

**VERBI SPONSA: AN INSTRUCTION
ON THE CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE
AND ON THE ENCLOSURE OF NUNS**

**Issued by the Congregation for Institutes of
Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life**

Some brief comments

Introductory remarks

On 1st May 1999, Pope John Paul approved a document prepared by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life and authorised its publication which occurred on 13th May 1999. The document bears the title *Verbi Sponsa: Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns*.

In dealing with any Church document, it is always necessary to distinguish what is important, what is less important, and what is not very important at all. In any study, the focus ought to be only on what is important. There are some aspects of the Christian life and religious life which are not negotiable. For example, all people in consecrated life profess the three evangelical counsels. Many live also within the enclosure. Yet the counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience are on a different plane from a life lived in enclosure. Acknowledging this does not mean that enclosure is not important; but an

enclosed life does not belong to the essence of consecrated life in the same way as the three evangelical counsels.

There are strong arguments to consider that the (at least remote) origins of consecrated life may be traced back to apostolic times. Indeed, one might easily conclude that the Pope shares this view from the manner in which he begins *Vita Consecrata* on Mount Tabor where Jesus brought some disciples aside for a particular experience¹. Yet to say that the Transfiguration experience constitutes the origin of consecrated life as we know it today is something of an exaggeration: scriptural inspiration for a life according to the evangelical counsels is to be found in abundance², but a search cannot be undertaken in scripture for the inspiration behind the enclosed life as we know it³. The practice of enclosure – even though it has a long history – is of human origin. The details of what constitutes enclosure are to be found in ecclesiastical laws, norms made by human beings, albeit with the highest authority within the Church⁴.

¹ Pope JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 25th March 1996, AAS 88 (1996) 377-486; nn. 14-16.

² E.g. Matthew 19: 12, 21; 20: 28; 1 Corinthians 7:32-35; 2 Corinthians 8: 9; Philippians 2: 6-8.

³ The invitation of Jesus to the apostles to «come away to a lonely place» (Mark 6:31) does indicate an appreciation of the relationship between solitude and prayer dating from the earliest days of Christian discipleship. But this was not understood as a permanent life choice.

⁴ The principal sources of law concerning enclosure prior to the current intervention are: 1917 *Code of Canon Law*, canons 597; 600; 602; SACRED CONGREGATION OF RELIGIOUS,

It must not be forgotten that laws are at the service of the faithful, not *vice-versa*. In his own day, Jesus made it clear that the Sabbath was made for human beings, not the other way round. The Lord insisted that, for serious reasons, even the Sabbath observance as understood by his contemporaries could be set aside⁵. The Sabbath was given for the benefit and good of human beings and, if in some way, its observance became too oppressive then the good of the human being had to have priority. The Church's norms concerning the contemplative life and enclosure are to assist those who live this life; their aim and purpose is to strengthen them in responding to their vocation. Such laws are to be observed with that aim and purpose in mind.

Instruction *Nuper edito*, 6th February 1924, AAS 16 (1924) 96-101; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS, Decree *Conditio plurimorum*, 16th July 1931, in F. X. OCHOA (ed.), *Leges Ecclesiae*, Vol. I, 1340 (preceding this decree is a longer document: *Statuta a sororibus externis monasteriorum monialium cuiusque ordinis servanda*, *ibid.*, coll. 1331-1340); Pope PIUS XII, Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*, 21st November 1950, AAS 43 (1951) 5-24; SACRED CONGREGATION OF RELIGIOUS, Instruction *Inter praeclara*, 23rd November 1950, AAS 43 (1951) 37-44; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS, Instruction *Inter cetera*, 25th March 1956, AAS 48 (1956) 512-526; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS, Instruction *Peculiaris monialium*, 25th March 1961, AAS 53 (1961) 371-380; VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*, 28th October 1965, AAS 58 (1966) 710, n. 16; Pope PAUL VI, Motu proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, 6th August 1966, AAS 58 (1966) 780-781, nn. 30-32; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, Instruction *Venite Seorsum*, 15th August 1969, AAS 61 (1969) 674-690.

⁵ Cf. Matthew 12: 1-8.

The purpose and structure of the document

An outline of the contents is to be found at the end of the Instruction; there are six separate sections:

1. Introduction (nn. 1-2)

2. Part I – The meaning and value of the enclosure of nuns (nn. 3-8)

In the mystery of the Son in his communion of love with the Father (n. 3)

In the mystery of the Church in her exclusive union with Christ the Bridegroom (n. 4)

The ascetical dimension of the cloister (n. 5)

The sharing of contemplative nuns in the communion and mission of the Church (nn. 6-8)

3. Part II – The enclosure of nuns (nn. 9-21)

Papal enclosure (nn. 10-11)

Enclosure according to the Constitutions (n. 12)

Monasteries of nuns belonging to the ancient monastic tradition (n. 13)

Norms for the papal enclosure of nuns:

General Principles (n. 14)

Entering and leaving the enclosure (nn. 15-18)

Meetings of nuns (n. 19)

The means of social communications (n. 20)

Vigilance over the enclosure (n. 21)

4. Part III – Perseverance in fidelity (nn. 22-26)

Formation (nn. 22-24)

Autonomy of the monastery (n. 25)

Relations with Institutes of men (n. 26)

5. Part IV – Associations and federations (nn. 27-30)

6. Conclusion (n. 31).

What might be regarded as the purpose of the document is also stated towards the end: «It is to con-

firm the Church's high esteem for the wholly contemplative life of cloistered nuns and to re-affirm her concern to safeguard its authentic nature that this world may never be without a ray of divine beauty to lighten the path of human existence» (n. 31). The overall thrust of the document is positive; its view of the contemplative way of life is positive. The Congregation presents the document as an expression on its part of a concern to make sure that the wholly contemplative way of life is given all the assistance it needs in order to flourish within the Church. The Pope is quoted in support:

May the Holy Father Pope John Paul II's words of blessing be of support and encouragement to all cloistered contemplatives: «As the Apostles, gathered in prayer with Mary and the other women in the Upper Room, were filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:14), so the community of the faithful hopes today to be able to experience, thanks also to your prayer, a renewed Pentecost for a more effective Gospel testimony on the threshold of the Third Millennium. Dear Sisters, I entrust to Mary, faithful Virgin and House consecrated to God, your Communities and each one of you. May the Mother of the Lord grant that from your monasteries a ray of that light which enveloped the world when the Word was made flesh and came to live among us should shine forth again!» (n. 31).

Within these words of encouragement one can detect a two-fold intention which is made explicit in the document:

- to *confirm* the Church's high esteem for the wholly contemplative way of life
- to *re-affirm* her concern to safeguard its authentic nature.

Verbi Sponsa is not simply a letter of exhortation; it also contains concrete and practical norms which

are intended to help renew the structures of enclosure and give support and encouragement to the contemplative life. The Instruction is very clearly related to the 1994 Synod of Bishops and to the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*; in fact, it might be seen as an extended commentary to n. 59 of *Vita Consecrata*. When reading the present document, it is important to bear in mind this two-fold intention. How it is lived and interpreted and enacted in the flesh is the responsibility of each monastery and each individual.

This commented reading of the Instruction will follow the structure of the document itself.

1. Introduction

At the beginning of the introduction in nn. 1-2, *Verbi Sponsa* places the enclosed life at the centre of the life of the Church; it quotes *Vita Consecrata* which speaks of the vocation and mission of cloistered nuns «as a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord whom she loves above all things». The wholly contemplative life, according to this document, reminds all Christians of their calling «to enter a grace filled encounter with God in prayer». The consecrated life is thus not just for those who profess the evangelical counsels: it is for the whole Church, as the Pope stressed more than once in *Vita Consecrata*⁶.

⁶ E.g. «We are all aware of the treasure which the gift of the consecrated life in the variety of its charisms and institutions represents for the ecclesial community» (n. 2); «Institutes completely devoted to contemplation, composed of either women or men, are for the Church a reason for pride and a

As was mentioned earlier, the Pope seems to see in the experience of the few disciples on Tabor the real origins of consecrated life in the Church, i.e. the call of a few to come aside for a particular and intense experience⁷. He does not say it is a better or worse way of life, or that those who live it are better or worse than others. What those disciples had was a unique experience which the others did not share. One can detect echoes of the impact of that experience in Peter's second letter⁸; it is obvious that his experience touched him deeply. The Instruction sees in the life of those who live an enclosed contemplative life an echo of the experience of Mary: «The cloistered nuns see themselves especially in the Virgin Mary, Bride and Mother, figure of the Church; and sharing the blessedness of those who believe,

source of heavenly graces» (n. 8); «The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life» (n. 21); «Consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion at the service of the mission of the universal Church by the very fact that the manifold charisms of their respective institutes are granted by the Holy Spirit for the good of the entire Mystical Body, whose upbuilding they must serve» (n. 47); etc.

⁷ «The evangelical basis of consecrated life is to be sought in the special relationship which Jesus, in his earthly life, established with some of his disciples. He called them not only to welcome the Kingdom of God into their own lives, but also to put their lives at its service, leaving everything behind and closely imitating his own way of life»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 14.

⁸ «We had seen his majesty for ourselves. He was honoured and glorified by God the Father, when the Sublime Glory itself spoke to him and said "This is my Son, the Beloved; he enjoys my favour". We heard this ourselves, spoken from heaven, when we were with him on the holy mountain»; 2 Peter 1: 17-18.

they echo her "Yes" and her loving adoration of the Word of life, becoming with her the living "memory" of the Church's spousal love» (n. 1). Contemplatives are called to see themselves as mirrors of Our Lady in faith and in adoration of the Word. One of the themes central to this presentation of the contemplative life is the importance of Scripture, the written Word of God, and divine inspiration which is the Word of God speaking through the Church and its members⁹.

There are many references in *Vita Consecrata* to the need for faithfulness and fidelity¹⁰. This document can be seen as a concrete aid on the part of the Church to assist contemplative women to remain faithful to their vocation in the midst of change. *Verbi Sponsa* contains changes to the discipline governing enclosure. Some might say the changes are

⁹ This openness to the Word of God alive and active in the Church may be seen in the number of documents and interventions which have come since Vatican II. A cursory glance at footnote n. 8 reveals some of the documents that have been issued with special reference to the contemplative life: VATICAN COUNCIL II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, 46, AAS 57 (1965) 52; Pope PAUL VI, Motu Proprio *Ecclesiae Sanctae* (6 August 1966), II, 30-31, AAS 58 (1966) 780; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, Instruction *La dimensione contemplativa della vita religiosa* (12 August 1980), nn. 24-29, in F.X. OCHOA, *Leges Ecclesiae*, vol. VI, coll. 8013-8014; CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Potissimum Institutioni* (2 February 1990), IV, 72-85, AAS 82 (1990) 514-520; Pope JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 8; 59.

¹⁰ E.g. «There is need for fidelity to the founding charism and subsequent spiritual heritage of each Institute»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 36; «At no stage of life can people feel so secure and committed that they do not need to give careful attention to ensuring perseverance in faithfulness»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 69.

excessive; others might say they are not at all what was expected. Regardless of expectations, within those changes the Congregation expects fidelity to the charism of the institute; not to what is peripheral, but to what is truly fundamental. A link with the past is made explicit, lest there be any confusion: «While re-affirming the doctrinal foundations of enclosure set out by the Instruction *Venite Seorsum* (I-V) and the Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (No. 59), this present Instruction establishes the norms which are to regulate the papal enclosure of nuns who are dedicated to a wholly contemplative life» (n. 2).

From a canonical point of view this statement is very significant because it means that the doctrinal sections of *Venite Seorsum* remain valid teaching¹¹. The practical norms contained in the rest of that document have been replaced, even though almost all of them are referred to in the footnotes. In this way, the current norms may be seen as having evolved from earlier regulations concerning enclosure¹². Knowing this will be helpful when interpreting a particular norm.

¹¹ It is true to say that sections I-VI of *Venite Seorsum* (AAS 61 [1969] 674-687) are an effort to locate disciplinary norms within a perspective which is profoundly spiritual and even mystical. By contrast, the introductory sections of *Sponsa Christi* (AAS 43 [1951] 5-15), *Inter praeclara* (AAS 43 [1951] 37), and *Inter cetera* (AAS 48 [1956] 512-513) tend to focus on the need to protect, regulate and safeguard the life within the limits of the enclosure, without attempting to offer a theological or spiritual rationale.

¹² A comparison of all the twentieth century legislation concerning the enclosure of nuns reveals a certain continuity of expression. However, *Venite Seorsum* abbreviated the detail of the earlier regulations; *Verbi Sponsa* has continued that trend, leaving many of the details to the domain of proper law.

2. Part I: The meaning and value of the enclosure of nuns

In Part I there are four paragraphs or sub-sections.

2.1 *In the mystery of the Son in his communion of love with the Father*

This first paragraph evokes the early sections of *Vita Consecrata*¹³. It locates the contemplative way of life in the mystery of the Son in His communion of love with the Father. Before anything purely practical about enclosure is mentioned, attention is focused on the mystery of the life of the Trinity. The Instruction speaks of the relationship of the enclosed

¹³ The first Chapter of the Exhortation is entitled «Confessio Trinitatis». On several occasions, the Pope takes the opportunity to call to mind the fact that consecrated life in the Church is a confession of the communion that lies at the heart of the Blessed Trinity: e.g. «The consecrated life is thus called constantly to deepen the gift of the evangelical counsels with a love which grows ever more genuine and strong in the Trinitarian dimension: love for Christ, which leads to closeness with him; love for the Holy Spirit, who opens our hearts to his inspiration; love for the Father, the first origin and supreme goal of the consecrated life. The consecrated life thus becomes a confession and a sign of the Trinity, whose mystery is held up to the Church as the model and source of every form of Christian life»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 21; «The consecrated life can certainly be credited with having effectively helped to keep alive in the Church the obligation of fraternity as a form of witness to the Trinity. By constantly promoting fraternal love, also in the form of common life, the consecrated life has shown that sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships and create a new type of solidarity»; *ibid.* n. 41.

contemplative to God. This is an imitation of Jesus on the mountain in relationship to the Father, guided by the Spirit. The physical enclosure itself is seen first and foremost as a special way of being with the Lord, an act of renunciation in joyful expectation of the Lord's return.

The enclosure therefore, even in its physical form, is a special way of being with the Lord, of sharing in «Christ's emptying of himself by means of a radical poverty, expressed in [...] renunciation not only of things but also of "space", of contacts, of so many benefits of creation», at one with the fruitful silence of the Word on the Cross. It is clear then that «withdrawal from the world in order to dedicate oneself in solitude to a more intense life of prayer is nothing other than a special way of living and expressing the Paschal Mystery of Christ». It is a true encounter with the Risen Lord, a journey in ceaseless ascent to the Father's house.

In watchful waiting for the Lord's return, the cloister becomes a response to the absolute love of God for his creature and the fulfilment of his eternal desire to welcome the creature into the mystery of intimacy with the Word, who gave himself as Bridegroom in the Eucharist and remains in the tabernacle as the heart of full communion with him, drawing to himself the entire life of the cloistered nun in order to offer it constantly to the Father (cf. Heb 7:25). To the gift of Christ the Bridegroom, who on the Cross offered his body unreservedly, the nun responds in like terms with the gift of the «body», offering herself with Jesus Christ to the Father and cooperating with him in the work of redemption. Separation from the world thus gives a Eucharistic quality to the whole of cloistered life, since «besides its elements of sacrifice and expiation, [it assumes] the aspect of thanksgiving to the Father, by sharing in the thanksgiving of the beloved Son» (n. 3).

According to this vision, enclosure is a form of return to Christ for the gift of Himself in the Eucharist. In one of the footnotes, this is developed by

quoting from Pope John Paul II's Letter to Cloistered Nuns on the Occasion of the Eighth Centenary of the Birth of Saint Clare of Assisi (11 August 1993): «In reality, Clare's whole life was a *eucharist* because [...] from her cloister she raised up a continual "thanksgiving" to God in her prayer, praise, supplication, intercession, weeping, offering and sacrifice. She accepted everything and offered it to the Father in union with the infinite "thanks" of the only-begotten Son»¹⁴. In this way, long before the enclosed way of life is spoken of in terms of discipline or obligation, it is presented as a response to a gift, an act of thanksgiving, to be lived with joy.

One of the greatest values in contemporary Western society is freedom of movement. Those who dedicate themselves totally to the contemplative way of life are asked to renounce willingly their mobility for the sake of the Gospel. Such a renunciation is understood in the Instruction primarily as an act of thanksgiving to God, a eucharist which involves complete self-giving and sacrifice; primarily, it does not have to do with the limits of the enclosure or the law, but with what goes on in the heart of each and every individual who professes to live this way of life.

2.2 In the mystery of the Church, in her exclusive union with Christ the bridegroom

The contemplative life is also to be understood within the perspective of the relationship between God and his holy people. To help explain this, the

¹⁴ Quoted in Footnote 15 of the Instruction. The full text is not to be found in *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*.

Instruction takes up the image of the Bride and Groom, an image with very deep biblical roots. It is a dimension which belongs to the whole Church, as the document makes clear: «The nuptial dimension belongs to the whole Church, but consecrated life is a vivid image of it, since it more clearly expresses the impulse towards the Bridegroom» (n. 4). This image is portrayed above all in the love between a wife and her husband, as St. Paul makes clear in the Letter to the Ephesians¹⁵.

According to the Instruction, the nuptial relationship between God and his people is also manifest in a very striking manner in the case of enclosed contemplatives:

In a still more significant and radical way, the mystery of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with the Lord is expressed in the vocation of cloistered nuns, precisely because their life is entirely dedicated to God, loved above all else, in a ceaseless straining towards the heavenly Jerusalem and in anticipation of the eschatological Church confirmed in the procession and contemplation of God (n. 4).

Thus the life of the contemplative is a reminder to all Christian people of the fundamental vocation of everyone to come to God. The enclosed life cannot be separated from the life of the Church. It may be set apart in a different way, lived within a different space, but it is not isolated or cut off from the rest of the Church. By living the life faithfully, contemplatives are called to try and remind people that there are values at work in the world and in their

¹⁵ Ephesians 5: 31-33.

lives, far deeper than the superficial values out of which most people manage to operate¹⁶.

Using almost poetic and very evocative language, the Instruction speaks of the cloister as the desert where the Bride meets the Groom in order to share in his suffering¹⁷. The Instruction sees Our Blessed Lady as the role model for the contemplative in this perspective:

In this light, nuns re-live and perpetuate in the Church the presence and the work of Mary. Welcoming the Word in faith and adoring silence, they put themselves at the service of the mystery of the Incarnation, and united to Christ Jesus in His offering of Himself to the Father, they become co-workers in the mystery of Redemption. Just as in the Upper Room, Mary in her heart, with her prayerful presence, watched over the origins of the Church, so too now the Church's journey is entrusted to the loving heart and praying hands of cloistered nuns (n. 4).

The role of the contemplative within the Church thus is not to be understood as passive; it is active:

¹⁶ This recalls the words of Pope John Paul addressed to all who live a consecrated life in the Church: «Consecrated men and women are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Such communities are places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes, where love, drawing strength from prayer, the wellspring of communion, is called to become a pattern of life and source of joy»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 51.

¹⁷ This theme is reminiscent of the beginning of *Venite Seorsum* (AAS 61 [1969] 675) I, where the experience of the people of Israel in the desert during the Exodus is considered as an image of the relationship between the contemplative and God.

the contemplative promotes evangelisation in the same way Mary did, by her silent, praying presence at the very centre of the family of the faithful.

2.3 The ascetical dimension of the cloister

Instead of speaking about the restrictions on movement as a first principle, the Instruction places the ascetical dimension of the enclosure in close relationship to the First Commandment:

As an ascetical means of immense value, the cloister is especially well suited to life wholly directed to contemplation. Its totality signals absolute dedication to God, and it therefore becomes a sign of God's holy watchfulness over his creatures and a unique mode of belonging to him alone. It is an archetypal and effective way of living the nuptial relationship with God in the exclusiveness of love and without undue interference from persons or material things, so that the creature, intent on God and absorbed by him, may live solely for the praise of his glory.

The contemplative nun fulfils to the highest degree the First Commandment of the Lord: «You will love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind», making it the full meaning of her life and loving in God all the brothers and sisters. She moves towards the perfection of charity, choosing God as «the one thing necessary», loving him exclusively as All in all. Through her unconditional love of him and in the spirit of renunciation proposed by the Gospel, she accomplishes the sacrifice of all good things, «consecrating» every good thing to God alone. This is so that he alone may dwell in the utter silence of the cloister, filling it with his word and presence, and the Bride may truly dedicate herself to the Only One, «in constant prayer and ardent penance» in the mystery of a total and exclusive love (n. 5).

According to the Instruction, even the very architecture of a monastery can assist in this total

dedication to God. By living within a clearly defined enclosure, all good things are sacrificed so that nothing created can distract from the one single quest. There is no dispersal of energies and no unnecessary accumulation of good things. The commitment to this way of life is indeed an act of asceticism. It is withdrawing, it is refining, it is purifying. What is being surrendered is not something evil; it is good; but it is being sacrificed in order to achieve something and serve Someone infinitely better¹⁸.

The section ends by beginning to relate the ideals of the enclosed life to some of its practicalities: «In consequence, the regulation of the cloister, in its practical aspects, must be that it allows the realisation of this sublime contemplative ideal, which implies total dedication, undivided attention, emotional wholeness and consistency of life» (n. 5). The practical norms which the document contains are intended to allow each and every sister and community to achieve the ideal of devoting themselves entirely to the love of God. The norms are not to be seen or understood as having a value in themselves: they are simply a means towards the achievement of a great goal.

¹⁸ «In the light of this vocation and ecclesial mission, the cloister responds to the need, felt as paramount, to be with the Lord. Choosing an enclosed space where they will live their lives, cloistered nuns share in Christ's emptying of himself by means of a radical poverty, expressed in their renunciation not only of things but also of "space", of contacts, of so many benefits of creation»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 59.

2.4 *The sharing of contemplative nuns in the communion and mission of the Church*

This part of the document has three sub-divisions. Each of these helps to spell out some ideas which are encountered briefly in the Introduction and in the initial sections of the document.

2.4.1 In the communion of the Church

Although the contemplative life in the tradition of the Church is enclosed, it is not in any sense cut off. The contemplative religious are already an integral part of the Church:

Through their specific call to union with God in contemplation, cloistered nuns are fully within the communion of the Church, becoming a unique sign of the entire Christian community's intimate union with God. Through prayer, especially the celebration of the liturgy, and their daily self-offering, they intercede for the whole people of God and unite themselves to Jesus Christ's thanksgiving to the Father.

Therefore the contemplative life is the nun's particular way of being the Church, of building the communion of the Church, of fulfilling a mission for the good of the whole Church (n. 6).

This «being in communion» recalls another theme developed by Pope John Paul in *Vita Consecrata*: the concept of the Church and community life as a fellowship or communion¹⁹. The Instruction

¹⁹ «A great task also belongs to the consecrated life in the light of the teaching about the Church as communion, so strongly proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion and to prac-

points out that the community of enclosed religious is itself an expression of true communion:

Because of the mutual love involved, fraternal life is a God-filled space in which the mystical presence of the Risen Lord is experienced: in a spirit of communion, nuns share the grace of the same vocation with the members of their own community, helping one another to follow the same path, advancing together towards the Lord, one in heart and soul.

This notion of communion or fellowship is extended to include the relations between individual monasteries of the same Order and, above all, the life of the nuns themselves at the very heart of the Church.

2.4.2 In the mission of the Church

The proper role of contemplatives in the mission of the Church is inextricably united to the work of those actively engaged in evangelisation and ecumenism, and the growth of the Kingdom of God among the different cultures of the world. These are themes the Pope presented in *Vita Consecrata* as areas for special attention within all of consecrated life²⁰. Now the Congregation seeks to make explicit

tise the spirituality of communion as “witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God’s design”. The sense of ecclesial communion, developing into a spirituality of communion, promotes a way of thinking, speaking and acting which enables the Church to grow in depth and extension»; *Vita Consecrata* n. 46.

²⁰ Cf. *Vita Consecrata* nn. 76-83; 100-103.

the proper role of contemplatives within this mission. Evangelising or missionary activity in the sense of pushing out the boundaries is explicitly left to others. This is part of the self-emptying that is required of each and every individual contemplative. There are things that perhaps a gifted individual sees that she might do better than others; but these must be left to those whose proper calling it is to carry them out.

The Instruction is quite unambiguous about its position in this regard: «The specific contribution of nuns to evangelisation, to ecumenism, to the growth of the Kingdom of God in the different cultures, is eminently spiritual. It is the soul and leaven of apostolic ventures, leaving the practical implementation of them to those whose vocation it is» (n. 7). This may seem to set unacceptable limits to the initiatives taken by some contemplative communities, but it is a salutary reminder of the need for all members of the Church to respect the legitimate diversity and autonomy, of life of other members. True communion is effected when each person and group plays its proper role; the mission of the Church is carried out more effectively when all the members contribute in fellowship, and not in competition. For contemplatives to take on initiatives which are properly apostolic might indicate an attitude which believes that a life of prayer and penance is somehow not enough.

History shows that several contemplative communities in the past decided, often with the encouragement of the local Bishop, to integrate their contemplative life with some form of external apostolate, e.g. schools, nursing homes, orphanages,

etc.²¹. The work which was done by these religious was indeed a great contribution to the local and universal Church. But it often led to the religious becoming somewhat distanced from their own proper charism. The Instruction seeks to reinforce the protection guaranteed by the Code of Canon Law for a way of life wholly dedicated to contemplation²².

2.4.3 The monastery in the local Church

The monastery of contemplatives is spoken of in glowing terms as a place of encounter with God: «It is the dwelling place of His unique presence, like the tent of meeting where He is met day after day, where the thrice Holy God fills the entire space and is recognised and honoured as the only Lord» (n. 8). It is a place located within the life of the local Church. In fact, the Instruction describes a contemplative monastery as a gift for the local Church to which it belongs. It also brings an added dimension to the life of the local Church: «Representing the prayerful face of the Church, a monastery makes the Church's

²¹ E.g. the Institute now known as The Sisters of Saint Clare began as a group of autonomous monasteries of Poor Clares in Ireland, each with some form of external apostolate attached to the monastery.

²² «Institutes which are wholly directed to contemplation always have an outstanding part in the mystical Body of Christ. They offer to God an exceptional sacrifice of praise. They embellish the people of God with very rich fruits of holiness, move them by their example, and give them increase by a hidden apostolic fruitfulness. Because of this, no matter how urgent the needs of the active apostolate, the members of these institutes cannot be called upon to assist in the various pastoral ministries»; Canon 674.

presence more complete and more meaningful in the local community» (n. 8). This notion goes back to the document from Vatican II on missionary activity, *Ad Gentes*²³. Without the presence of contemplatives, a local Church is missing something very important, i.e. the whole dimension of the witness to the primacy of God's presence, the primacy of God's love. Where it is present, the monastery represents the very heart of the local Church: «The monastery represents what is most intimate to a local Church – its heart, where the Spirit always groans in supplication for the entire community and where thanksgiving rises unceasingly for the Life which he sends forth each day» (n. 8).

Because of its importance in the life of the local Church, all the faithful must care for such a monastery. The Instruction speaks of the responsibility of the laity, the bishops, and the priests in caring for the welfare of the monastery. They have a responsibility to make sure that the contemplatives have what is needed to carry out their role in the mission of the Church:

Only in the perspective of their true and fundamental apostolic mission, which consists in «concerning themselves with God alone», will monasteries be able – to the extent and in a way conforming to the spirit and tradition of their

²³ «The various undertakings aimed at establishing the contemplative life are worthy of special mention; some aim at implanting the rich tradition of their own order and retaining the essential elements of the monastic life, others are returning to the more simple forms of early monasticism. All, however, are eagerly seeking a real adaptation to local conditions. The contemplative life should be restored everywhere, because it belongs to the fullness of the Church's presence»; VATICAN COUNCIL II, Decree *Ad Gentes*, n. 18, AAS 58 (1966) 969.

particular religious family – to welcome those who wish to draw from their spiritual experience or share in the community's prayer. Physical separation however should be maintained, in a way that recalls the meaning of contemplative life and safeguards the conditions for it, in conformity with the norms on enclosure set out in this Document (n. 8).

The physical separation must be maintained in a way that recalls the meaning and the value of a life dedicated to contemplation. The simple fact of high gates, high walls, locked doors, etc. does not mean anything in itself. These have to become a genuine expression of the desire of the nuns to lead this particular way of life; they must also be understandable to the people of the locality so that the witness of the nuns might be more fully effective. Of course, there will be some practical difficulties, e.g. there will have to be some way of sharing common worship and praise of God; there will have to be some way at least of being heard in prayer, if not actually seen; there will have to be some kind of a welcoming presence, particularly for those who come to the monastery in times of personal difficulties and distress. All of these issues can be addressed only in accordance with the norms laid down in the document.

The proper role of contemplative women in the local Church – as in the universal Church – is described as follows:

In a spirit of freedom and hospitality, «with the tenderness of Christ», nuns bear in their hearts the sufferings and anxieties of all those who seek their help, and indeed of all men and women. Deeply attuned to the experiences of the Church and of people today, they cooperate spiritually in building the Kingdom of Christ so that «God may be everything to everyone» (n. 8).

With these words, the first part of the Instruction comes to an end. It is by far the more important part, since it deals with the essence of the contemplative life. To read the norms on enclosure outside of the context of the Church's teaching on the contemplative life, or to read the teaching without any reference to or respect for the norms leads to a distorted view of what constitutes the essence of a life wholly dedicated to contemplation. External observance without a real appreciation and understanding of the core values is sterile and not life-giving; an understanding of the contemplative way of life which excludes or reduces the need for external expression of the quest for God has not taken account of the fundamental needs of human beings or of the wisdom of the Church down through the centuries.

3. Part II: The Enclosure of Nuns

The second part of the Instruction is very close in its content to Part VII of *Venite Seorsum*. Initially, a few fundamental principles are stated, recalling the essence of the contemplative vocation and reflecting on what has been found useful. Enclosure is described as «a proven help» to the fulfilment of the contemplative vocation (n. 9); it is not something imposed for any punitive reasons or any kind of purely organisational motives. It is there as a help towards creating a space for the fulfilment of the vocation; a help which has proved more than useful in the past. The Instruction says: «The particular demands of separation from the world have thus been received by the Church and canonically ordered for the benefit of the contemplative life itself. The discipline of enclosure is therefore

a gift, for it protects the foundational charism of monasteries» (n. 9). The discipline which is referred to as a gift obviously refers not simply to the written norms but to the manner in which those norms are received in the heart as well; in other words it refers also to the self-discipline of the individual, the discipline of the group, rather than solely to the discipline of a law or structure imposed from outside.

Fidelity to the separation from the world which this discipline entails is not slavish observance of legal minutiae: that would run contrary to the quest for God alone which the first part of the Instruction sees as the one thing necessary in the life of the contemplative. Rather, the fidelity which is expected is to a discipline which has helped preserve the essentials of the contemplative way of life. The Instruction states:

Such fidelity is fundamental for the life of an Institute, which really endures only as long as it remains rooted in its original charism. For this reason the vital renewal of monasteries is essentially linked to the authenticity of the search for God in contemplation and the authenticity of the means which foster that search, and it must be considered genuine when it restores its original splendour (n. 9).

Because of the significance of the practical discipline with regard to what is fundamental to the wholly contemplative way of life «it is the duty, the responsibility and the joy of nuns to understand, maintain and defend firmly and intelligently their special vocation, safeguarding the identity of their specific charism from any attempt to alter it whether coming from within or from without» (n. 9). What is presented in this document is not some externally imposed norm; rather, it is a call to be faithful to a structure which has served the contemplative life well. The basic responsibility for

observing the discipline rests with each and every nun. If enclosure is not embraced in the individual's heart, it cannot be lived in the joy and freedom which brings life; it will remain something to be endured and all sorts of efforts will be made to evade the consequences of or alter the nature of the vocation.

3.1 *Papal Enclosure*

Before addressing the norms in detail, the Instruction presents some familiar distinctions. Quoting canon 667 §3, it recalls that «monasteries of nuns who are wholly devoted to the contemplative life must observe papal enclosure, that is, in accordance with the norms given by the Apostolic See». This way of life expresses more dramatically than others the self-giving of Christ. So «the enclosure is the sign, the safeguard and the form of the wholly contemplative life, lived as a total gift of self, embracing the entirety of the individual's intentions and actions, so that Jesus may be truly the Lord, the sole desire and sole happiness of the nun, joyful in her expectation and radiant in the anticipated contemplation of Christ's face» (n. 10). Concern for this way of life since the Second Vatican Council has led to several interventions on behalf of the supreme authority within the Church²⁴ which

²⁴ Footnote 58 of the Instruction refers specifically to interventions such as *Perfectae Caritatis* n. 7, AAS 58 (1966) 705; *Vita Consecrata* nn. 8, 59; SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, Instruction *La dimensione contemplativa della vita religiosa*, 12 August 1980, n. 29, in F.X. OCHOA, *Leges Ecclesiae*, vol. VI, col. 8014. To these might be added the documents referred to in footnote n. 4 above.

the Congregation regards as acts of the Church's teaching authority: «The Church's Magisterium has often restated the need for this manner of life, which is a source of grace and holiness for the Church, to be faithfully maintained» (n. 10). The various documents referred to are to be understood as teaching, a source of encouragement, exhortation, and challenge, not an order to be obeyed without thought or reflection.

The document gives three criteria for what the Church regards as the wholly contemplative life:

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 will 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 it must be submitted to the approval of the Holy See (n. 11).

Papal enclosure refers strictly to that enclosure regulated by the Holy See, into which and out of which movement is very limited. The three distinguishing features mentioned here (i.e. total dedication to God, the exclusion of works of the apostolate and a separation which is truly physical, not merely symbolic) are fully consistent with the doctrinal principles outlined in the first part. They are

part of the essential distinguishing features of this particular way of living a consecrated life in the Church. Canon 667 §1 states: «In accordance with the institute's own law, there is to be in all houses an enclosure appropriate to the character and mission of the institute. Some part of the house is always to be reserved to the members alone». That also may be described as enclosure; it is a valuable institution for all religious, given the centrality of prayer and privacy and silence in religious life. But for contemplatives, it must be much more. Other institutes can afford to have symbolic signs, indicating those reserved areas, e.g. signs on doors marked «private»; but contemplatives need something more obvious, more concrete and more permanent.

3.2 *Other forms of enclosure*

There is no mention in *Verbi Sponsa* of the distinction between major and minor papal enclosure. That distinction was introduced by Pope Pius XII in *Sponsa Christi*²⁵ and was further defined in *Inter praeclara*²⁶. However, Pope Paul VI effectively

²⁵ «Severior Monialium clausura, quae pontificia dicitur, firmis semper ac pro omnibus monasteriis iis notis quae eidem quasi naturales sunt, duplex in posterum distinguetur: *maior* et *minor*»; *Sponsa Christi* n. IV, §1, AAS 43 (1951) 16.

²⁶ «Clausura papalis Monialium in posterum duplex erit: *maior*, quae Monasteriis reservatur in quibus, licet numerus Monialium imminutus sit, vota solemnita emittuntur et vita unice contemplativa ducitur; et *minor*, quae, ex regula, Monasteriis applicatur in quibus vita non unice contemplativa colitur

abolished the distinction by suppressing minor papal enclosure²⁷. The Instruction *Venite Seorsum* addressed the issue of enclosure only for those nuns wholly dedicated to contemplation. The current Instruction includes general norms for those other nuns who associate the contemplative life with some work of the apostolate or charity. Such monasteries do not follow papal enclosure. Rather, «they define in their Constitutions an enclosure befitting their specific character and in accordance with sound traditions» (n. 12). Authority to give permission to enter or leave the enclosure is entrusted to the Superior in such monasteries, in accordance with proper law.

Following a distinction drawn in *Perfectae Caritatis*²⁸, the Instruction speaks of the «monasteries of

vel ubi Moniales vota tantum simplicia profitentur»; S.C. REL., Instr. *Inter praeclara*, n. VI, AAS 43 (1951) 38.

²⁷ «Clausura minor tollitur Moniales ergo quae ex instituto operibus externis sunt deditae, propriam clausuram in Constitutionibus definiant. Moniales vero quae, licet ex instituto sint contemplativae, opera tamen externa susceperunt, post congruum temporis spatium ipsis ad deliberandum concessum, aut, operibus externis relictis, clausuram papalem retineant, aut, iisdem operibus servatis, propriam clausuram in Constitutionibus definiant, firma manente earumdem conditione Monialium»; Pope PAUL VI, Motu proprio, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, II, n. 32, AAS 58 (1966) 780-781.

²⁸ Alongside the monasteries of institutes wholly dedicated to contemplation are monasteries which belong to the «venerable institution of monastic life» (*Perfectae Caritatis* n. 9, AAS 58 [1966] 706). In some of these monasteries, a life dedicated to contemplation was lived; in others, some apostolic or charitable activity had been taken on.

nuns belonging to the venerable monastic tradition, expressed in the various forms of the contemplative life» (n. 13). When the nuns in these monasteries actually live a life wholly dedicated to contemplation, they must observe papal enclosure, i.e. the norms contained in the Instruction. On the other hand, «if other activities of service to the People of God are associated with the contemplative life, or if they practise more extensive forms of hospitality in fidelity to the tradition of their Order, their enclosure is defined in their Constitutions» (n. 13). In this way, monasteries of nuns belonging to institutes defined as monastic must observe the appropriate form of enclosure: even if the whole institute is not wholly dedicated to a contemplative life, a particular monastery which is so dedicated must observe the norms for papal enclosure.

3.3 *The Norms for the Papal Enclosure of Nuns*

After a brief consideration of the Church's teaching on the contemplative life, as well as some general features of the way of life, the juridical norms themselves are set forth. This part of the document is divided into five basic sections:

- general principles outlined in n. 14;
- entering and leaving the enclosure in nn. 15-18;
- meetings of nuns in n. 19;
- means of social communications in n. 20;
- vigilance over the enclosure in n. 21.

The titles are quite similar to those found in *Venite Seorsum* VII. The norms are less detailed but the document may be seen to be a continuation or an evolution of it. All the footnotes refer back to one or other of the earlier norms in *Venite Seorsum*.

3.4 *General principles*²⁹

14. §1. The enclosure of nuns of the wholly contemplative life is called papal, because the rules governing it must be confirmed by the Holy See, even in the case of norms to be specified in the Constitutions and in other legislative texts of the Institute (Statutes, Directories, etc.).

Given the great variety of Institutes dedicated to the wholly contemplative life and given the variety of their traditions, some aspects of their separation from the world are left to particular law, and are subject to the approval of the Holy See.

Particular law can also lay down stricter norms regarding enclosure³⁰.

This particular norm has its parallels in Norms 1 and 9 of *Venite Seorsum*. It recalls the distinction between papal and constitutional enclosure. While there will be a fundamental uniformity of discipline concerning enclosure, the Instruction makes it clear that each Institute will wish to express that discipline in its own way, even establishing a more strict regime where that is consistent with the charism of the institute. Whatever the details contained in particular legislation, it is clear that these must conform to the norms set forth by the

²⁹ While the text of the norms is quoted in the official English translation, the Latin original is used in the footnotes since, juridically, it is the normative text.

³⁰ «Monialibus vitae unice contemplativae designata clausura papalis nuncupatur, quandoquidem regulae eam moderantes a Sancta Sede approbentur oportet, etiam cum de legibus agitur in Constitutionibus aliisque eiusdem Instituti codicibus (Statutis, Directoriis, et similibus) statuendis. Varietate inspecta Institutum quae vitae omnino contemplativae vacant eorumque traditionum, remittuntur ad ius particulare quidam modi separationis a mundo quos Apostolica Sedes approbet necesse est. Regulas de clausura etiam strictiores decernere potest ius particulare».

Holy See. The fact that this norm leaves the definition of «some aspects of their separation from the world» to particular law does not give any institute – even less a monastery – permission to establish a discipline which is contrary to what is contained in *Verbi Sponsa*.

3.5 *Extent of enclosure*

§2. The law of papal enclosure extends to the residence and to all areas, indoors and outdoors, reserved to the nuns. The means by which the monastery building itself, the choir, the parlours and all areas reserved to the nuns are separated from the outside must be physical and effective, not just symbolic or «neutral». These means are to be defined in the Constitutions and supplementary legislative documents, with due regard both for the places themselves and for the different traditions of individual Institutes and monasteries.

The participation of the faithful in the liturgy is not a reason for the nuns to leave the enclosure nor for the faithful to enter the nuns' choir. Guests cannot be allowed to enter the monastery enclosure³¹.

A further dialogue between the universal law of the Church as contained in this document and the law proper to each institute is necessary when it comes to the details of the extent of the enclosure. *Verbi Sponsa*

³¹ «§2. Ad habitacula cunctaque spatia interiora et exteriora monialibus reservata papalis extenditur clausura.

Condiciones exterioris seiunctionis aedificii ipsius monastici et chori, exedriorum et omnium locorum monialibus destinorum oportet sint corporales ac efficaces, non solummodo symbolicae neque ut dicuntur « neutra », in Constitutionibus additisque codicibus circumscribendae, ratione habita locorum nec non variarum in singulis Institutis ac monasteriis traditionum. Communicatio fidelium liturgicis in ritibus non permittit monialium egressionem e clausura neque fidelium in monacharum chorum ingressionem; hospites si qui sunt non licet introduci in monasterii clausuram».

does not make mention of the actual means of separation as *Venite Seorsum* did in Norms 3 and 4³². Nevertheless, the current norm makes it clear that the separation must be physical and effective, not just symbolic or neutral. The details of the means of separation are left to the particular law of each institute. Since the implementation is left to the responsibility of each institute and monastery, what is important here is honesty and consistency. If enclosure is truly the response to God's love mentioned in n. 3, then there should be no difficulty in finding a way that expresses the joy of that response in a way that is understandable and challenging to the people of today.

One particularly delicate matter related to this norm has to do with the liturgy. While some liturgists insist that there ought to be no hard and fast division between Christians during the celebration of the liturgy, the fact remains that such separations do exist. The life choice made before God by some individuals cannot be compromised in an effort to encourage others to take part in the liturgy. At the same time, the community of enclosed religious

³² «3. Saepta monasterii legi clausurae obnoxia ita constituentur ut materiale separationem efficiant, quae scilicet ingressus et egressus impediat (v.g. muro, sive alio efficaci modo, veluti tabulis ligneis, ferreo reti, densa firmaque saepe). Ingressus vero et egressus fiant per portas quae clavibus obserrantur.

4. Modus huius efficacis separationis, praesertim quoad chorum et collocatorium, definiatur in Constitutionibus et in codicibus additiis, attenta diversitate sive traditionum singulorum Institutorum, sive temporum locorumque condicionum (v.g. cratibus, cancellis, stabili mensa, etc.); *Venite Seorsum* Normae 3 et 4, AAS 61 (1969) 687-688.

should in some way be audible and/or visible as part of the Christian assembly. The norm here does not outlaw active participation by enclosed contemplatives in liturgy which is shared with other members of the faithful; rather, it points out that, during the liturgy, the boundaries established as a result of other sacred bonds must be respected. Thus, for example, the nuns' choir is not open ground to the rest of the faithful, nor is the rest of the extern chapel the appropriate place for the enclosed nuns to participate in the liturgy. There should be no ambiguity about the limits of these boundaries.

The same care must be taken when showing hospitality to guests. No provision is made by the law for guests to spend time inside the enclosure, whether they are fully residential elsewhere in the monastery, or whether they are simply visiting.

3.6 *The obligation of enclosure*

§3. a) By virtue of the law of enclosure, nuns, novices and postulants must live within the enclosure of the monastery, and it is not permissible for them to leave it, except in cases provided for by law; nor it is permissible for anyone to enter the area of the enclosure of the monastery, with the exception of cases provided for by law.

§3. b) Norms concerning the separation from the world of extern Sisters are to be defined by particular law.

§3. c) The law of enclosure entails a grave obligation of conscience both for the nuns and for outsiders³³.

³³ «§3. a) Vi legis ipsius super monialium clausura, degere debent novitiae ac postulantes intra monasterii claustrum neque iis excedere licet, nisi in casibus iure praevisis, nec cuiquam pariter intrare licet monasterii clausurae limites nisi ex causis in iure memoratis.

In keeping with the trend in the Church to reduce as far as possible the number of automatic penalties, *Verbi Sponsa* makes no mention of any punishment incurred by those who might be in breach of the law of enclosure. The penalties of the old law³⁴ had been suspended by *Venite Seorsum* until the promulgation of the new Code of Canon Law³⁵. But the 1983 Code made no mention of such penalties. The obligation to observe this law falls on all who live within the enclosure, i.e. postulants, novices, and professed. They may not leave except in accordance with the law. The obligation also falls on outsiders who enter the enclosure: no one other than the nuns may enter, except in accordance with the law. This norm repeats the principles found in *Venite Seorsum* Norms 5, 6 and 13. The law might not contain mention of penalties, but it obliges all concerned before God in conscience.

b) De segregatione a mundo sororum externarum iure particulari statuuntur normae.

c) Gravem secum conscientiae obligationem tum pro monialibus tum pro extrariis infert clausurae lex».

³⁴ «Plectuntur ipso facto excommunicatione Sedi Apostolicae simpliciter reservata:

1° Clausuram monialium violantes, cuiuscumque generis aut conditionis vel sexus sint, in earum monasteria sine legitima licentia ingrediendo, pariterque eos introducentes vel admitcentes; quod si clerici sint, praeterea suspendantur per tempus pro gravitate culpae ab Ordinario definiendum [...];

3° Moniales e clausura illegitime exeuntes contra praescriptum can. 601»; *C.I.C. 1917*, canon 2432.

These penalties were repeated in the Instructions *Nuper edito* IV (AAS 16 [1924] 100), *Inter praeclara* n. X (AAS 43 [1951] 39), and *Inter cetera* nn. 38-39 (AAS 48 [1956] 519-520).

³⁵ *Venite Seorsum* Norma 16, AAS 61 (1969) 690.

3.7 *Entering and leaving the enclosure*

3.7.1 In general

15. The granting of permission to enter and to leave the enclosure always requires a just and grave cause, dictated, that is, by genuine need on the part of the individual nun or the monastery: this is required to safeguard the conditions demanded by the wholly contemplative life and, on the part of the nuns, it is a requirement of consistency with the vocation they have chosen. By its very nature then, every entry into or exit from the enclosure must constitute an exception.

The custom of recording entrances and exits in a book may be maintained, at the discretion of the conventual Chapter, also as a contribution to knowledge of the monastery's life and history³⁶.

Clearly, even in the strictest of monasteries, there will come a time when an exception to the norm must be made. The document here points out that to leave the enclosure requires a just and grave cause. In other words, there must be a genuine need on the part of the individual or of the monastery. The use of the word «need» is significant. It indicates something necessary, not just desirable. The rationale of the norm which the document gives is interesting: it

³⁶ «15. Ut introeundi atque exeundi concedatur facultas, iusta semper gravisque postulatur ratio, quam nempe vera singularum monialium sive monasterii ipsius necessitas praebet: hoc idcirco requiritur ut protegantur condiciones postulatae ad vitam ex toto contemplativam utque moniales ipsae suae vocationi electae consentiant. Quapropter omnis egressus aut ingressus exceptionem secum importare debet. Denotandi in libro ingressiones egressionesque consuetudo servari potest ad Capituli conventualis iudicium etiam ut utile aliquid ad vitam monasterii historiamque cognoscendam».

is a requirement which will safeguard the way of life objectively; it is also a requirement for the individuals who are expected to live in a manner which is consistent with their profession. In a society where consistency is becoming more and more a key value, this point is highly significant.

The norm concerning the recording of entrances and exits is somewhat less prescriptive than Norm 14 in *Venite Seorsum*, where the recording of these events in a special book was mandatory³⁷.

3.7.2 Responsibility for custody of the enclosure

16. §1. The Superior of the monastery is responsible directly for the custody of the enclosure, for ensuring the practical conditions of separation from the world, and for promoting, within the monastery, the love of silence, recollection and prayer.

It is she who makes a judgement regarding the advisability of entries and exits from the enclosure, weighing with prudence and discretion whether they are necessary in the light of the wholly contemplative vocation, in accordance with the norms of the present document and of the Constitutions.

§2. The entire community has the moral obligation of protecting, promoting and observing papal enclosure, in such a way that secondary or subjective motivations do not take precedence over the purpose of separation³⁸.

³⁷ This norm is a radical departure from the strict norms contained in earlier Instructions where the nuns were encouraged to have recourse to the Holy See if possible in order to verify the gravity of a «danger»; cf. *Nuper edito* III, 1, AAS 16 (1924) 95-96; *Inter cetera* 21 d, AAS 48 (1956) 516.

³⁸ «16. §1. Ipsius Antistitae monasterii est clausuram ex propinquo custodire, in tuto condiciones collocare segregationis atque intra monasterii moenia amorem silentii provehere

The document highlights the double responsibility for observing the law of enclosure. The Superior has direct responsibility, particularly in those matters which pertain to the practical side of observance. If anything is missing in this regard, it is her responsibility to make sure that something is done. On the other hand, the whole community has a joint responsibility to make sure that the law of enclosure is observed properly. It would be unfair to leave the whole burden on the shoulders of the Superior. Individual members of the community should not, therefore, make requests of the Superior that are flippant. They have a duty in conscience to do what they can in their own lives to preserve the spirit of prayer and recollection which enclosure safeguards. As regards actual entrances and exits, it is the Superior who decides in accordance with her own prudence and discretion. This decision must be consistent always with the norms of the present document and with the Constitutions. *All the nuns* are to make sure that the just and grave cause for an exception to the rule has a firm basis in objective reality and is not based on some subjective motivation.

There is an interesting corollary to this. Given the nature of the obligations involved, one must also consider the *rights* of the individual members of the com-

nec non recessus ac precationis. Illa quidem iudicium de opportunis ex clausura egressionibus et ingressionibus pronuntiat, quarum prudenter aestimat necessitatem sub lumine vocationis omnino contemplativae ad huius documenti nec non Constitutionum regulas.

§2. Officio morali tenetur universa communitas ut tueatur et promoveat et sic papalem observet clausuram ut rationes secundariae vel subiectivae non anteferantur illi proposito quod separatio ipsa sibi vindicat».

munity. Once a person has made solemn profession within a monastery, she has the obligation of observing the law on enclosure for the rest of her life. But she also has the right to have that law observed within her monastery. She may not agree with a particular individual's leaving the enclosure for certain approved purposes; that is the business of the one seeking permission. But she is entitled, by virtue of this norm, to oppose entrances into the enclosure which she believes constitute a violation of her right. If the entrance into the enclosure is a special occasion of true value to the life of the monastery and is in accordance with the law, then her opposition can be noted and, if the Superior considers it prudent, overlooked. However, if entrance into the enclosure becomes a regular occurrence and, objectively, constitutes a disruption of the life of the monastery, then she is entitled to have recourse if the Superior ignores her opposition. It cannot be argued in defence of such exceptions to the norm that the majority of the community are in favour. Canon 119, 3° makes it clear that «in regard to collegial acts, [...] that which affects all as individuals must be approved by all». The authority of the Superior to permit entrances and exits is thus not absolute. It must respect the legitimate rights of each and every Sister.

3.7.3 Leaving the enclosure

17. §1. Permission to leave the enclosure, apart from particular indults of the Holy See or cases of extremely grave and imminent danger, is given by the Superior in ordinary cases involving the health of the nuns, the care of infirm nuns, the exercise of civil rights and needs of the monastery which cannot otherwise be provided for.

§2. For other just and grave reasons the Superior, with the consent of her Council or the conventual Chapter, and in

accordance with the norms contained in the Constitutions, can authorize a departure for whatever time is needed, not however beyond one week. If the stay outside the monastery has to be further extended, up to three months, the Superior will seek the authorization of the Diocesan Bishop, or the regular Superior if there is one. Should the absence exceed three months, other than in cases of health care, permission must be obtained from the Holy See.

The Superior will also apply these rules in authorizing departures for the sake of taking part, when necessary, in courses of religious formation organized by monasteries.

It should be kept in mind that the norm of Canon 665 §1 concerning residence outside the Institute does not apply to cloistered nuns.

§3. To send novices or professed nuns, when necessary, for part of their formation in another monastery of the Order, and to effect temporary or definitive transfers to other monasteries of the Order, the Superior will express her consent, with the intervention of her Council or of the conventual Chapter as required by the Constitutions³⁹.

³⁹ «17. §1. Exceptis peculiaribus Sanctae Sedis indultis aut gravissimo proximoque periculo instante, ab Antistita conceditur egressus ex clausura communibus in casibus qui monacharum respiciunt valetudinem vel monialium decumbentium curationem vel etiam iurium civilium exercitationem et illas coenobii necessitates quibus aliter consuli non potest.

§2. Aliam ob aequam gravemque causam valet Antistita, adsentiente ipsius Consilio vel conventuali ipso Capitulo, secundum Constitutionum disciplinam, concedere egressionem necessarium ad tempus at non ultra hebdomadam. Si vero commoratio extra claustrum ulterius perduraverit ad tres usque temporis menses, veniam ab Episcopo dioecesano petet ea vel a Superiore regulari si quidem est. Tres autem si menses absentia excesserit, nisi de curanda agitur salute, permissionem Sanctae Sedis poscere debet. Haec praescripta adhibebit Antistita etiam ad egressionem concedendam ut quis adsistat, quotiens opus fuerit, formationis religiosae curriculum ab ipsis monasteriis inter se constitutis. Recordari decet normam canonis 665 §1, de commoratione extra Institutum, clausurae moniales non tangere.

These norms deal with those situations where it is permissible within the law for someone living an enclosed life to leave the enclosure. There are many parallels with Norm 7 of *Venite Seorsum*. But there are some significant differences. Whereas the older norms spoke of the Superior giving permission «with at least habitual consent of the Ordinary», the new norm leaves it entirely to the Superior to give the permission in the cases of health, the care of infirm nuns, the exercise of civil rights and other needs of the monastery which cannot otherwise be met. The present norm is a recognition of the autonomy of life of the monastery. For the ordinary situations where someone must leave the enclosure, there is no need for the Superior to have recourse to any other authority. It is clear from the context that these absences from the enclosure are meant to be of short duration, i.e. less than one day.

The second paragraph deals with longer absences. Again, it is the Superior with the consent of her council or the conventual Chapter (depending on which body is specified in the Constitutions), who authorises absences of up to one week. However, should it be necessary to grant permission for someone to remain outside the monastery for more than one week and less than three months, then the permission of the diocesan Bishop or regular Superior is also

§3. Ut novitiae vel professae, cum necesse fuerit, mittantur ad suam alio in Ordinis monasterio perficiendam efformationem, sicut et ad translationes temporales aut perpetuas in alias Ordinis domos efficiendas, suam declarabit Antistita consentionem, Consilio intercedente vel ad Constitutionum normam conventuali Capitulo».

necessary. Any absence for a longer period must be sanctioned by the Holy See. The document makes it explicitly clear that absences for the sake of health are not included in this norm. Whatever is necessary by way of absence to assist in the physical or mental health of the Sisters does not need any permission beyond the prudent judgement of the Superior in conjunction with the medical experts involved.

The norm does apply, however, to those absences incurred during courses organised for religious formation. If these extend beyond one week, then the permission of the appropriate Ordinary is still necessary; if they extend beyond three months, the permission of the Holy See is required. The application for these permissions is a matter of conscience, since the relevant authorities cannot be expected to check up on the details of the absence of a particular sister. The law wisely leaves the responsibility for this with the Superior and her council or chapter.

There is also a reference to canon 665 §1. This is often used to permit a religious in an apostolic institute to live outside of a house of the institute for up to one year. Very often, this has been used as a time for vocational discernment. It is frequently and inaccurately referred to as «leave of absence». *Verbi Sponsa* makes it quite clear that this norm can never be used in the case of enclosed nuns. They should seek exclaustation in the normal way, or apply for special permission from the Holy See.

Finally, the transfer of sisters either in formation or in solemn profession to other monasteries is left in the hands of the Superior with the appropriate intervention of the council or chapter. Details of the process in such cases are to be determined by the particular law of each institute.

3.7.4 Entering the enclosure

18. §1. Entry into the enclosure is permitted, apart from particular indults of the Holy See:

- to Cardinals, who may have someone accompanying them; to Apostolic Nuncios and Delegates in places subject to their jurisdiction; to Visitators during a canonical visitation, and to the Diocesan Bishop or the regular Superior, for a just reason.

§2. With the permission of the Superior:

- to a priest for the purpose of administering the Sacraments to the sick, assisting those suffering from protracted or serious illness and, when necessary celebrating Holy Mass for them from time to time. When the occasion arises, for liturgical processions and funerals;

- to those whose work or skills are needed to care for the health of the nuns or to provide for the needs of the monastery.

- to the monastery's own aspirants and to visiting nuns, should this be provided for in particular law⁴⁰.

This norm finds its equivalent in Norm 8 of *Venite Seorsum*. However, the new norm makes a very

⁴⁰ «18. §1. Integris peculiaribus Sanctae Sedis manentibus indultis, ingressus in clausuram permittitur:

Cardinalibus qui secum deducere possunt comitatum; Nuntiis ac Delegatis Apostolicis in regionibus propriae auctoritati subditis; Visitatori canonicae visitationis tempore, dioecesano Episcopo vel Superiori regulari iusta de causa;

§ 2. Annuente Antistita:

- Sacerdotibus infirmarum Sacramenta dispensaturis, adiuturis eas quae diu graviterve aegrotant et, si opus fuerit, Missam Sanctam pro eis celebraturis. Si oportuerit, pro liturgicis processionibus et exsequiis;

- iis praeterea quorum opera vel munera necessaria sunt ad monialium procurandam valetudinem et monasterii procurandas necessitates.

- Propriis aspirantibus nec non monialibus in transitu, si hoc iure peculiari praestituitur».

clear distinction between those who have the right to enter the enclosure by virtue of the law itself, and those who may enter with the permission of the Superior. The list of those who may enter by virtue of the law is very similar to that given in the previous norm. There is one particularly interesting omission. There is no longer any reference to the right of the head of state to enter. If the visit were a formal occasion, it is difficult to see how entry could be refused, since it might constitute a grave affront to a head of state to prevent him or her moving freely within the State. On the other hand, if the visit were informal, the requisite permission would have to be sought and granted – if there were a just and grave reason: the law knows no favourites and, unless it makes specific provision, all members of the faithful, regardless of office, are bound by the same obligations.

The motives for which the Superior may permit someone to enter the enclosure are listed as the physical, mental and spiritual welfare of the community. An addition to the older norm is the explicit reference to aspirants and visiting nuns, provided that this is included in the particular law of the institute. In the case of aspirants, this permission to enter the enclosure is immensely useful: given the enormous changes in society in recent decades, the life within the enclosure is utterly unlike anything younger people can experience outside; if they are truly to discern a vocation to the enclosed way of life, such a discernment must include some time spent within the enclosure.

3.8 *Meetings of nuns*

19. With the prior authorization of the Holy See, meetings of nuns belonging to the same contemplative Institute within the same nation or region can be organized, if motivated by a genuine need for common reflection, provided that the nuns freely agree and such meetings do not take place too frequently. These meetings should preferably be held in a monastery of the Order.

Federations of monasteries are to define in their statutes the frequency and the organization of federal Assemblies, with due respect for the spirit and the demands of the wholly contemplative life⁴¹.

Because of the Church's great esteem and regard for the wholly contemplative life, the Instruction seeks to make sure that nuns do not leave their monasteries for meetings too frequently, or for no useful purpose. For that reason, it insists on having meetings of this kind referred to the Holy See for prior approval. The life of a federation or association of monasteries will always involve meetings. The regularity of meetings of nuns within the federation or association is to be made explicit in the statutes which must be submitted to the Holy See for approval. As far as possible these meetings should take place within a monastery of the Order. However, depending on the num-

⁴¹ «19. Praeunte Sanctae Sedis licentia, illi monialium constitui possunt conventus eiusdem quidem contemplativi Instituti intra eiusdem nationis aut regionis fines, quos vera suadet necessitas communis disceptationis, dummodo eos libere celebrent moniales neque nimia contingant crebritate. Praestat tales agere conventiones ipsius in Ordinis aliquo monasterio. Quae iam Foederationem inierunt monasteria, stata tempora nec non rationes celebrandi suas foederales Congressiones propriis decernunt in Statutis, conservatis tum spiritu tum etiam postulationibus vitae omni ex parte contemplativae».

bers attending, the health of the Sisters involved, their age, etc., it may well be that no monastery can actually host the meeting; in this case, a suitable location will have to be found so that the meeting can take place while the core values of a contemplative way of life are maintained and safeguarded.

It should be noted that the tone of this norm is much more positive than its counterpart, Norm 12, in *Venite Seorsum*. This norm accepts meetings as an ordinary feature of life, even for contemplatives. The previous norm set the regulation of meetings in an almost completely negative context. Nevertheless, they are still to be considered as lawful only when they assist the fundamental purpose of the contemplative way of life.

3.9 *The means of social communications*

20. Rules regarding the means of social communications in all their present-day forms are aimed at safeguarding the spirit of recollection; contemplative silence can in fact be undermined when noise, news and talk fill the enclosure.

The communications media should be used with moderation and discretion, not only with regard to the content but also the amount and the medium itself. It should be remembered that, inasmuch as contemplatives are accustomed to interior silence, the media have a more powerful impact on their sensitivity and emotions, making recollection more difficult.

The use of radio and television can be permitted on particular occasions of a religious character.

With prudent discernment and for everyone's benefit, in accordance with the decisions of the conventual Chapter, the use of other modern means of communication, such as fax machines, cellular telephones or the Internet, may be permitted in the monastery, for the exchange of information or for reasons of work.

Nuns should make efforts to be duly informed about the Church and the world, not through the great volume of

news, but by wise discernment of what is essential in the light of God, in order to make this a part of their prayer, in union with the heart of Christ⁴².

Norms 10 and 11 of *Venite Seorsum* spoke of the need to regulate the use of radio, television, newspapers, magazines and other publications in contemplative monasteries. The current norm includes mention of other means of social communication, such as the Internet, fax machines, and even cellular telephones. None of these is forbidden, but great caution is urged in their use. Bearing in mind the whole purpose and nature of the wholly contemplative life as outlined in the opening sections, the Instruction seeks to ensure that the nuns' quest for «the one thing necessary» does not suffer from needless distractions. The power-

⁴² «20. Super communicationis socialis instrumentis, in omni illa quae hodie eorum praebetur varietate, regulae spectant ad meditationis custodiam: silentium enim contemplativum vacuefieri potest quotiens strepitu et vocibus et notitiis clausura redundat. Quocirca adhibeantur hi apparatus necesse est moderate ac sapienter, non tantum quod attinet ad doctrinas verum etiam ad copiam notitiarum et genus ipsum communicationis. Prae oculis etiam teneatur, quoniam silentio interiori iam assuefactae sunt, haec omnia vehementius movent earum sensus atque affectus, difficilemque ideo meditationem reddunt. Radiophonii autem ac televisionis usus concedi potest peculiaribus datis naturae religiosae opportunitatibus. Usurpatio si quae erit aliorum communicationis instrumentorum recentium, qualia sunt: similia, telephonia cellularia, interrete, permitti potest ipsi monasterio ex causa notitiarum percipiendarum operisque perficiendi in communem utilitatem, prudenti de iudicio nec non ad Conventualis capituli decreta. Consentaneas cognitiones procurent moniales de Ecclesia ac mundo, non secundum notitiarum varietatem multiplicem, sed dum res essentielles sub Dei lumine colligunt quas deinde suam in precationem inserant cum Christi Iesu affectione consentientes».

ful impact of some of these modern means of communication does not need to be stated: it is patently obvious. Hours and hours of television or radio or sitting in front of the computer surfing the Internet is not at all conducive to a life of contemplation; it can lead to an overload of stimulation which is far from healthy and is utterly inimical to the contemplative life.

The use of radio and television are of particular concern since they are the means of social communication most often encountered among the ordinary people of contemporary society. Their use can be permitted. The document says «on particular occasions of a religious character». This does not exclude the possibility, from time to time, of using the television, for example, to show a video tape which might contain material directly helpful to a life of prayer, or which might help some of the nuns on occasion to relax and rest.

The Instruction is very sensitive to the need of the nuns to keep themselves informed of what is happening in the world. But this should not take place by means of a large volume of news, such as that which is now available on television twenty four hours a day. Rather, a great deal of discernment should accompany the reception of such information. In this way, the prayer of the nuns for society and the world will be rooted in reality, but will not be distracted by irrelevant details. The inclusion of this norm is a timely reminder that enclosure is fundamentally about a state of mind and a disposition of the heart rather than purely physical boundaries. Unless due vigilance is sustained by the individual and by the community, it is possible that someone might become strictly observant about the physical limits of the enclosure while living a life filled with

unnecessary distractions due to the improper use of means of social communication.

3.10 *Vigilance over the enclosure*

21. The Diocesan Bishop or the regular Superior are to exercise vigilance over the custody of the enclosure of monasteries entrusted to their care and are to defend it, to the extent of their competence, assisting the Superior, who is responsible for its direct custody.

The Diocesan Bishop or the regular Superior do not ordinarily intervene in the granting of dispensations from enclosure, but only in particular cases, as provided for in the present Instruction.

During the canonical visitation, the Visitor must ascertain whether the norms of enclosure and the spirit of separation from the world are being observed.

The Church, by virtue of her profound esteem for their vocation, encourages nuns to remain faithful to the cloistered life and to express responsibly in their lives the spirit and discipline of enclosure, in order to foster in the community a fuller and more fruitful contemplation of the Triune God⁴³.

⁴³ «21. Invigilent dioecesanus Episcopus ac Superior regularis clausurae custodiendae in monasteriis suae auctoritati commendatis eamque protegant, quantum iis quidem licet, Antistitam hac in re adjuvantes, cuius nempe est illam proxime custodire. Non intercedunt plerumque Episcopus dioecesanus vel Superior regularis ut dispensationes a clausura concedantur, sed dumtaxat peculiaribus in casibus secundum hanc ipsam instructionem. Progrediente canonica Visitatione comprobanda est ipsi Visitori normarum observatio de clausura tum etiam de affectu separationis a mundo. Quanti earum vocationem aestimat Ecclesia, tantum profecto monachas cohortatur ut claustrali vitae perstent fideles exsequentes cum propriorum officiorum conscientia tam spiritum quam disciplinam claustralem, ut intra communitatem fructuosa et integra instituat ad Dei Unius et Trini contemplationem directio».

Having already placed the primary responsibility for the maintenance of the discipline of enclosure with the Superior and the community, the Instruction, echoing Norm 15 of *Venite Seorsum*, outlines the proper responsibility of the diocesan Bishop or the regular Superior. His role is one of supervision and, where necessary, of assistance to the Superior of the monastery. It is of the utmost importance that the Ordinary in question be fully familiar not only with the universal law on enclosure found in this document but also with how it is meant to be expressed according to the charism of each institute. He is not to become involved in the granting of permissions except where the law requires it. To do so would be to become embroiled in the internal affairs of the monastery. Certainly, at the time of visitation, the Visitor is charged with making a full investigation into the fidelity of observance of the law on enclosure. But, the fundamental principle of this Instruction is to leave the responsibility for living an enclosed life to the nuns themselves, not by issuing threats and warnings, but by using words of encouragement which bring the nuns back to the *raison d'être* of their vocation, i.e. «a fuller and more fruitful contemplation of the Triune God».

4. Part III: Perseverance in fidelity

Three issues of great importance for a life dedicated to contemplation are addressed in the third major section of the Instruction:

- formation
- autonomy of the monastery
- relations with institutes of men.

4.1 *Formation*

The contents of nn. 22-24 are based largely on the Instruction, *Potissimum Institutioni*⁴⁴, which dealt at length with initial and ongoing formation in religious institutes. The purpose of formation is given at the beginning of n. 22: «The formation of cloistered nuns is aimed at preparing them for total consecration of self to God in the following of Christ according to the form of life ordered solely to contemplation which is proper to their particular mission in the Church». Formation, the document says, must influence the individual at the deepest level, so it is not simply a matter of learning conformity to the particular norms of life within a monastery, nor is it a matter of learning from books a lot of information about the contemplative way of life in general or according to a particular tradition. If this is what formation entails in fact, then one is not reaching to the deepest level, one cannot speak about vocation or about a life ordered to contemplation. It is not a vocation to the way of life «[...] aiming at involving the whole person in a progressive journey of conformity to Jesus Christ and to his total self-giving to the Father» (n. 22). The contemplative vocation cannot be reduced to mere conformity to the letter of the law.

It is clear that the Congregation wishes to remind contemplatives that formation is something essential and of vital importance to their way of life: «To a large extent the renewal of the contemplative life is

⁴⁴ AAS 82 (1990) 470-532.

dependent on the formation given to individual nuns and to the whole community, in order that they may reach the fulfilment of the divine plan by assimilating their basic charism» (n. 22). The integrated programme of formation which includes initial and ongoing formation is not an option, but something necessary if the contemplative way of life is going to flourish in the Church.

In that regard, each monastery is expected to draw up a programme of formation which it must present to the Holy See⁴⁵. The contents of such a programme are indicated towards the end of n. 23: «Study of the word of God, the tradition of the Fathers, the documents of the Magisterium, liturgy, spirituality and theology should constitute the doctri-

⁴⁵ Whether or not the approval of the Holy See is required is not entirely clear. The Latin text states: «Habeant idcirco in hunc finem claustrales communitates "rationem formationis" idoneam, quae proprii et particularis iuris partem efficiet postquam, praeunte deliberativo Capituli conventualis suffragio, Sanctae Sedi erit proposita». This seems to indicate that the formation programme must be proposed to the Holy See after the deliberative vote of the conventual Chapter; such a reading would suggest that the Holy See's approval in the strict sense is not required but a kind of *recognitio*. The official English translation suggests something similar: «To this end, enclosed communities should draw up a suitable *ratio formationis*, which will become part of their proper law, after submission to the Holy See, with the prior deliberative vote of the conventual Chapter». It would seem to be exaggerated that the Holy See would wish to approve directly the proper and particular law of each and every monastery of enclosed nuns. Rather, it is much more likely that the Congregation wishes to receive a copy of the programme which it will review; if necessary, omissions from the programme or eventual amendments to the contents will be indicated.

nal basis of formation, aiming at presenting the foundations of knowledge of the mystery of God contained in Christian revelation». In addition, the document also gives some indication of the qualities which those in charge of formation should look for in prospective candidates. Among these is an awareness of the obligations involved in taking on the enclosed life. The fact that aspirants may enter the enclosure in accordance with the Instruction (n. 18 §2) means that a better assessment may be made of a candidate's awareness of the obligations of the enclosed life.

The Instruction repeats the principle that the entire cycle of formation should take place ordinarily within the monastery. This is the obvious location for formation since the individual's entire consecrated life will be lived within the enclosure. However, exceptions can be made and these are provided for by the law of the Church. As such, courses and other formation meetings should be seen as something good, but always exceptional or subsidiary: «Attendance at courses of formation cannot however substitute for systematic and gradual formation in one's own community» (n. 24). The Instruction challenges the Superiors responsible and the whole community to find the necessary resources of formation within the monastery so that each might become self-sufficient.

4.2 Autonomy of the monastery

This is a useful commentary on those canons of the Code which speak of autonomous monasteries, e.g. canons 586 and 615. It explains what autonomy is and what it is not. Thus, «the Church recognises every monastery "sui iuris" as possessing legitimate juridi-

cal autonomy of life and government in order that it may have its own discipline and be capable of preserving intact its own heritage» (n. 25). In accordance with canon 620, the Superior of such a monastery is a major Superior⁴⁶. This status helps promote the stability of life and internal unity which is essential to a truly contemplative way of life. However, «autonomy does not [...] mean independence from ecclesiastical authority, but is just, right and opportune in order to protect the nature and proper identity of a monastery of wholly contemplative life» (n. 25). Indeed, the Instruction points out the responsibility of the local Ordinary to preserve and safeguard this autonomy. It also reminds diocesan Bishops and regular Superiors that they are to act only within the limits of their competence determined by universal and proper law. Three delicate and important areas of competence are mentioned explicitly: presiding at elections, the canonical visitation, and the administration of goods. It could be argued that the intervention of the diocesan Bishop or regular Superior in these domains constitutes an infringement of autonomy. However, it is more accurate to see these interventions as a means of safeguarding true autonomy, which the Instruction distinguishes very clearly from the concept of independence. By means of these interventions, the monastery's communion within the local and universal Church is strengthened and protected.

⁴⁶ This point was clarified by Pope Pius XII in *Sponsa Christi* VI, §1, 2°, AAS 43 (1951) 17-18: «Antistitae singulorum monasteriorum monialium in iure Superiores maiores sunt, omnibusque facultatibus donantur quae Superioribus maioribus competunt [...]».

While autonomy helps to preserve a way of life within the monastery, there is always the danger that an individual community might become isolated. For that reason, *Verbi Sponsa* also encourages cooperation and coordination between monasteries. What is essential to this collaboration is the free agreement of each participating monastery and the prior approval of the Holy See.

4.3 *Relations with Institutes of men*

This paragraph is closely related to the issues of the autonomy of the monastery and the enclosed way of life. The document highlights the special relationship which can exist between monasteries of contemplative life and male religious institutes. This relationship often goes back to the founder or foundresses of both and to a shared charism. Very often, it can be said that the monasteries of women and the male institutes demonstrate two ways of living the same charism. Nevertheless, the juridical boundaries between them must be clear and unambiguous. The Instruction stresses that the bonds between the different institutes must be understood as essentially spiritual and not juridical in the sense that the men are not to be seen as having jurisdiction over the monasteries. The two ways of life rooted in the same charism are very different; that difference must be preserved: «A monastery associated with an Institute of men retains its own rule of life and governance. For this reason, the definition of reciprocal rights and obligations, aimed at the spiritual good, must safeguard the effective autonomy of the monastery» (n. 26).

Indeed, the autonomy of the monastery spoken of in n. 25 makes no sense unless the monastery has

real self-government, free from the interference from any outside agency. Thus, should any trace of a juridical subordination of the women to the men remain, it must be removed since such a link undermines the legitimate autonomy which the Church recognises as belonging of right to the monastery. Lest there be any ambiguity in the contents of the document, the Congregation addresses the Superiors of the male institutes involved: «Men Superiors are to carry out their task in a spirit of cooperation and humble service, without creating improper submission to themselves in order that the nuns may make decisions regarding all that concerns their religious life with freedom of spirit and a sense of responsibility» (n. 26). A proper relationship will assist the nuns in making free and responsible decisions about their own way of life.

5. Part IV: Associations and Federations

In *Sponsa Christi*, Pope Pius XII reminded the monasteries of their autonomy⁴⁷, even when they belonged to the same religious Order⁴⁸. The bonds between the monasteries were fundamentally spiritual and moral, not juridical. Yet, for the support of the

⁴⁷ «Monialium monasteria, secus ac aliae religiosae mulierum domus, ex Codice et ad ipsius normam sui iuris sunt»; *Sponsa Christi* VI, §1, 1°, AAS 43 (1951) 17.

⁴⁸ «Monasteria monialium non solum sui iuris sunt, sed etiam iuridice distincta atque invicem independentia, nullis vinculis praeter quam spiritualibus ac moralibus, inter se unita ac devincta, etsi idem primo Ordini vel religioni iure sint subiecta»; *Sponsa Christi* VII, §1, AAS 43 (1951) 18.

monasteries, the Pope introduced the institution of federations and confederations of autonomous monasteries⁴⁹ and reminded the monasteries that such groupings were not contrary to the radical autonomy of each monastery. A few days after the promulgation of *Sponsa Christi*, the Sacred Congregation for Religious issued the Instruction *Inter praeclara* for the implementation of the Apostolic Constitution. In this second document, the Congregation reiterates the point that membership of a federation is not inimical to the relationships of each monastery with the Ordinary – whether the Bishop or the regular Superior – and with other monasteries⁵⁰. These groupings were not being imposed by the Congregation; the freedom of each monastery to join a federation was respected; but federations as a means of support were seen by the Holy See to be necessary⁵¹.

Federations and similar unions had a fourfold purpose and benefit:

- the faculty and obligation of mutual support for the maintenance and promotion of regular observance in the monasteries and for assistance in economic matters;

- the establishment of novitiates which would be common to several monasteries; this would be of enormous benefit wherever there was a shortage of suitable personnel to provide proper formation in each of the monasteries;

- the faculty and, in some cases, the obligation not only of requesting individual nuns from another

⁴⁹ *Sponsa Christi* VII, §§ 2-8, AAS 43 (1951) 18-19.

⁵⁰ *Inter praeclara* XVIII; XX, AAS 43 (1951) 41.

⁵¹ *Inter praeclara* XVII, AAS 43 (1951) 41.

monastery to assist in government and formation, but also of granting such requests;

– the possibility and freedom to transfer nuns temporarily or even definitively from one monastery to another for reasons of infirmity or some other material or moral necessity⁵².

Each federation or similar grouping was required to prepare statutes and submit them to the Holy See for approval⁵³. Further norms for the harmonisation between the demands of papal enclosure and the needs of federations were issued six years later⁵⁴.

The fourth part of the present Instruction takes up the essential features of the earlier legislation concerning federations and similar associations. The

⁵² «Unionum seu Federationum generales ac praecipui fines et commoda sunt:

1° facultas, iuridice agnita, atque officium canonice sancitum fraterni adiutorii, tam in regularis observantiae conservatione, defensione, incremento, rebusque oeconomicis quam in omnibus aliis mutuo sibi praestandis;

2° erectio novitiatuum omnibus seu pluribus monasteriis communium pro casibus in quibus, sive ob defectum personarum ad officia directionis necessariorum sive ob alia adiuncta moralia, oeconomica, localia, etc., in singulis monasteriis solida et practica institutio spiritualis, disciplinaris, technica, culturalis dari certe non possit;

3° facultas et moralis obligatio, certis normis definita, a monasteriis foederatis suscepta, petendi ac mutuo sibi concedendi moniales quae ad regimen et formationem necessariae esse possunt;

4° possibilitas et libertas mutuae temporariae communicationis seu cessionis subiectorum, et etiam destinationis ratione infirmitatis aliisque moralis vel materialis necessitas»; *Inter praeclara* XXII, AAS 43 (1951) 41-42.

⁵³ *Inter praeclara* XXIV, AAS 43 (1951) 43.

⁵⁴ *Inter cetera* nn. 64-69, AAS 48 (1956) 525.

establishment of associations and federations is encouraged: «Associations and Federations are a means of ensuring support and coordination between monasteries, in order that the latter may properly fulfil their vocation in the Church. Their principal purpose is therefore to safeguard and promote the values of the contemplative life in the monasteries which belong to them» (n. 27). Although this places collaboration on a more formal and structured level, these bodies must protect the autonomy of each individual monastery. Indeed, they exist in order to sustain the life of each monastery: «Such bodies are to be promoted, especially where other effective forms of coordination and help are lacking, and communities might find themselves in the position of not being able to respond to basic needs of various kinds» (n. 27). It belongs to the Holy See to establish federations, associations or confederations; the same authority must approve the statutes of each; it is for the Holy See to permit a monastery to join a federation or similar body or to separate from it. But «the decision to belong or not to such bodies depends on each community, whose freedom must be respected» (n. 27).

The juridical limits of the federation are clearly stated: «The Federation, insofar as it is at the service of monasteries, must respect their juridical autonomy, does not have governing power over them, and therefore cannot decide all matters that refer to the monasteries; nor is it representative of the Order» (n. 28). The federations envisaged by the law do not transform the group of monasteries into a centrally organised «congregation» of any kind. The bonds which unite the individual monasteries are spiritual and moral, not juridical. These are expressed princi-

pally in the manner in which the monasteries respond to the needs of others in the federation. The assistance which the federation can provide concerns three major areas: «the appropriate renewal and reorganisation of monasteries, formation both initial and ongoing, and mutual financial support» (n. 28). The manner in which the federation can respond to needs in these three areas is expanded in nn. 29-30. In all cases, the aim of the intervention of the federation is to do what is necessary for the individual monastery so that it might become self-sufficient once again. It is clear that the primary role of responsibility for the effectiveness of any response by the federation rests with the Superior of each of the participating monasteries, as well as the President of the Federation and her Council. In this way, the internal autonomy of each monastery is respected.

Working along with the Superiors and with the President and Council is a Religious Assistant, named by the Holy See which can delegate to him certain faculties and tasks. It is through the Assistant that the Holy See exercises its vigilance and authority⁵⁵. He is not to be considered in any way as the

⁵⁵ This is in keeping with *Sponsa Christi* VII, §7, AAS 43 (1951) 19: «S. Sedes immediatam vigilantiam et auctoritatem, prout casus ferat, in Foederationem exercere poterit per aliquem Adsistentem religiosum, cuius munus erit non tantum S. Sedem repraesentare sed etiam conservationem genuini spiritus proprii Ordinis fovere et Superiorissas in recto ac prudenti Foederationis regimine opera et consilio adiuvare». Within the statutes of the Federations, the role of the Assistant in this regard is described in similar terms: «The religious Assistant is the representative of the Holy See to the Federation, but not to the individual Monasteries which compose it»; *Federal Statutes of the*

superior either of the individual monasteries or of the federation as a whole. His role is one of assistance, not governance:

It is the Assistant's charge: to ensure that the Order's genuine spirit of life entirely dedicated to contemplation is preserved and increased within the Federation; in a spirit of fraternal service to help in the running of the Federation and in economic problems of greater importance; to contribute to the solid formation of novices and professed members (n. 28).

This fourth part of the Instruction is very important because it demonstrates that the Congregation fully respects the autonomy of the individual monasteries while recognising the need for support of various kinds. The support offered by federations or associations can only be subsidiary insofar as it can help a monastery to live the wholly contemplative life to the full. But the Congregation is also aware that such assistance might not be sufficient to guarantee the continued existence of a monastery: «In the case of a community which is no longer in a position to act in a free, autonomous and responsible way, the President will notify the Diocesan Bishop and the regular Superior where there is one, and submit the

Poor Clare Colettine Federation of Saint Mary of the Angels in Ireland and Great Britain (Prot. n. FM 110-1/89), Cork 1989, art. 74. «The Religious Assistant acts as a liaison between the Federation and the Holy See. Therefore he shall not interfere in the government of the monasteries or in their canonical relations with the Ordinaries and with the Holy See»; *Statutes of the Madre Jeronima Federation of the Monasteries of the Order of Saint Clare in the Philippines* (Prot. n. FM 131-1/96), Makati 1996, artt. 75-76.

case to the Holy See» (n. 30). Even at moments of the utmost crisis, a delicate balance is maintained between the juridical autonomy of the monastery, the responsibility of the President of the Federation, the duty of the diocesan Bishop or regular Superior, and the authority of the Holy See.

6. Concluding remarks

It is true to say that the Instruction *Verbi Sponsa* contains nothing dramatically new. It takes account of much of the Church's recent teaching about consecrated life and about the contemplative life within the enclosure in particular. It repeats some very important principles again in a clear and inspiring fashion. The purpose of the document is to inspire those living the life to remain faithful to their vocation. From a spiritual point of view, the document is to be read in the light of *Vita Consecrata*; it is much too closely related to the 1994 Synod of Bishops and the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to be read in isolation. From a juridical point of view, the norms are rooted in *Nuper edito*, *Sponsa Christi*, *Inter praeclara*, *Inter cetera* and *Venite Seorsum* as well as in the Code of Canon Law. In that sense, they may be seen as part of a progression and evolution. The changes which are found in the present Instruction reflect the recent concerns of the Church to promote personal responsibility, the autonomy of the individual monastery, and a deep sense of belonging to the wider communion or fellowship of the Church. The juridical norms are presented in a very positive manner, taking account of many changes which have been introduced into contemporary soci-

ety and stressing that the law of enclosure is to be observed with care within the proper context of a truly deep spirituality which embraces the life of the Trinity and the communion of the faithful in the Church. *Verbi Sponsa* is not a document to be treated lightly nor is it to be dismissed as a return to the past. It is a mark of the Holy See's genuine desire to be helpful to all those called to such a radical way of life.

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