happen elsewhere. Truth and humility should be the foundations on which to build community. If you are too self-confident and do not accept correction from another or try to conceal or disguise the truth, you are deprived of the aid that the Lord offers us through the mediation of the Church and of the brethren. Certainly, the recommendations of [Holy Mother Teresa] echo the culture and mentality of her time, as well as a different canonical system. But it cannot be said that the dangers, temptations and faults you have found are things of the past, and that therefore, there is no need to supervise them. ... In conclusion, I believe that Teresa would not only have nothing to say about the new norms of CO, but indeed she would greet them joyfully.”

Learning to Listen Together

Before concluding, I would like to share one of the first responses I received from a monastery of nuns after VDQ was promulgated. With one voice, these nuns rejected VDQ, preemptively rejected CO which was still forthcoming, and declared that they have not been heard and clearly not understood by the “men” at the Vatican. As a partial response to this objection or concern that nuns were not heard, I would like to share a bit about the consultation process prior to the drafting of VDQ and CO and the “listening Church” in the present pontificate.

An oft-repeated antiphon resounding throughout the pontificate of Pope Francis is his exhortation that we must “*Listen!*,” and in these two years leading to the 2023 Synod on Synodality, he has encouraged us to be a listening Church—to encounter one another, mutually listen, and then discern how the Spirit is inviting us to move forward.⁸

The Pope understands that, “It is a slow and perhaps tiring exercise, this learning to listen to one another—bishops, priests, religious and laity, all the baptized—and to avoid artificial and shallow and prepackaged responses,” so he urges us to follow in the footsteps of the Word made Flesh who—filled with the Holy Spirit—also listened to others: “The Spirit asks us to listen to the questions, concerns and hopes of every Church, people, and nation. And to listen to the world, to the challenges and changes that it sets before us. Let us not soundproof our

⁸ Pope Francis, Homily at the Holy Mass for the Opening of the Synodal Path (10 October 2021).