

CONGREGATION  
FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE  
AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE

YEAR OF CONSECRATED LIFE

# *Contemplate*

To consecrated men and women  
on the trail of Beauty



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# *Contemplate*

*“You whom my heart loves”*

(Sg 1:7)

To consecrated men and women  
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LIBRERIA EDITRICE VATICANA

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[www.libreriaeditricevaticana.va](http://www.libreriaeditricevaticana.va)

[www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va)

ISBN 978-88-209-9727-4

*« True love  
is always contemplative ».*

Pope FRANCIS



*Dear brothers and sisters,*

1. The Year of Consecrated Life – precious and blessed journey – has crossed its Zenith, while the voices of consecrated men and women from around the world express the joy of their vocation and the faithfulness to their identity within the Church, at times testified to the point of martyrdom.

The two letters *Rejoice!* and *Keep Watch!* have launched a journey of choral, serious and meaningful reflection that has posed existential questions to our personal lives and to that of the Institute. It is now time to continue our reflection together, fixing our gaze on the heart of our life of *sequela*.

Bringing our gaze into the depths of our life, looking for meaning in our pilgrimage to seek God, and questioning the contemplative dimension of our times to recognize the mystery of grace that sustains, impassions and transfigures us.

Pope Francis urges us to turn our gaze towards Jesus, but also to let ourselves be looked upon by him so we can “realize ever anew that we have been entrusted with a treasure which makes us more human and helps us to lead a new life”.<sup>1</sup> He invites us to train our heart’s gaze because “true love is always contemplative”.<sup>2</sup> The consecrated person’s theological relationship with the Lord (*confessio Trinitatis*), fraternal communion with those who are called to experience the same charism (*signum fraternitatis*), and mission as the epiphany of God’s merciful love in the human community (*servitium caritatis*) all refer to the unending search for the face of God and to the obedient listening to his Word in order to reach contemplation of the true and living God.

The various forms of consecrated life – eremitic and of virgins, monastic and canonical, cloistered and apostolic, secular and new fraternities – drink from the wellspring of contemplation and are therein restored and given strength. There they encounter the mystery that lives in them and find fullness to live the evan-

<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 264.

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, 200.

gical aspect of consecration, communion and mission.

This letter – in line with the Instruction *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* (1980), the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (1996), the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (2001), and the Instructions *Starting Afresh from Christ* (2002) and *Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram* (2008) – comes to you as a disclosed invitation on the mystery of God, foundation of our entire life. It is an invitation that opens a horizon which is never reached or totally experienced: our relationship with the secret of the living God, the primacy of a life in the Spirit, and the communion of love with Jesus, the center of life and continual source of every initiative,<sup>3</sup> a living experience that wants to be shared.<sup>4</sup> The desire resonates: *Set me as a seal upon your heart* (Sg 8:6).

May the Holy Spirit, who alone knows and moves our innermost self, *intimior intimo meo*,<sup>5</sup> accompany us through the trials, formation and

<sup>3</sup> Cf. CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ. A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (May 19, 2002), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 16.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* III, 6, 11.

transformation of our lives, to be the embrace and the rejoicing of a Presence that lives within us, desired and beloved, true *confessio Trinitatis* in the Church and in human cities: “The greater the faith we believe with, the steadfastness we hope with, and the ardor we desire with, the greater our capacity to prepare ourselves to receive it”.<sup>6</sup>

The mystical cry that recognizes the Beloved, *You are the fairest of the children of men* (*Ps* 45:3), as power of love enriches the Church and reconstructs the lost fragments of Beauty in the human city.

<sup>6</sup> *Id*, *Ep.* 130, 8, 17.

## PROLOGUE



*In the streets and the squares;  
I will seek him whom my heart loves.*

Song of Songs 3:2



## Listening

2. He who loves is pervaded with dynamism, experiences the paschal character of life, accepts the risk of going outside of himself to reach the other – not only in an external space, but also in his inner being – and he discovers that living in the other and embracing the other in himself is good. Love looks upon the other with a new gaze, one of special intimacy, and for this, the other does not belong to the plane of ideas, nor remains at the threshold, but instead enters the microcosm of feeling of the one who loves to become *him whom my heart loves* (Sg 3:2), the “one I seek”.

This is the dynamism found throughout the *Song of Songs* (in Hebrew *šîr haššîrîm*), a book so superlative as to be defined the “saint of saints” of the Old Testament. It is the first of five scrolls (*meghillôt*) of special liturgical relevance to the Jewish people; it is read during Passover celebrations. This *sublime* song celebrates the beauty and attractive force of the love between a man and a woman that emerges in a story of desire, searching and encounter. It is a love that leads to *exodus* crossing streets

and *squares* (Sg 3:2) and that ignites the flame of love of God in the world. If human love is presented in the book as *flames of the divine* (Sg 8:6: *šalhebetyâ*), flames of *Yāh*, it is because it is the *the way that is better than any of them* (1Co 12:31). It is the reality without which man is *nothing at all* (1Co 13:2). It is that which, more than all else, brings the creature closer to God. Love is resonance and fruit of God's same nature. The creature who loves humanizes, but, at the same time, experiences the beginning of a process of deification because *God is love* (1Jn 4:10.16). The creature who loves tends towards fullness and peace, towards *šalom*, which is the haven for communion, as with the lovers of the *Song* who carry *šalom* in their names; his name is *Šelōmōh*, hers *Šûlammît*.

The *Song* has been interpreted in a literal way, as a celebration of the power of human love between a woman and a man, but, also, in an allegorical way, as in Jewish and Christian traditions to tell of the relationships between God and Israel, Christ and the Church. The book, however, finds its cornerstone in the spousal dynamics of love and – like a parable that helps move us to another place where the living language of lovers, one that cures of loneliness, retreat, and selfishness, is spoken – brings us back to our present, suggesting to us that is it

not the imposition of commands or constrictions that moves life forward, nor is life moved forward by rules, but rather, by an ecstasy, an enchantment, a rapture that leads us outside of the self, that starts us on a journey and that interprets history in a way that is relational, communal and agapic.

This love of spousal nature that captures the senses and inspires the steps along the journey can be felt by the human creature, not only for another human being, but also for God. This is what happens to him who is consecrated to God in the sapiential horizon and in the fruitful atmosphere of the Gospel's teachings, intended to proclaim the primacy of the relationship with him. For this, the *Song* is a beacon that illuminates the consecrated.

The *Song*, defined as a chant of unitive mysticism, can also be read as an itinerary leading the heart to God, as an existential pilgrimage towards encounter with the God incarnate who loves in a spousal way. It can be read as a symphony of spousal love that includes the restlessness in searching for the beloved (*dôd*), the encounter that satisfies the heart, and the savoring of the election and mutual belonging.

In light of the *Song*, the consecrated life appears as a vocation to love that is thirsty for the living God (*Ps* 42:3; 63:2), that ignites

in the world the search for the hidden God (*1Co* 16:11; *Ps* 105:4; *Is* 55:6; *Am* 5:6; *Zp* 2:3) and that encounters him in the faces of brothers and sisters (*Mt* 25:40). It is there that God finds room to put his tent (*Rv* 21:3); in prayer or in the depths of the heart where God loves to live (*Ga* 2:20). Consecrated men and women move towards Christ to encounter his words that are *spirit and life* (*Jn* 6:63), intent on finding him in sacred places, but also *in the streets and squares* (*Sg* 3:2), and designated to turn their personal encounter with his love into a passion that intercedes in history.

### **Consecrated life, *statio orante* in the heart of history**

3. In his *Apostolic Letter* to consecrated men and women, Pope Francis writes, “I expect that each form of consecrated life will question what it is that God and people today are asking of them. Only by such concern for the needs of the world, and by docility to the prompting of the Spirit, will this Year of Consecrated Life become an authentic *kairòs*, a time rich in God’s grace, a time of transformation”.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, *Apostolic Letter To All Consecrated People*, on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life (November 21, 2014), II, 5.

It is a question which resonates in each of us. The Pope offers us an initial answer: “To know and show that God is able to fill our hearts to the brim with happiness; that we need not seek our happiness elsewhere”.<sup>2</sup>

People yearning for fullness and seeking happiness, who are impassioned and never satiated by joy, this restlessness bonds us.

We look for true joy (cf. *Jn* 15:11) in “a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, tends to pronounce in favor of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time, moreover, in which the soul of man has plumbed the depths of irrationality and desolation; a time, finally, which is characterized by upheavals and a hitherto unknown decline even in the great world religions”.<sup>3</sup>

These are the words Blessed Paul VI addressed to the world during the Last General Meeting of the Second Vatican Council. Our time – even more than in the days following Council session – is characterized by the para-

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, II, 1.

<sup>3</sup> PAUL VI, *Allocution* on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Vatican City (December 7, 1965).

digmatic centrality of change and has as distinctive features speed, relativity, and complexity. Everything changes more quickly than in the past and this causes disorientation and restlessness in those who remain anchored to old certainties and old elements of the interpretation of reality. This acceleration makes the present volatile: the present is a place of emotions, encounters, and provisional choices, when what is required is stability and fixed points of reference to be valued and lived.

In the overabundance of events, communication, and experiences, it is difficult to make a summary and discern, hence, many people are not able to experience a search for meaning as to turn the present into a workshop of comprehension, communion, and sharing.

Present-day culture, especially that of the West which is aimed predominately towards praxis and concentrated on doing and producing, generates – as a repercussion – the unconscious need for silence, listening, and contemplative breath. These two opposing tendencies, however, risk causing greater superficiality. Always being active and some ways of experiencing contemplation, can both represent a kind of escape from oneself or from reality, a neurotic wandering which generates hurried and wasted lives.

It is in this context “often in a confused way, a unique and growing demand for spirituality and for the supernatural does not fail to re-emerge. This is a sign of anxiety which dwells in the hearts of people who are not open to the transcendent horizon of God. Unfortunately, it is God himself who is excluded from the horizon of so many people; and when the topic of God does not meet with indifference, closure or rejection, people wish in any case to relegate it to the subjective context, reducing it to an intimate and private factor, marginalized from public awareness”.<sup>4</sup>

4. The consecrated life, characterized by the constant search for God and the constant re-visitation of his identity, breathes the demands and the cultural climate of this world which, having lost consciousness of God and his effective presence throughout history, runs the risk of no longer recognizing itself. This is a time of not only *dis-enchantment*, *dis-agreement* and *indifference*, but also *non-sense*. For many, it is a time of *confusion*, they let themselves be overwhelmed by the search for the meaning of things, true spiritual castaways.

<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address* to the General Assembly of the Italian Episcopal Conference, Vatican City (May 24, 2012).

In this time, the Church – and the life consecrated in her – is called to bear witness that “God is – and more, He is real, He lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in Himself, but also immeasurably good to us. He will be recognized as Our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on Him, and to center our heart in Him which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity”.<sup>5</sup>

This is the task of the consecrated life: to bear witness – in this our time – that God is happiness. Fixing our gaze and our hearts on Him allows us to live in fullness.

In everyday language, the word contemplate is used with the meaning of to think deeply, to attentively observe something that provokes amazement or admiration: the sight of nature, the starry sky, a painting, a monument, a beautiful view. This gaze, by grasping and savoring beauty, is able to go beyond what it is contemplating and to drive the search for the beauty’s creator (cf. *Wis* 13:1-9; *Rom* 1:20). It is a gaze

<sup>5</sup> PAUL VI, *Allocution* on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Vatican City (December 7, 1965).

that contains in itself something which goes beyond the eyes: a mother who gazes at her child sleeping in her arms, or the gaze of two old lovers who, after a lifetime spent together, linger in love. It is a gaze that communicates intensely, that expresses a relationship and that tells what one person means to the other.

If it is true that the origin of the word contemplation is Greek (*theorein/theoria*) – and that it indicates the intuition of reason that, from the multiplicity of what it seen, arrives at the one, and so, grasps the whole through the fragment and the intimate nature of things in the phenomenon –, it is truer still that biblical man has an *animus* which is essentially contemplative. Aware of receiving his existence from the unrestrained and free act of God, he finds in his amazement as a creature a haven for all of his heart's restlessness. The Psalms are pervaded by this attitude of gratitude and wonder towards man and things.

5. The biblical man is aware of the loving initiative and generosity of God, even in another domain: the gift of the Word. The initiative of God towards his creature opens a dialogue with it and engages it in a personal relationship of reciprocity, which is the covenant: I for you and you for me. It is not a "given" to which you

can become accustomed; it is a surprising revelation to simply “be” before, in receptivity and gratitude.

The Prophets are qualified witnesses of this attitude. The *ten words* which seal the covenant (cf. *Ex* 34:28), are introduced as hear, *O Israel* (*Dt* 6:4). The first sin, or better yet, the root of all sins of Israel, is the omission of the Word: like in the beginning, with the declaration of autonomy from God (cf. *Gn* 3:3-6), like Moses and the prophets declared to the people of Israel the abandoning of the covenant. “The word of God also inevitably reveals the tragic possibility that human freedom can withdraw from this covenant dialogue with God for which we were created. The divine word also discloses the sin that lurks in the human heart”.<sup>6</sup>

In the fullness of time the initiative of God comes to fulfillment: the Word is condensed, to the point of becoming flesh and living among us. It is abbreviated, becoming silent in the decisive Easter *hour*. Creation gives way to redemption, which is new creation.

<sup>6</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010), 26. Among the Biblical texts to cite: for example *Dt* 28:1-2.15.45; 32:1; among the prophets cf. *Jr* 7:22-28; *Ezk* 2:8; 3:10; 6:3; 13:2; up to the last: cf. *Ze* 3:8. For Saint Paul cf. *Rom* 10:14-18; *1Th* 2:13.

The term contemplation is found only once in the New Testament. The only scripture that contains the terminology of contemplation uses it in reference to the human gaze and heart fixed on Jesus Christ crucified, He who narrated God to man (cf. *Jn* 1:18). It is used the moment immediately following the death of Jesus with the exclamation of the centurion who, from below the Cross, proclaims: *This man was innocent!* (*Lk* 23:47). Luke notes: *When all the people who had gathered for this spectacle* (Greek: *theoría*; Latin: *spectaculum*) *saw what had happened, they returned home beating their breasts* (*Lk* 23:48). This passage from the Book of Luke speaks of unity between interiority and exteriority, gaze and repentance. The act of seeing and beating the breast demonstrates a profound unity of the person; unity that is created mysteriously before Christ. The term *theoría* (contemplation) defines the “concrete spectacle... of Jesus of Nazareth ‘King of the Jews’ crucified”:<sup>7</sup> at the center of Christian contemplation is Christ crucified.

Contemplation, therefore, is “a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus”,<sup>8</sup> in the simple words of a peas-

<sup>7</sup> G. DOSSETTI, “L’esperienza religiosa. Testimonianza di un monaco”, in AA.VV., *L’esperienza religiosa oggi*, Vita e Pensiero, Milan 1986, 223.

<sup>8</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2715.

ant of Ars to his holy Curé: “I look at him and he looks at me”.<sup>9</sup> Saint Teresa of Jesus, similarly, explains: “Just so, in this life, two persons of reasonable intelligence, who love each other dearly, seem able to understand each other without making any signs, merely by their looks. This must be so here, for, without seeing each other, we look at each other face to face as these two lovers do: the Spouse in the Songs, I believe, says this to the Bride: I have been told that it occurs there”.<sup>10</sup>

Contemplation, therefore, is man’s gaze on God and *the work of His fingers* (cf. *Ps* 8:4). Returning to the words of Blessed Paul VI, it is “the effort to look on Him, and to center our heart in Him, [...] the highest, the most perfect act of the spirit”.<sup>11</sup>

6. Consecrated men and women are called – possibly now more than ever – to be prophets, mystics, and contemplatives, to discover the signs of God’s presence in everyday life, and to become wise representatives who know how to recognize the questions that God and human-

<sup>9</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>10</sup> St. TERESA OF AVILA, *The Book of My Life*, 27, 10.

<sup>11</sup> PAUL VI, *Allocution* on the occasion of the last public session of the Second Vatican Council, Vatican City (December 7, 1965).

ity ask throughout history. The greatest challenge is the ability to “continue to ‘see’ God with the eyes of faith in a world which ignores his presence”.<sup>12</sup>

Life, as it stands, is called to be the place of our contemplation. The cultivation of inner life does not need to produce an existence that is situated between heaven and earth, in ecstasy and illumination, but rather a life which, in humble closeness to God and with sincere empathy towards neighbors, creates and realizes a purified and transformed existence in history.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer uses the image of *cantus firmus*<sup>13</sup> to explain how an encounter with God allows the believer to contemplate the world, men, and everyday tasks to be performed with a contemplative attitude, and that it is this attitude which allows him to see, live, and savor the mysterious presence of God-Trinity in all things.

The contemplative unites, gradually and through a long process, work for God and the good sense to recognize him. He perceives the sound of God’s footsteps in life’s daily happenings and he becomes an expert of the *light, silent*

<sup>12</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 68.

<sup>13</sup> D. BONHOEFFER, *Lettera a Renata ed Eberhard Bethge*, in *Opere di Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, v. 8: *Resistenza e resa*, Queriniana, Brescia 2002, 412.

*sound* (1K 19:12) of everyday life where the Lord makes himself present.

In the Church, the contemplative and active dimensions intertwine and are inseparable. The Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* underlines the theandric nature of the Church which is “both human and divine, visible and yet invisibly equipped, eager to act and yet intent on contemplation, present in this world and yet not at home in it; and she is all these things in such wise that in her the human is directed and subordinated to the divine, the visible likewise to the invisible, action to contemplation, and this present world to that city yet to come, which we seek”.<sup>14</sup>

Let us return to the origin and foundation of our lives: the relationship with the Mystery of the living God, the primacy of a life in the Spirit, and the communion of love with Jesus, “the centre of life and the continual source of every initiative”,<sup>15</sup> an experience called to be shared.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ. A Renewed Commitment to Consecrated Life in the Third Millennium* (May 19, 2002), 22.

<sup>16</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 16.

As consecrated men and women, it is important for us to remember that no ecclesial action is evangelically productive unless we *remain* intimately united with Christ who is the vine (cf. *Jn* 15:1-11): *Without me you can do nothing* (*Jn* 15:5). He who does not remain in Christ will be unable to give anything to the world and will be unable to do anything to transform the structures of sin. He will labor over many things, things which might be important but not essential (cf. *Lk* 10:38-42), at the risk of working in vain.

Pope Francis encourages us: “Jesus wants evangelizers who proclaim the good news not only with words, but above all by a life transfigured by God’s presence. [...] Spirit-filled evangelizers are evangelizers who pray and work. [...] What is needed is the ability to cultivate an interior space which can give a Christian meaning to commitment and activity. Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out. The Church urgently needs the deep breath of prayer”.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 259; 262.

7. In the Church, as *cantus firmus*, *exclusively contemplative* brothers and sisters are “a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things”,<sup>18</sup> but this letter is not dedicated to them alone. Let us examine together the contemplative dimension in the heart of the world, the foundation of every consecrated life and true source of ecclesial productivity. Contemplation requires the consecrated person to proceed with new spiritual methods.

– A new way of relating with God, with themselves, with others, with creation, that that *bears his likeness*.<sup>19</sup> The contemplative person overcomes all obstacles to arrive at the source, at God; he opens the eyes of his heart in order to *observe, consider, and contemplate* the presence of God in people, in history and in events.

– A personal encounter with God, who through his Son *became flesh and made his dwelling among us* (cf. *Jn* 1:14), and who makes himself present in the life of every person, in daily happenings and in the admirable work of creation. The contemplative person does not see

<sup>18</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 59.

<sup>19</sup> St. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Canticle of Creatures*, 4.

life as an obstacle, but rather as a mirror which mystically reflects the *Mirror*.<sup>20</sup>

– An experience of faith greater than the vocal declaration of the creed, allowing the truths contained within to become a life practice. The contemplative person is, before all else, a believer, a person of faith, *faith incarnate* and not a *lab faith*.<sup>21</sup>

– *Friendly relation*, a *tratar de amistad*,<sup>22</sup> as affirmed by the first female Doctor of the Church, Saint Teresa of Jesus; a gift from a God who wishes to communicate deeply with man, as a true friend (cf. *Jn* 15:15). To contemplate is to take pleasure in the friendship of the Lord, in the intimacy of a Friend.

– An immersion in the passionate search for a God who lives with us and who makes Himself sought-after on the path of men. The contemplative person understands that it is the personal “I” which marks the distance between oneself and God and for this, never ceases to be a *beggar* of the Beloved, but rather looks for it in

<sup>20</sup> Cf. St. CLARE, *Letters to Agnes of Prague*, 4, in *FF*, 2901-2903.

<sup>21</sup> A. SPADARO, *Interview with Pope Francis*, in: *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 164 (2013/III), 474.

<sup>22</sup> St. TERESA OF AVILA, *The Book of My Life*, 8, 5.

the right place, in the depths of himself, in the sanctuary where God resides.

– An opening to the revelation and the communion of the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.<sup>23</sup> The contemplative person lets himself be filled by the revelation and transformed by the communion, he becomes a luminous icon of the Trinity and makes the “attraction of divine beauty”<sup>24</sup> felt in the fragility of humanity. This happens in life’s silence, where words fall silent to let the gaze, full of child-like wonder, the open hands of a mother that don’t expect anything in return, and the feet of *the one bringing good news* (Is 52:7), capable of crossing borders for the message of the Gospel, speak.

Contemplation, therefore, does not justify a mediocre, repetitive, and bored life. “Only God is enough” for those who follow Jesus: it is the intrinsic and indispensable aspect of this choice. With “heart towards the Lord”<sup>25</sup> is how the

<sup>23</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life* (Plenary, March 1980), 1.

<sup>24</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 20.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. St. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Earlier Rule*, 19.25.

contemplatives and mystics of the history of Christianity have walked. For consecrated persons the *sequela* of Christ is always a *contemplative sequela* and contemplation is fullness of a *sequela* that transfigures.



SEEKING



*Have you seen him whom  
my heart loves?*

Song of Songs 3:3



## Listening

8. To love means being ready for the daily apprenticeship of the search. The dynamic of the search attests that nobody can make it through life on their own, and it requires embarking on an exodus inside ourselves, attracted by “the sacred ground of the other”,<sup>1</sup> to come together in communion. However, the other is mystery, the other is always beyond our desires and expectations, it is not predictable. The other does not require possession but rather care, safekeeping, and room for their freedom to grow. If this is true for human creatures, it is even more true for God – mystery of highest freedom, of dynamic relation, of a fullness which exceeds us and whose weakness, as manifested through the Cross, disarms us.

Love in the *Song* is struggle and effort, as is death (*māwet*, *Sg* 8:6). It is not idealized but rather sung in the awareness of its crises and losses. The search involves effort; it requires

<sup>1</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 169.

getting up and going, it requires taking on the darkness of the “night”. The night is absence, detachment and estrangement from *the one whom the heart loves*, and the bride’s room transforms from a place of rest and dreams into a prison and a place of nightmares and torture (cf. *Sg* 3:1). The bride, the protagonist of the drama, seeks her beloved but He is absent. She must search for him, go *through the streets and squares* (*Sg* 3:2). Facing the dangers of the night and consumed by the desire to embrace him again, the bride asks the eternal question: *Have you seen him whom my heart loves?* (*Sg* 3:3). It is the question, cried out in the heart of the night, that elicits joy at the thought of him and that renews the wound of his unbearable distance. The bride is sleepless.

The night is the protagonist in chapter 5 of the *Song*: the young woman is in her room, her lover knocks at the door and asks to come in, but she temporizes, and he leaves (*Sg* 5:2-6). Is it misunderstanding between the two lovers or a dream turned into a nightmare? The text continues with a new search of great trial; trial which is not only emotional and affective but also physical because the bride who faces the night alone is beaten by the guards, wounded, and robbed of her robe (*Sg* 5:7). Love challenges the night and its dangers; it is greater than any

fear: *In love there can be no fear, but fear is driven out by perfect love (1Jn 4:18).*

The woman in search of her bridegroom works for personal knowledge of her feelings. She searches her heart and finds herself *sick with love (Sg 2:5; 5:8)*. This sickness shows the “alteration” of her condition; the fact that, by virtue of the encounter with her lover, she feels irreversibly changed, “altered”. She has become “other”, dedicated, consecrated to the other who gives her life meaning. Such is the condition of those who truly love.

Only those who overcome the distress of the night with the name of their beloved on their lips and his face impressed on their hearts, certain of the bond which unites them, can savor the spirited joy of the encounter. The fire of love puts in all-consuming relation the two lovers who, having escaped the winter of solitude, savor the spring of the communion, competing between them to celebrate the beauty of the other with passion and poetry.

### **The daily apprenticeship of the search**

9. “*Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram: your face, O Lord, I seek (Ps 26:8)*. A pilgrim seeking the meaning of life, enwrapped in the great mystery that surrounds him, the human person,

even if unconsciously, does, in fact, seek the face of the Lord. *Your ways, O Lord, make known to me, teach me your paths* (Ps 25:4): no one can ever take away from the heart of the human person the search for him of whom the Bible says *He is all* (Si 43:27) and for the ways of reaching him”.<sup>2</sup>

The search for God unites all men of good will; even those who profess to be non-believers confess to this deep yearning of their hearts.

Pope Francis, on many different occasions, showed the contemplative dimension of life as a way to enter the mystery. “Contemplation is mind, heart, knees”.<sup>3</sup> It is the “ability to wonder; the ability to listen to the silence and to hear the tiny whisper amid great silence by which God speaks to us. To enter into the mystery demands that we not be afraid of reality: that we not be locked into ourselves, that we not flee from what we fail to understand, that we not close our eyes to problems or deny them, that we not dismiss

<sup>2</sup> CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *The Service of Authority and Obedience. Faciem tuam, Domine, requiram* (May 11, 2008), 1.

<sup>3</sup> FRANCIS, *Contemplation, Closeness, Abundance*, morning Meditation in the Chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Tuesday, October 22, 2013, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, daily edition, Year CLIII, n. 243, Rome (October 23, 2013).

our questions [...], going beyond our own comfort zone, beyond the laziness and indifference which hold us back, and going out in search of truth, beauty and love. It is seeking a deeper meaning, an answer, and not an easy one, to the questions which challenge our faith, our fidelity and our very existence”.<sup>4</sup>

**10.** Entering the mystery requires a continual search, the need to go beyond, to not close our eyes and to seek answers. The human being continually tends towards an improvement; he is continually on a journey, seeking. And there is the risk of living with eternal dissatisfaction, numbed by strong emotions. For this, our time is one of shipwreck, downfall, indifference and loss of enthusiasm. It is essential to be aware of this consuming uneasiness, to intercept the sounds of the post-modern soul, and, in this fragility, to reawaken the vigor of the roots in order to remind the world of the prophetic vitality of the Gospel.

Christian life “requires and entails a transformation, a purification, a moral and spiritual elevation of man. It requires a search and effort towards a personal condition; an interior

<sup>4</sup> FRANCIS, *Homily* Easter Vigil on the Holy Night, Vatican Basilica (Saturday, April 4, 2015).

state of feelings, thoughts, mentality, and an exterior state of conduct, and a richness of grace and gifts that we call perfection”.<sup>5</sup> Racing towards destinations of opportunity, consumption, trends, powers, and desires, and pushed by a compulsion to repeat, we are in search of new pleasures which are never satisfied. In these times of ours, men and women, in this search for the illusive, come to taste the desperation that closes life in and extinguishes it.

Saint Augustine made a diagnosis, observing that men are not always able to make the leap in quality that pushes them to go beyond, to search for the infinite, because “they fall upon that which they can, and are content therewith; because, what they are not able to do, they do not will so strongly as would suffice to make them able”.<sup>6</sup>

In this haze of the conscience and of affections, the sometimes tragic experience of today awakens the need for the liberating encounter with the living God; we are called to be wise and patient interlocutors of these *pleas that could never be put into words* (cf. *Rom 8:26-27*) be-

<sup>5</sup> PAUL VI, *General Audience*, Vatican City (August 7, 1968).

<sup>6</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* X, XXIII, 33.

cause the longing for God, glowing under the ash of indifference, does not extinguish.

In view of this reemergence of the search for the sacred, it cannot be ignored how, even among those who profess to be Christians, faith seems reduced to brief religious parentheses kept completely separate from everyday problems. Faith becomes irrelevant to life. God is not necessary and is not as much a part of life as are family, friends, prized possessions, work, the house and the economy. This extraneousness can even touch our consecrated life.

### *Pilgrims deep within*

11. “If man is essentially a voyager, this means that he is on a journey towards a destination of which we can say, at the same time and contradictorily, that he sees and does not see it. But restlessness is just like the inner spring of this progression”<sup>7</sup> even in the time of technical power and its ideals “man cannot lose this spur without becoming immobile and without dying”.<sup>8</sup>

It is God alone who reawakens restlessness and the power of the question, the insomnia that

<sup>7</sup> G. MARCEL, *Homo viator. Prolégomènes à une métaphysique de l'espérance*, Aubier, Paris 1944, 26

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

is at the origin of the awakening and the departure. He is the driving force of the journey. The restlessness in front of the questions raised by life pushes man into the pilgrimage of the search.

At the root of the life of every Christian, there is the fundamental movement of faith: the walk towards Jesus Christ to center life on Him. An exodus that leads to knowing God and his Love. A pilgrimage that knows the destination. A radical change that turns wanderers into pilgrims. Being a pilgrim requires movement, activity and effort. The path to be taken involves risk, insecurity, and being open to new things and unexpected encounters.

A pilgrim is not one who simply moves from one place to another. He does not delegate the search for the destination. He knows where he wants to go and has a finish-line that draws his heart and tenaciously urges him on. He does not harbor a vague search for happiness but rather focuses on a specific point, a point that he knows, or at least imagines, a point that he has knowledge of and that has led him to his departure. The destination of every Christian is God.

## *Quaerere Deum*

12. Saint Benedict, the tenacious seeker of God, affirms that a monk is not one who has found God; he is one who seeks God for a lifetime. In *Rule* he calls for the examination of the young monk's motivations in order to know, first of all, if "*si revera Deum quaerit*", if he actually seeks God.<sup>9</sup>

This is the paradigm of the life of every Christian and of every consecrated person: the search for God, *si revera Deum quaerit*. The Latin word *quaerere* not only means to seek, to go in search of something, to work hard to obtain, but even to ask, to pose a question. It is the human being who continuously asks and seeks. Seeking God, therefore, means to never tire of asking, like the bride in the *Song*: *Have you seen him whom my heart loves?* (*Sg* 3:3).

The common thread throughout this story from the *Song* is represented by the theme of the loving search, of the savored presence after the bitterness of absence, of the dawn welcomed after the night, and of the oblivion of self experienced as a condition for finding the Other.

The first degree of love is love that seeks. The sense of longing and the search are the domi-

<sup>9</sup> St. BENEDICT, *Rule*, 58, 7.

nant experiences, and the other is perceived as the absent Presence. The lovers in the *Song* are beggars of love, ardent seekers of the beloved.

Seeking God means being in relation with Him and allowing his Presence to question our humanity. This means never being satisfied with what we have reached. God constantly asks us: *Where are you?* (*Gn* 3:9). The search for God requires humility: our truth is revealed by the light of the Spirit and in it we recognize that it is God who seeks us first.

“The restless heart is the heart that is ultimately satisfied with nothing less than God, and in this way becomes a loving heart. [...] But not only are we restless for God: God’s heart is restless for us. God is waiting for us. He is looking for us. He knows no rest either, until he finds us. God is restless for us, he looks out for people willing to “catch” his unrest, his passion for us, people who carry within them the searching of their own hearts and at the same time open themselves to be touched by God’s search for us”.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for our search take us back to the Love that sought and touched us first, while it

<sup>10</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* on the occasion of the Solemnity of the Epiphany of the Lord, Vatican Basilica (January 6, 2012).

recognizes its seal. It can happen that renouncing the search silences the inner voice which calls us to fulfillment. It can happen that we stop to relish in splendors that blind us, being contented with the bread that satisfies hunger for one day, repeating the initial choice of the *lost son* (cf. *Lk 15:11-32*).

It can happen that the horizon narrows while the heart non longer waits for *he who comes*. But God always comes until the primacy of Love is established in our lives. The dynamics of the *Song* return, the game of the search: we cannot think to find God once and for all.

### **The search in the night**

13. *On my bed, at night, I sought him whom my heart loves. I sought him but did not find him* (*Sg 3:1*). The reading of the *Song* envelops us in the idyll of a dream-like love while introducing the living and constant suffering of the enamored soul. Love, the experience that transforms and not a brief and fleeting encounter, calls to live with the possibility of the absence of the beloved and at times exile, brokenness, and separation. From this possibility comes the wait and the reciprocal and constant search. The cry of a soul that is never content. The *Song* puts us in front of a time of crisis and confrontation, a

moment in which we recognize and accept each other after the passion and fire of the beginnings. It is the time to love in a different way. Distance becomes the search, while the longing that pines and hurts becomes necessary nourishment for love.

### *Desire*

14. Love for God must maintain this dynamic of desire. God is invisible, he is always beyond everything, our search for him is never fulfilled, and his presence is elusive. “God is He who seeks us and, at the same time, He who makes himself sought-after. It is he who reveals himself and, at the same time, he who hides himself. It is for him that these words of the psalm *It is your face, O Lord, that I seek* (Ps 26:8) are for, and many other words of the Bible, like those of the bride in the *Song: On my bed, at night, I sought him whom my heart loves. I sought but did not find him. So I will rise and go through the City; in the streets and the squares I will seek him whom my heart loves... I sought but did not find him* (3:1-2). [...] Urged by the words of the *Song – I sought but did not find him –*, we pose to ourselves the problem of atheism or better yet, ignorance about God. None of us are far from such an experience:

there is a potential atheist in us that shouts and whispers its difficulty in believing every day”.<sup>11</sup>

“*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*”,<sup>12</sup> writes Augustine: that is, “if you understood him, it would not be God”. This category of search preserves the distance between the creature who seeks and the Creator; an essential distance because the One who is sought-after is not an object but he, too, is a subject, the true subject, as he is the one who first sought, called, and loved us, provoking our heart’s desire.

Our search is a call to humility because we recognize “potential atheists” in ourselves. We experience the difficulty in believing, and we recognize in ourselves that self-sufficient, and sometimes arrogant, pride which separates us from others and condemns us. Seeking God requires crossing through the night and even staying there for some time. It requires discovering the strength and the beauty of a walk of faith that knows how to stop in front of the darkness of doubt without the pretension of having to offer solutions. Faith that is lived will also allow us to bear witness to Christ with the

<sup>11</sup> C.M. MARTINI, *La tentazione dell'ateismo*, in *Il Corriere della Sera*, November 16, 2007.

<sup>12</sup> ST. AUGUSTINE, *Sermon 52*, 16.

humble language of one who has learned to inhabit the night and to endure its questions.

In Scripture, the night is the time of distress, interior struggle, and spiritual warfare, as we see happen to Jacob at the Jabbok (*Gn* 32:25). It is night when Nicodemus goes to see Jesus, hidden out of fear of the Jews (*Jn* 3:2); it is night when Judah becomes lost and leaves the vital friendship with Christ by leaving the cenacle (*Jn* 13:30); still it is night when Mary Magdalene goes to the tomb (*Jn* 20:1) and is able to recognize the voice of her Beloved (cf. *Jn* 20:11-18), just like the bride in the *Song* (*Sg* 2:8). The night is a time of desire that transforms into encounter only if it is crossed without doubting love.

Humble faith accepts that the dark passage towards dawn does not signify the passing from the search to possession, but instead, leads from the fragmentation that scatters the spirit to the unifying experience of the Risen One. Life acquires direction and sense as, day after day, prayer after prayer, trial after trial, the pilgrimage continues towards the definitive answer, towards rest and stillness, towards peace of soul.

In our time, a time marked by fragility and uncertainties, contemplation could be sought without being rooted in faith, solely as a “place” of stillness or rest, as emotional space, as satisfaction for one’s search for self, that avoids ef-

fort and suffering. The Word of God and the reading of some experiences of holiness that encountered pain or the “night of faith” help us avoid the temptation to run away from the difficulties of the human journey.

### *Hope*

**15.** The night, a dark and grim symbol, becomes an image full of hope within Biblical and Christian spirituality. The story of the Spirit is prepared in the night that readies the radiant and splendid day, the day of light. The journey through the dark night is marked by the crumbling of certainties in order to be born anew. Light is reached through darkness, life through death and day through night. This is what a life of faith requires: a time in which the person is invited to dwell in God. It is the moment in which those who seeking are invited to pass from the experience of being loved by God to that of loving God simply because he is God.

Saint John of the Cross defined the *dark night* as the spiritual experience in which loss, aridity, impotence, pain and desperation alternate; a night of the Spirit and of the senses, a passage towards the perfect union of love with God. Teresa of Avila, at the height of her involvement with the reform of Carmel, wrote in

her book *The Book of My Life*, “I would forget all the favours that the Lord had bestowed upon me: nothing would remain with me but the mere recollection of them, like the memory of a dream, and this was a great distress to me. For, when a person is in this condition, the understanding becomes stupid; and so I was tormented by a thousand doubts and suspicions. I thought that I had not understood it properly, and that it might have been my fancy, and that it was bad enough for me to be deluded myself, without deluding good men as well. I felt I was so evil that I began to think that all the evils and heresies that had arisen were due to my sins”.<sup>13</sup>

From Francis of Assisi to Teresa of Lisieux, from Gemma Galgani to Bernadette Soubirous, from Padre Pio to Teresa of Calcutta there are numerous examples of people who write: “There is so much contradiction in my soul, such deep longing for God, so deep that it is painful, a suffering continual and yet not wanted by God repulsed empty, no faith, no love, no zeal. Heaven means nothing to me. To me it looks like an empty place”.<sup>14</sup> The night becomes the place where love is tried and the

<sup>13</sup> St. TERESA OF AVILA, *The Book of My Life*, 30, 8.

<sup>14</sup> Blessed TERESA OF CALCUTTA, *Vieni e sii la mia luce*, edited by B. Kolodiejchuk, BUR, Milan 2009.

place of faithfulness and the mysterious closeness of God.

*O vere beata nox*, “O truly blessed night”<sup>15</sup> we sing on Easter night, announcing the resurrection and the victory. The night becomes time and path for the coming of the Bridegroom who unites with and, in the embrace, transforms the soul as the Spanish mystic sings:

“Oh, night that guided me,  
oh night more lovely than the dawn,  
oh, night that joined  
Beloved with lover,  
lover transformed in the Beloved!”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> ROMAN MISSAL, *Easter Proclamation*.

<sup>16</sup> St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Poems*, V, *The Dark Night*, 5-8.



DWELLING



*My Beloved is mine and I am his.*

Song of Songs 2:16



## Listening

16. The *Song* follows a storyline of search and finding in a harmonious epiphany of encounter and mutual contemplation within a very precise linguistic *register*: that of *praise*. Praise involves the entire body, the tangible place of relation with the other: lips, teeth, cheeks, neck, hair, breasts, hands, legs and particularly, the eyes which send signals of love as to be equated to *doves* (*Sg* 1:15; 4:1; 5:12).

Fullness of the heart is expressed through the celebratory language of bodies. The praise of beauty of the body is interpreted through the language of nature, constructions, goldworking, and emotions. The universe flows into in the body of the one who is loved and the beloved appears present in the universe. The word consecrates itself to love and the lexicon of communion appears. Love becomes a lively and continuous dialogue that grasps and celebrates beauty. The Bridegroom's praise: *How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful you are!* (*Sg* 1:15), is followed by the bride's: *How beau-*

*tiful you are, my Beloved, and how delightful!* (Sg 1:16). These “blessed words” heal the wounds inflicted by the language of blame, evident in the relationship between man and woman ever since original sin (cf. Gn 3:12), and allow for the restoration of equality, reciprocity and mutual belonging: *My Beloved is mine and I am his* (Sg 2:16), *I am my Beloved’s, and my Beloved is mine* (Sg 6:3), *I and my Beloved’s, and his desire is for me* (Sg 7:11), expression which seems to put an end to the divine punishment expressed in *Genesis* (3:16). The language of praise and compliments procures a relational harmony that is also mirrored in creation, which is never separated from human vicissitudes (cf. *Rom* 8:22-23), and syn-tonizes with the human heart in celebration through a jubilation of colors, perfumes, flavors and sounds.

Even God, fascinated by his creature, showers it with compliments, as he does with Mary when he greets her as *full of grace* (*kecharitoméne*, *Lk* 1:28), proclaiming her, with these words, a masterpiece of beauty. The creature answers with *Magnificat* (*Lk* 1:46-55), inserting into the story the power of praise that dilates the human heart and introduces it into an authentic relationship with God.

17. The word that blossoms to liberate love tends towards contact, towards union. The *Song* opens with the request that blooms on the lips of the bride, main protagonist of the drama, and expresses the desire for contact with her lover who is physically absent but present in her heart and thoughts. Her lover's mouth becomes a wellspring she can draw from to quench her thirst and become intoxicated. *Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth. Your love is more delightful than wine; delicate is the fragrance of your perfume, your name is an oil poured out; and that is why the maidens love you* (Sg 1:2-3). The kisses and tenderness of the Bridegroom (*dodîm*) are qualified as *tôbîm*, "good", and so, exhibit the fundamental quality of all that has come from the hands of the Creator (cf. *Gn* 1:4) in accordance to the original divine plan. They represent a *liturgy of communion*, access to the other's breath, and a joy greater than the intoxication from the wine: *You will be our joy and our gladness. We shall praise your love above wine* (Sg 1:4). The beloved cannot be resisted because love is a reality so strong and inescapable that it can only be compared to *death* (Sg 8:6). It is a reality of incredible attractive force which brings the two to become one.

18. This is true for both married life (cf. *Gn* 2:24) and consecrated life which experiences, in a similar way, the dynamism of Christ's spousal love (cf. *1Co* 6:17). It in fact flourishes within love, a love that fascinates, that intercepts the deepest desires, that touches the sources, and that provokes the longing for the gift. It arises as an answer of love to a God who gives himself without reservations, an answer to a gratuitous love that is not possessed but received. "This love embraces the whole person, soul and body, whether man or woman, in that person's unique and unrepeatable personal 'I'. The One who, given eternally to the Father, 'gives' Himself in the mystery of the Redemption, has now called man in order that he in his turn should give himself entirely to the work of the Redemption through membership in a community of brothers or sisters, recognized and approved by the Church".<sup>1</sup>

This dynamic of search and of coming together is a journey that is never completed in its entirety. The path to conversion and prayer in which to dwell opens to the person who is called. On this path longing becomes transformation and purification, praise and form in the

<sup>1</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation *Redemptionis donum* (March 25, 1984), 3.

Beauty that attracts and unites, the mystery in which to dwell. “This intimate and profound knowledge of Christ is actuated and grows deeper day by day through the life of personal, community and liturgical prayer”.<sup>2</sup>

### **In the form of Beauty**

19. At the heart of Christian identity is the force that shapes it: the revelation of God as creation and salvation and the glory manifested once and for all in Christ and in his Easter. Through the Son and his earthly life, God fulfilled his intention to make himself known and to reveal the creature to itself: “We were then sealed with the Spirit by God. For as we die in Christ, in order to be born again, so, too, we are sealed with the Spirit, that we may possess His brightness and image and grace”.<sup>3</sup> The mutual recognition of the origins resonates. God expresses his satisfaction to the human creature: *God saw all that He had made, and indeed it was very good (Gn 1:31)*. He connects it to himself with a love that as it recognizes, it returns to beauty: *How beautiful you are, my love, how beautiful you are (Sg 1:15)*; absolute and inextin-

<sup>2</sup> *Ivi*, 8.

<sup>3</sup> St. AMBROSE, *On the Holy Spirit*, I, 6, 79.

guishable love: *I am my Beloved's and his desire is for me* (Sg 7:11).

Let us fix our contemplative gaze on the mystery of the Beauty we are a form of. Western and Eastern traditions introduce us to and enlighten us on the Christian form of Beauty, its uniqueness, and its ultimate meaning. “Belatedly I loved thee, O Beauty so ancient and so new”.<sup>4</sup> In this heartfelt exclamation from *Confessions* we find the cry of the human soul of all time. The necessity for a journey resounds, a journey that leads from beauty to Beauty, from the penultimate to the Ultimate, to rediscover the meaning and the nature of all that exists at the base of every beauty: “For see, thou wast within and I was without, and I sought thee out there. Unlovely, I rushed heedlessly among the lovely things thou hast made. [...] Thou didst call and cry aloud, and didst force open my deafness. Thou didst gleam and shine, and didst chase away my blindness”.<sup>5</sup>

**20.** In the Vespers chant of the Lenten season and Holy week, the Church introduces Psalm 44 with two Scripture passages that seem to contrast to each other. The first interpretive

<sup>4</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, X, 27, 38.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*.

key recognizes Christ as the most handsome among men: *You are the fairest of the children of men and graciousness is poured upon your lips* (Ps 44). The grace poured upon his lips reveals the inner beauty of his word, the glory of the Truth, and the beauty of God who draws us to him and provokes the wound of Love. In the Church as Bride, it moves us towards the Love that has impressed its form in us. We live in the form of beauty, not as aesthetic longing, but as the main reference to the truth that lives in us: *Your God will be your splendour* (Is 60:19; cf. Wis 8:2).

The second passage from the Scripture invites us to read the same psalm with a different interpretive key, referring to Isaiah: *Without beauty, without majesty (we saw him), no looks to attract our eyes* (Is 53:2). How is this reconciled? Is the *fairest of men* so miserable in appearance that we do not want to look at him? Pilate presents him to the crowd by saying: *Ecce homo* (Jn 19:5), so as to create pity for the beaten and disfigured Man. The faceless man.

**21.** “An uncomely and deformed Jesus? A Jesus who is comely and beautiful in loveliness surpassing the sons of men? Yes, two flutes seem to make discordant sounds: howbeit one Spirit breathes into both. The first trumpet says,

*Beauteous in loveliness surpassing the sons of men*; and the second, with Isaiah, says, *We saw him: and he had no form nor comeliness...* Turn not away thine ears, listen to both and apply understanding”.<sup>6</sup> Saint Augustine settles the comparisons – not contradictions – by showing the glory of the true Beauty, the same Truth. Whoever believes in the God who manifested himself as love, precisely *to the end* (Jn 13:1) in the battered body of Christ crucified, know that beauty is truth and truth beauty. In the suffering Christ, he also learns that the beauty of truth also embraces offense, pain, and even the dark mystery of death. It is in accepting pain, not in ignoring it, that our encounter with Beauty can occur, even when weak eyes or a heart wounded by evil are unable to grasp the mysterious and fruitful plan.<sup>7</sup>

**22.** The incarnate Word is the way to the ultimate Beauty: “Our very Life came down to earth and bore our death, and slew it with the very abundance of his own life. And he departed from our sight that we might return to our

<sup>6</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Homilies on the First Epistle of John*, 9, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. J. RATZINGER, *La corrispondenza del cuore nell'incontro con la Bellezza*, in *30 Giorni*, n. 9, September 2002, 87.

hearts and find him there”.<sup>8</sup> The Word Jesus leads us to the source of beauty, it draws us with binds of love: *How beautiful you are, my Beloved, and how delightful!* (Sg 1:16). The beauty moves for a second time: love in response. It moves to encounter, to contemplate; it embarks on a journey, attracted by the love which came to us as grace and freedom.

We are invited to the journey towards encounter and to dwell in it, while God returns us to the beautiful identity: *When Moses came down from mountain of Sinai... he did not know that the skin of his face was radiant after speaking with the Lord* (Ex 34:29).

**23.** Mystic tradition preserves beauty in silence; it does not intend to violate it. The way of beauty requires exile, withdrawal and tension that unifies. It is what connects monastic theology to the flourishing of mysticism between the late Middle Ages and the dawn of the Modern Age.

The voice of Dionysius the pseudo Areopagite echoes: “But Divine Love is ecstatic, not permitting (any) to be lovers of themselves, but of those beloved... Wherefore also, Paul the Great, when possessed by the Divine Love, and

<sup>8</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, IV, 12, 19.

participating in its ecstatic power, says with inspired lips, 'I live no longer, but Christ lives in me.' As a true lover, and beside himself, as he says, to Almighty God, and not living the life of himself, but the life of the Beloved, as a life excessively esteemed".<sup>9</sup> Divinization begins on earth; the creature is transfigured and the Kingdom of God is inaugurated. The splendor of God in the ecclesial form of *ordo amoris* burns in man as existence and new way of life. *The life I now live in this body I live in faith: faith in the Son of God who loved me and who sacrificed himself for my sake* (Ga 2:20).

**24.** Beauty is ecstatic. It can be reached only by those who lose themselves, who accept to embark on an interior journey that, paradoxically, leads one out of the self in the movement of love. *My beloved is mine and I am his* (Sg 2:16); *I am my Beloved's, and my Beloved is mine* (Sg 6:3). The experience that relates us with the Lord, an experience which is desired and sought-after, becomes a theological place in which the soul recognizes itself and finds dwelling: "My God, I contemplate you in the heavens of my soul and I immerse myself you".<sup>10</sup> In this

<sup>9</sup> DIONYSIUS THE AREOPAGITE, *De divinis nominibus*, 4, 13.

<sup>10</sup> Blessed ELIA OF ST. CLEMENT, *Scritti*, OCD, Rome 2006, 431.

abyss, where everything is resolved in unity and peace, mysterious and silent lives God, the unspeakable, the Other: "God from which all that is beautiful is beautiful and without which nothing can be beautiful".<sup>11</sup>

Saint Mary Magdalene de' Pazzi, tells of the mystical experience in which she discovers the glory of God and of the creature seen in God: the soul united with the Word *passus et gloriosus*, understands the graft of the human in the divine, absorbed in the Trinitarian life given over to the order of love.<sup>12</sup>

### *The Beauty that wounds*

**25.** Beauty calls to ecstasy, while its act of love opens in us the possibility of awareness, of a journey, of a known and embraced vulnerability.

Beauty strikes the human person, it wounds him and, precisely in that way, gives him wings and raises him up with a longing so powerful it desires more than what is opportune for man to desire: "It is the Bridegroom who has smitten them with this longing. It is he who has sent a

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ACHARD OF SAINT VICTOR, *De unitate Dei et pluralitate creaturarum*, 1, 6.

<sup>12</sup> St. MARY MAGDALENE DE' PAZZI, *I colloqui*, part II, in *Tutte le opere*, v. 3, CIL, Florence 1963, 226.

ray of his beauty into their eyes. The greatness of the wound already shows the arrow which has struck home, the longing indicates who has inflicted the wound”.<sup>13</sup> This is how Nicolas Kabasilas refers to the beauty that wounds and in it recognizes Christ’s presence and the *vulnus* that cries within us as a longing for fulfillment. A wound that calls us to our ultimate destiny and our mission. Pope Francis reminds us: “Whoever wants to preach must be the first to let the Word of God move him deeply and become incarnate in his daily life [...]; we need to let ourselves be wounded by that word which will also wound others”.<sup>14</sup>

**26.** In the journey that conforms us to the Son, we are asked to become aware of the possible deformation of the original image that lives in us and of the vocation to be born anew from above. Such awareness must be experienced in our daily lives by accepting the risk of an exacting gaze that cannot be satisfied with a narrowed vision but trains itself to see and demonstrate the gracefulness of the Christian form. We are

<sup>13</sup> N. CABASILAS, *La vita in Cristo*, Città Nuova, Rome 1994, in J. RATZINGER, *La corrispondenza del cuore nell'incontro con la Bellezza*, in *30 Giorni*, n. 9, September 2002, 89.

<sup>14</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 149.

asked to train our gaze, to make it simple, purified and penetrating. It is a daily search to dwell in the encounter and to recognize the habits that can distort it; the indolence that can deafen us: *I hear my Beloved knocking. "Open to me, my sister, my love..."* (Sg 5:2).

The light of the Spirit touches us in infinite ways and its visit opens in us a wound, putting us in a state of passage. It urges us to make the needs and the ways of our Beloved our own. It shatters our certainties. It is not easy to dwell among the rubble of that which grace has demolished; temptation pushes us to rebuild, to work. We consecrated men and women sometimes find in missionary work the ointment that soothes the wound created in us by grace. We glimpse the steps to take, but we fear them: *I have taken off my tunic, am I to put it on again? I have washed my feet, am I to dirty them again?* (Sg 5:3). We must experience the wound and dwell in the conversion.

27. The Spirit puts us in a state of conversion (*metanoëin* = *shub*); it turns us around. The term *metanoëin* underlines our change of direction and shows how it is the *noûs*, the spiritual background, the deepest heart, within us that gets unsettled. Dwelling in conversion is contemplative attitude, a surprise that is re-

newed each day and which knows no end in Jesus Christ.

If we are strangers to conversion we become strangers to love. As consecrated men and women we are invited to humility that recognizes that alone we could not dwell in conversion. It is not the fruit of good intentions, it is the first step of love: *I hear my Beloved!* (Sg 2:8).

It may happen that as we get caught up in the flow of action we stop invoking (Lm 5:21; cf. Jr 31:18) and stop listening to the voice who invites us: *Come then, my love, my lovely one, come* (Sg 2:10). Our reference paradigms – our thoughts, times of oration, decisions, actions – no longer have a sense of waiting, longing or listening. Different references and necessities take place in us, ones that do not refer to Christ and the conformity to Him. The episode of Zebedee's son, narrated in Matthew (Mt 20:17-28), is emblematic. It shows the two disciples covered by a subtle hint of pettiness, while wanting to stay close to Jesus. They were following the Teacher, as do we, but their hearts were hardened. Through a slow process, which sometimes goes unnoticed, the heart hardens and is unable to interpret in a sapiential way. It stabilizes and wrinkles, losing the gaze that contemplates. This hardness of heart is not the same as that of an atheist but rather that of the

apostles whose hearts, as Mark observes, are often reprimanded by Jesus: *Do you not yet understand? Have you no perception? Are your minds closed? Have you eyes that do not see, ears that do not hear?* (Mk 8:17-18).

Even those of us who follow Jesus according to the Gospel are subject to this progressive hardening of the heart. Although formally believers, worldly interests, reasonings, and judgments reemerge in us. Contemplation extinguishes and beauty turns gray.

**28.** Pope Francis continually denounces the attitudes of life that He defines as worldliness: “Strip away every kind of worldly spirit, which is a temptation for everyone; strip away every action that is not for God, that is not from God... strip away the seeming assurance structures give, which, though certainly necessary and important, should never obscure the one true strength it carries within: God. He is our strength! To strip away what is not essential, because our reference is Christ”.<sup>15</sup> In *Evangelii gaudium* he warns: “Spiritual worldliness, which hides behind the appearance of piety and even love for the Church, consists in seeking not the

<sup>15</sup> FRANCIS, *Meeting with the poor assisted by Caritas, Assisi* (October 4, 2013).

Lord's glory but human glory and personal well-being. It is what the Lord reprimanded the Pharisees for: *How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (Jn 5:44)*. It is a subtle way of seeking one's *own interests, not those of Jesus Christ (Phil 2:21)*".<sup>16</sup>

29. The spiritual path knows no progress unless it is open to the actions of the Spirit of God through the effort of asceticism and, in particular, of spiritual warfare. "He then says that the way is narrow – that is to say, the way of perfection – in order to make it clear that, to travel upon the way of perfection, the soul has not only to enter by the strait gate, emptying itself of things of sense, but has also to straiten itself, freeing and disencumbering itself completely in that which pertains to the spirit. [...] And, as this is a matter wherein we must seek after and attain to God alone, God alone must be the object of our search and attainment".<sup>17</sup> It is necessary to open the door and go out, ask to find, without fear of beatings: *I sought him but I did not find him, I called to him but he did not answer... they beat me, they*

<sup>16</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 93; cf. 93-97.

<sup>17</sup> St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, 2, 7, 3.

wounded me, they took away my cloak, they who guard the ramparts (Sg 5:6-7).

The constant call resounds: “In fact the vocation of consecrated persons to seek first the Kingdom of God is first and foremost a call to complete conversion, in self-renunciation, in order to live fully for the Lord, so that God may be all in all. Called to contemplate and bear witness to the transfigured face of Christ, consecrated men and women are also called to a ‘transfigured’ existence”.<sup>18</sup> The heart knows the wound and lives it, while the Spirit deep within us opens us to contemplative oration.

### *Beauty that recreates*

**30.** Prayer is situated between our weakness and the Spirit. It gushes out of the depths of our souls, as if from a wound given by grace. It is a yearning, a search, practice, a journey. Like a wellspring of living water, it transports, pushes, digs and *flows* (cf. *Jn* 4:10); it makes flourish. Prayer is an inner birth: we become aware of a life present within us, one that sprouts and grows in silence. For mystics, praying means perceiving our deepest truth, the point in which we join with God, where God touches us while

<sup>18</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 35.

he recreates us: the sacred place of the encounter. The place of the new life: *For see, winter is past... the flowers appear on the earth... The fig tree is forming its first figs and the blossoming vines give out their fragrance* (Sg 2:11a.12a.13a). We must direct ourselves to this place with the will and faithfulness of one who loves: *Tell me then, you whom my heart loves: Where will you lead your flock to graze, where will you rest it at noon? That I may no longer wander like a vagabond beside the flocks of your companions* (Sg 1:7). In the fresco *The Creation of Adam*, which we admire in the Sistine Chapel, Michelangelo Buonarroti makes us contemplate the finger of the Father that nearly touches the finger of Adam, suggesting a mystery. The communion which began will have no end.

**31.** Prayerful contemplation is the seal of the Beloved: pure grace within us. The only behavior is waiting as a cry. Biblical language and that of the Fathers used the verb *hypoménein* and the noun *hypomoné*: to be below, to crouch down and be still, waiting for something to happen. The invocation of help, *Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord!* (Ps 129:1), dares to express before the face of God my desperation, my longing to contemplate his Face with a cry. Monks began to use the name of Jesus as supplication: “Jesus,

help me! Jesus, save me! Jesus, have mercy!”. The soul puts up the tent and lives in the Name. It dwells in love. It contemplates.

32. Prayer brings us back to the center of our being, it gives us over to Jesus, while it heals our self and restores our unity: “The divine Master is in the bottom our our soul as in the bottom of Peter’s boat... At times, it seems as though he sleeps but he is always there; ready to save us, ready to answer our request”.<sup>19</sup>

Saint John of the Cross sings: “What more do you want, O soul! And what else do you search for outside, when within yourself you possess your riches, delights, satisfaction, fullness, and kingdom - your Beloved whom you desire and seek? Be joyful and gladdened in your interior recollection with him, for you have him so close to you. Desire him there, adore him there. Do not go in pursuit of him outside yourself. You will only become distracted and wearied thereby, and you shall not find him, or enjoy him more securely, or sooner, or more intimately than by seeking him within you”.<sup>20</sup> Byzantine tradition uses a figurative expression: the mind (*noûs*) descends into the heart. Intellect

<sup>19</sup> Blessed CHARLES DE FOUCAULD, *Opere spirituali*, San Paolo Edizioni, Rome 1997, 144.

<sup>20</sup> St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Spiritual Canticle* B, verse I, 8.

abandons its musings and unites with the heart that invokes: *Set me like a seal on your heart, like a seal on your arm. For love is strong as Death, jealously relentless as Sheol. The flash of it is a flash of fire, a flame of the Lord himself* (Sg 8:6). The whole being enters into the life of God, it is healed, it is integrated into the action of the Spirit: Love returns beauty to him. Contemplation becomes the wound of the Beloved who recreates us, the presence that lives within us.

“O living flame of love  
that tenderly wounds  
my soul in its deepest center!  
Since now you are not oppressive,  
now consummate! if it be your will:  
tear through the veil  
of this sweet encounter”.<sup>21</sup>

### **In the exercise of truth**

33. Ancient philosophy taken from Thomas affirms that beauty is ‘the splendor of the truth’ and ‘the flowering and exercise of the being’, better yet, it is the manifestation of the reality of life that each of us carries within: the truth. The mystery of the being presents itself to our awareness as beauty that creates amazement and

<sup>21</sup> ID., *The Living Flame of Love B, Prologue*, 4.

wonder. It is not what we grasp that strikes us, but rather, that which lies beyond our grasp; not the quantitative aspect of nature, but its quality; not what is beyond the range of time and space, but the true meaning, the source and end of being, in other words, the ineffable.<sup>22</sup> It is the life that shines, that reveals itself, that overflows despite the veils that hide and protect it. To grasp the ineffable and understand its essence, our heart must dwell in the mystery and, at the same time, dwell in history in a contemplative way.

We call our life “consecrated”, and we ask ourselves whether or not this adjective has lost the living brilliance of the mystery that abides in it and that manifests itself in it daily. Our consecrated life indeed signifies a style, a way of living in the world; and it has an task that is both heuristic (it finds, discovers, makes visible) and hermeneutic (it interprets, explains, makes understand).

### *The holiness that embraces*

**34.** Christian tradition is aware of its particularity – of its style, of its form – by discovering its capacity to assume the conditions imposed by history and cultures, in the intelligence of the

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A.J. HESCHEL, *L'uomo alla ricerca di Dio*, Edizioni Qiqajon, Bose Monastic Community 1995.

faith from which it originates. The unity between the mission of Christ and his life, is embodied in the Christian style and form throughout history.

Let us contemplate the way of Christ. It expresses Jesus' unique capacity to dwell in the Father in the charity of the Spirit, while learning from every individual and every situation (cf. *Mk* 1:40s.; 5:30; 7:27-29). This attitude is not a sign of weakness, but of authority, strength, and holiness. He is luminous because in him prayer, thoughts, words, and actions come together and show the simplicity and unity of his being. His splendor as the Son of the Father does not blind, but approaches us discreetly, it sets itself aside for the advantage of all. He makes space of freedom around himself by communicating with just his benevolent presence and closeness. In this encounter, people are put in the condition to discover their own deepest identity. They recognize their own truth; the mystery of being sons and daughters of God.

Christ's way shows that he watches with the eyes of love God. Those who have encountered Jesus can continue the journey because that which is essential to their life has been revealed and therefore, known. The man Jesus of Nazareth told of God and it is in him that *the fullness*

of divinity (Col 2:9) lives. It is the man Jesus of Nazareth that consecrated people are called to follow in a personal and community life that before all else is human and humanized.

Christ *teaches us that... we must be self-restrained and live good and religious lives here in this present world* (Ti 2:12). In this way, our humanity, purified and enlivened by the need for contemplation, is liberated every day from falsehood in order to become a human and holy place that embraces the echo and narration of Jesus' life, in the limit and the perfection. Let us learn the style that the *Didaché* calls "the ways of the Lord".<sup>23</sup> Pope Francis reminds us that the *sequela Christi* finds the model for its own humanity in Christ's holy humanity to bear witness to how He "lived on this earth".<sup>24</sup>

### *Listening that sees*

**35.** We learn Christ's way, first, by listening. We are invited to take on a contemplative way in which the Word shines in our lives as men and women: in our thoughts, in prayerful silence, in our fraternities, in our encounters and deacon-

<sup>23</sup> *Didaché*, 11, 8.

<sup>24</sup> A. SPADARO, "Wake up the world!". *Conversation of Pope Francis with the Union of Superiors General*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/I), 7.

ries, in the places where we live and in which we announce the grace of mercy, in our choices, in our decisions, and in the formative paths pursued in a constant and worthwhile way.

In listening to the Word of God, the consecrated person finds a place to be under the gaze of the Lord and to learn from Him how to look at himself, others, and the world. The letter to the Hebrews (4:13) demonstrates this intersection of gazes very well: *Before the Word of God (lógos tou̇ theoû) no created thing can hide; everything is uncovered and open to the eyes of the one to whom we must give account of ourselves (ho lógos).* The Word sees us, it watches us, it regards us, it calls us, and it engages us, *his eyes were flames of fire* (cf. *Rv 19:12*).

Christian contemplation begins and grows with the exercise of obedient (*ob-audire*), uninterrupted listening. If it is God who is speaking, the believer is a person called to listen and the contemplative person is the one listening constantly. We see through our hearing, in a relationship of covenant, fulfillment, and joy. Active exercise and the love of and longing for the truth: *Listen to my voice, then I will be your God and you shall be my people. Follow right to the end the way that I mark out for you, and you will prosper* (*Jr 7:23*).

36. This synthesis between hearing and seeing “becomes possible through the person of Christ himself, who can be seen and heard [...] Saint Thomas Aquinas speaks of the Apostles’ *oculata fides* – a faith which sees! – in the presence of the body of the Risen Lord. With their own eyes they saw the risen Jesus and they believed; in a word, they were able to peer into the depths of what they were seeing and to confess their faith in the Son of God, seated at the right hand of the Father. [...] Only when we are configured to Jesus do we receive the eyes needed to see him.<sup>25</sup> Called to listen, we cultivate *a heart to understand* (1K 3:9), and we ask for wisdom and shrewdness (cf. 1K 3:12) to discern that which comes from God and that which goes against God.

The listening of the Word requires vigilance (cf. *Hab* 2:1-3), attention to what is being heard (cf. *Mk* 4:24), awareness of who one is listening to (cf. *Jr* 23:16) and of how one listens (cf. *Lk* 8:18). Teresa of Avila reminds: “If a person neither considers to Whom he is addressing himself, what he asks, nor what he is who ventures to speak to God, although his

<sup>25</sup> FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Lumen fidei* (June 29, 2013), 30-31.

lips may utter many words, I do not call it prayer”.<sup>26</sup>

This exercise allows us to illuminate the *chaos* of the self by receiving the merciful and compassionate, although at times exacting, gaze of Christ the Lord that leads the consecrated person to a realistic vision of self: “Set thine eyes on Him alone [...] if thou set thine eyes upon Him, thou shalt find the whole”.<sup>27</sup>

37. In the Rule, Benedict made the tax collector from the parable in the Book of Luke (cf. *Lk* 18:9-14) the model for monks to follow, the *exemplum*.<sup>28</sup> He does not want monks whose gazes are raised to heaven but rather whose eyes are lowered to earth. A monk does not proclaim his closeness to the Lord but recognizes his distance; he does not articulate a magniloquent prayer but confesses his sin: *God, be merciful to me, a sinner*.<sup>29</sup> Isaac of Nineveh writes: “He who has been able to see himself has accomplished more than one who has seen the angels [...]

<sup>26</sup> St. TERESA OF AVILA, *Interior Castle*, The First Mansions, I, 7.

<sup>27</sup> St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Ascent of Mount Carmel*, II, 22.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. St. BENEDICT, *Rule*, VII, 62-66.

<sup>29</sup> The tax collector’s short prayer has been defined as “the perfect and perpetual prayer”: A. LOUF, *À l’école de la contemplation*, Lethielleux, Paris 2004, 22.

One who apprehends his sin is better than one who through his prayers raises the dead”.<sup>30</sup> With acute realism, Pope Francis affirms: “He who does not sin is not human. We all make mistakes and we need to recognize our weakness. A religious who recognizes himself as weak and a sinner does not negate the witness that he is called to give, rather he reinforces it, and this is good for everyone”.<sup>31</sup>

### *Quies, requies, otium*

**38.** To dwell in the relationship with God, in the power of the Spirit, it is necessary to give oneself time and space, going against the current. Today’s culture does not believe in life’s processes and changes even if it systematically makes them the foundation of its vision. Value is given to things that happen quickly, begin immediately, and move rapidly. Outcomes are not considered; every dynamic shines and is consumed in the present moment.

Time in the Christian way is not a commodity but a sign that God reveals to us here and now.

<sup>30</sup> ISAAC OF NINEVEH, *Un’umile speranza. Antologia*, edited by S. Chialà, Edizioni Qiqajon, Bose Monastic Community 1999, 73.

<sup>31</sup> A. SPADARO, “Wake up the world!”. *Conversation of Pope Francis with the Union of Superiors General*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/I), 5.

Adequate time and space are necessary, as are places to live without having to hurry.

To indicate the contemplative life, Western monastic tradition has often used words that indicate interior activity, the time dedicated only to God, *vacare Deo*; finding quiet time in God, *quies, requies*; abstaining from work activities in order to work on one's soul, *otium negotiosum*. The words speak of rest and quiet when, in reality, they require hard work and interior struggle: "Idleness hurts everything [...] but none so much as the soul".<sup>32</sup>

Interior life demands the asceticism of time and the body. It requires silence as a dimension to dwell in. It invokes solitude as an essential moment of purification and personal integration. It calls for hidden prayer to encounter the Lord who lives in the secret, and to make of the heart the interior cell (cf. *Mt* 6:6), the very personal and sacred place in which to worship (cf. *1P* 3:15): *Let my Beloved come into his garden, let him taste its rarest fruits* (*Sg* 4:16).

**39.** We often prefer to live outside of ourselves, outside of the interior castle, men and women living on the surface, because the ad-

<sup>32</sup> St. JOHN CHRYSOSTOM, *Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles*, 35, 3.

venture of the depths and the truth is scary. We prefer reassuring notions, even if they are limited, to the challenge that throws us beyond what we have glimpsed: “It is unspeakably more foolish to care to learn nothing of our nature except that we possess bodies, and only to realize vaguely that we have souls, because people say so and it is a doctrine of faith. Rarely do we reflect upon what gifts our souls may possess, Who dwells within them, or how extremely precious they are. Therefore we do little to preserve their beauty”.<sup>33</sup>

Sometimes we cannot find the stubborn courage that knows how to embark on the inner journey which leads us through the shadows of the limit and sin to the ultimate truth that lives in us: “I thought of the soul as resembling a castle, formed of a single diamond or a very transparent crystal, and containing many rooms, just as in heaven there are many mansions [...] the soul of a man is but a paradise, in which, God tells us, he takes his delight. What, do you imagine must that dwelling be in which a King so mighty, so wise, and so pure, containing in Himself

<sup>33</sup> St. TERESA OF AVILA, *Interior Castle*, The First Mansions, I, 3.

all good, can delight to rest? Nothing can be compared to the great beauty and capabilities of a soul...”<sup>34</sup>

*The ineffable memory*

**40.** The way of the Word is the first road the Lord himself meets us on, “he gathers us for the holy supper; as he did to the disciples at Emmaus, he reveals the meaning of the Scriptures to us and breaks break for us”.<sup>35</sup> Word, Gospel: an open treasure chest, the sublime treasure, the story of God.<sup>36</sup> An encounter with someone always comes through a word that, by making us participants in his life, reveals to us something about ourselves.

Here is Jesus, *Agnus Dei*. The invisible face of Christ, the Son of God, reveals himself in the most simple and, at the same time, most ineffable way; it manifests in the mystery of his Body and of his Blood. To fulfill the longing of men throughout time who ask to *see Jesus* (Jn 12:21), the Church repeats the gesture that the Lord himself made: she breaks bread and offers the chalice of wine. “Here is the Christ in a bit of

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, I, 2.

<sup>35</sup> ROMAN MISSAL, *Eucharistic Prayer V*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 174-175.

bread: in a crumb of created material, here is the Uncreated; here is the Invisible in an instant of visible”.<sup>37</sup>

Here, the eyes of he who seeks Him with a sincere heart open. In the Eucharist, the heart’s gaze recognizes Jesus.<sup>38</sup> Saint John Paul II reminds us: “To contemplate Christ involves being able to recognize him wherever he manifests himself, in his many forms of presence, but above all in the living sacrament of his body and his blood. The Church draws her life from Christ in the Eucharist; by him she is fed and by him she is enlightened. The Eucharist is both a mystery of faith and a ‘mystery of light’. Whenever the Church celebrates the Eucharist, the faithful can in some way relive the experience of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: *their eyes were opened and they recognized him (Lk 24:31)*”.<sup>39</sup>

Every day, the Eucharist introduces us to the mystery of love, “the spousal love of God: As the Redeemer of the world, Christ is the Bridegroom of the Church. The Eucharist is the

<sup>37</sup> P. MAZZOLARI, *Il segno dei chiodi*, Dehoniane, Bologna 2012, 73-78.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Homily* on the occasion of the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, Saint John Lateran Basilica (June 14, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (April 17, 2003), 6.

Sacrament of our Redemption. It is the Sacrament of the Bridegroom and of the Bride”.<sup>40</sup> It tells our heart that God is Love.

**41.** To experience the contemplative capacity of consecrated life is to live eucharistically, in the way of the Son given for us. The Eucharist nourishes the *Jesu dulcis memoria*, invitation for us consecrated men and women to let the *memory* of Jesus dwell in our soul, thoughts, and desires, through the Holy Spirit (cf. *Jn* 14:26), as contemplation that transfigures our lives and strengthens our joy. “Since then I learnt Thee, Thou residest in my memory; and there do I find Thee, when I call Thee to remembrance, and delight in Thee”,<sup>41</sup> affirms Saint Augustine, while the Greek Fathers show the continual memory of Jesus as spiritual fruit of the Eucharist. In this constant memory of Christ, thoughts of docility and benevolence flourish, while God takes up dwelling in the soul and makes it his though the work of the Holy Spirit.

**42.** Every day, invocation and prayer, listening to the word of God, spiritual warfare, and the celebration of the sacraments renew our

<sup>40</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter *Mulieris dignitatem* (August 15, 1988), 26.

<sup>41</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, X, 8-24.

openness to the gift of the Holy Spirit: “Prayer, fasting, vigil and all other Christian activities, however good they may be in themselves, do not constitute the aim of our Christian life, although they serve as the indispensable means of reaching this end. The true aim of our Christian life consists in the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God”.<sup>42</sup>

Benedict XVI expressed the inseparable preciousness of communion and contemplation: “Communion and contemplation cannot be separated, they go hand in hand. If I am truly to communicate with another person I must know him, I must be able to be in silence close to him, to listen to him and look at him lovingly. True love and true friendship are always nourished by the reciprocity of looks, of intense, eloquent silences full of respect and veneration, so that the encounter may be lived profoundly and personally rather than superficially. And, unfortunately, if this dimension is lacking, sacramental communion itself may become a superficial gesture on our part. Instead, in true communion, prepared for by the conversation of prayer and of life, we can address words of confidence to the Lord, such as those which

<sup>42</sup> I. GORAINOFF, *Serafino di Sarov: vita, colloquio con Motovilov, scritti spirituali*, Gribaudi, Torino 2006<sup>6</sup>, 156.

rang out just now in the Responsorial Psalm:  
*O Lord, I am your servant; I am your servant,  
the son of your handmaid. You have loosed  
my bonds. I will offer to you the sacrifice of  
thanksgiving and call on the name of the Lord  
(Ps 115:16-17)*”.<sup>43</sup>

<sup>43</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* on the occasion of the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, Saint John Lateran Basilica (June 7, 2012).

FORMING



*Set me like a seal on your heart.*

Song of Songs 8:6



## Listening

43. The word of the *Song of Songs* narrates the story of a love oriented towards an interpersonal, decentralized relationship, intent on contemplating the beloved face and hearing its voice (cf. *Sg* 2:14): “He who loves must consequently cross the barriers that confined him within his limitations. For this reason it is said that love melts the heart: that which is melted is no longer confined within its boundaries”.<sup>1</sup>

Overcoming one’s limits and boundaries leads into the dynamism of contemplation where only beauty and the power of love speak. Contemplation prevents union from becoming an indistinct and vague fusion by preserving alterity and making the gift possible. It is the ecstasy in front of “the sacred ground of the other”,<sup>2</sup> it is the being in the space of reception and sharing that the other offers to recognize him in his unicity: *but my dove is unique, mine,*

<sup>1</sup> St. THOMAS OF AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard* III XXV, I, I, 4 m.

<sup>2</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 169.

*unique and perfect* (Sg 6:9) or even: *My Beloved is... to be known among ten thousand* (Sg 5:10). To remain in such epiphany one must train eyes and heart to experience beauty as mystery that envelops and engages.

44. One of the adjectives found throughout the *Song* is *yāpâ*, the female adjective for “beautiful”, and *yāfeh*, the male adjective for “beautiful”. In the Bible, beautiful describes the voice of a person (*Ezk* 33:32), a woman (Sarah, wife of Abram in *Gn* 12:11), the tree in Eden that is beautiful to see and therefore, desirable (*Gn* 3:6); the sandals of Judith ravish the eyes of Holofernes and her beauty conquers his heart (*Jdt* 16:9), beautiful is the stonework of the temple (*Lk* 21:5). Biblical beauty does not focus only on physical beauty but also inner beauty: beautiful is the wine that Jesus gave in Cana (*Jn* 2:10), beautiful is the shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep (*Jn* 10:11.14), beautiful is the gesture made by the woman who anoints Jesus and receives his praise that ensures her eternal remembrance (*Mt* 26:10).

Beauty in the Bible, therefore, appears as the “signature” of divine and human gratuitousness and, in the *Song*, this is presented as the overcoming of solitude, as an experience of unity. The two who love each other feel united even

before they are, and, after the union, they long for it to last. The two lovers do not want a temporary emotion, but rather to savor the taste of eternity through a mark, a seal (*hôtâm*) on their hearts and flesh (*Sg* 8:6), which puts everything in the *perspective of forever* of God. This sign on the flesh is a wound that creates the everlasting longing for love, it is a fire that no torrents can drown (*Sg* 8:7): “You, oh eternal Trinity, are a deep Sea, into which the deeper I enter, the more I find, and the more I find, the more I seek; the soul cannot be satiated in Your abyss, for she continually hungers after You, the eternal Trinity, desiring to see You with light in Your light”.<sup>3</sup>

When we mature in our relationship with God, we allow him to purify us and teach us to see in the way He sees, to love in the way He loves. Certainly, this new way to see and love is burdensome – it means acquiring what Benedict XVI calls: “A heart which sees”<sup>4</sup> – because it requires a radical transformation of the heart, that which the Fathers called *puritas cordis*, a formative journey.

<sup>3</sup> St. CATHERINE OF SIENA, *Il Dialogo della Divina Provvidenza*, Cantagalli, Siena 2006, 402-403.

<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005), 31.

## In the way of beauty

45. Today, in the variety of cultural situations and lifestyles, the consecrated life requires attention and confidence in the processes of personal and community formation, and in the dynamics of the Institute in particular, to introduce, accompany, and maintain the contemplative attitude and capacity. The need arises to pose questions about our way of life and to look at the formative *ethos* as: “The ability to establish a method characterized by spiritual and pedagogical wisdom, which will gradually lead those wishing to consecrate themselves to put on the mind of Christ the Lord. Formation is a dynamic process by means of which individuals are converted to the Word of God in the depths of their being”.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps we need to rediscover, through continuous formation, the breath of the mystery that lives within us and that transcends us: “As a tree torn from the soil, as a river separated from its source, the human soul wanes when detached from what is greater than itself. Without holiness, good turns chaotic; without good, beauty becomes acciden-

<sup>5</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 68.

tal. Good and Beauty shine however with just one voice”.<sup>6</sup>

46. How can the consecrated life be expressed in an immediate and simple way in everyday life? Apart from the hermeneutics of doctrine, magisterial support, Rules and traditions, what do consecrated men and women recount in the Church and in the human city? Are they truly a parable of Gospel wisdom and a prophetic and symbolic prod for a “different” world? Let us encourage a focused and truthful evaluation of our daily ways, so that the winnowing-fan of wisdom separates the straw from the grain of wheat (cf. *Mt 3:12*), so that the truth of our life and the call to the Beauty that transfigures can be seen.

These are some causes for reflection which, integrated into our plans and our approach to formation, can accompany the vital process that leads from the superficial to our deepest feelings, where the love of Christ touches the root of our being.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> A.J. HESCHEL, *L'uomo alla ricerca di Dio*, Edizioni Qiqajon, Bose Monastic Community 1995, 141.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 18.

## *Mystagogical pedagogy*

47. We have indicated the Word of God – first source of all Christian spirituality that nurtures a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will<sup>8</sup> –, and the Eucharist that contains Christ himself, our Easter and living Bread, heart of ecclesial and consecrated life,<sup>9</sup> as places in which to dwell with humility of spirit in order to be formed and sanctified. We invite you to accompany to the grace of these mysteries with attentive pedagogy. The Fathers loved mystagogical communication through which, in the light of the Scripture, the life-blood of the truth expressed in the celebrated mystery was revealed and internalized in life. This is how – as the Greek word *mystagoghía* says – the homiletic act and liturgy were able to initiate, guide, and lead to the mystery. Mystagogical communication can introduce new members of our Institutes fruitfully and can accompany the formation of consecrated men and women in a constant way, especially in liturgical life.

Liturgy itself is mystagogy – as it is communication through words, actions, signs and symbols of biblical origin – that introduces to the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 94.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. *ibidem*, 95.

vital fruition of the *mystérion*. The kind of *transfiguration* that consecrated life it refers to can be at the heart of the mystagogical process. It must know how to evoke the Paschal mystery, our destination to resurrection, in our lives as believers.<sup>10</sup> The ultimate mistagogue, as Gregory of Nazianzus reminds us, is Christ himself and everything in the liturgy has him, the *Kýrios*, risen and present, as the subject.

48. Mystagogical communication is an eminently Christological act seeing as the Christian's wisdom or the rites and liturgical acts alone are not enough to participate fruitfully and to make the mystery understood. Authentic Christian liturgy cannot exist without mystagogy. If there is no mystagogical language in the liturgy, what Origen says happened to the Levites, who were assigned the task of carrying the ark of the covenant covered up in coverings and veils, could occur. It can also happen to us consecrated men and women; we can carry the mystery of God on our shoulders as a weight

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum caritatis* (February 22, 2007), 64: "The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well. By its nature, the liturgy can be pedagogically effective in helping the faithful to enter more deeply into the mystery being celebrated".

without knowing what it is and so, not benefiting from it.<sup>11</sup>

We are called to make a real evaluation of our community celebrations – the Liturgy of the Hours, daily and Sunday Eucharist, and acts of mercy –, by asking ourselves if these celebrations are living and vitalizing encounters with Christ, “source of renewed self-giving”.<sup>12</sup> An invitation to think responsibly about a mystagogical pedagogy for our paths of continual formation.

### *Paschal pedagogy*

49. The mystical walk at the foundation of our Christian life of *sequela Christi* goes through the passion, death, and resurrection of the Lord. It requires constant and special care in the personal life to embrace “the chance to be transformed by the Paschal experience, being configured to the Crucified Christ who fulfills the Father’s will in all things”,<sup>13</sup> and equal care to understand its worth and power in the fraternal and missionary life. The contemplative attitude is nourished by the veiled beauty of the Cross.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. ORIGEN, *Homilies on Numbers*, 5, 1.

<sup>12</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 24.

<sup>13</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 70.

The Word that was with God, hung on tree branches, to tie the heavens and the earth, becomes the ultimate scandal before which we veil our face. Today, other victims of violence hang humiliated from the crosses of the world as the sun darkens, the sea becomes bitter, and the fruits of the earth, ripened for the hunger of all, are distributed for the avidity of few. The call echoes to purify our gaze in order to contemplate the Paschal enigma of salvation which is living and working in the world and in our daily contexts.

Today, in the fraternities and communities that live immersed in contemporary cultures – often characterized by the ephemeral – even our gaze as consecrated men and women can lose its ability to recognize the beauty of the Paschal mystery: the disarmed and defenseless composure outlined in the faces of brothers and sisters that we know, like on the faces of the christs rejected by history that we meet in our deaconries of charity. Faces *without beauty, without majesty, no looks to attract our eyes* (cf. *Is 53:2*).

**50.** Every day the spectacle of human suffering is seen in all of its crudeness. It is such that no redemption can be sought and understood without facing the scandal of pain. This mystery

crosses human history like an enormous wave and invites us to reflection. Few have grasped the truest question that dominates the human heart like Dostoevsky: pain, redemption from evil, victorious salvation over death. He compared the relevance of beauty with the mystery of pain, asking “why”. The young Ippolit, near death, poses the decisive and terrible question to Prince Myškin, the protagonist of *The Idiot* and an enigmatic figure of Christ, the Innocent One who suffers for the sake of all: “Is it true, prince, that you once declared that ‘beauty would save the world’? What beauty saves the world?”<sup>14</sup>

The question of evil emerges every day in the minds, in the hearts, and on the lips of many of our brothers and sisters. Only if God makes the infinite suffering of the world abandoned to evil His, only if He enters the deepest darkness of human misery, is pain redeemed and death overcome. This happened on the Cross of the Son. Christ’s suffering explains the tragedy of humanity by extending it to the divinity. In Christ who suffers, we find the only possible answer to the question of suffering. Contemplation and knowledge of the Beauty that lives within us and

<sup>14</sup> F. DOSTOEVSKIJ, *L’idiota*: II, 2, in E. LO GATTO (ed.), *Romanzi e taccuini*, vol. II, Sansoni, Florence 1961, 470.

transcends us is not reached except through the Cross; life is not accessed except by passing through death.

**51.** For us consecrated persons, entering in the paschal wisdom and training ourselves to see, here and now, the transfigured face of the Risen One in all that is disfigured and crucified is a real aspect of faith. The contemplative journey is a paschal journey. The pasch of Christ, the reason for our hope, challenges our fraternity and our mission which are sometimes blurred by superficial relationships, by hopeless routine, by Christian service that is merely functional, and by eyes which have grown lazy and are no longer able to recognize the mystery. In our communities, Beauty remains veiled! We are *foolish and slow to believe* (cf. *Lk 24:25*) in living the paschal pedagogy. We can forget that sharing in the Trinitarian communion can change human relationships, that the reconciling power of grace overcomes the divisive tendencies present in the human heart and in society, and that, in this way, we can show to people both the beauty of fraternal communion and the ways that actually lead to it.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 41.

## *Pedagogy of beauty*

52. Throughout the centuries, the consecrated life has unceasingly sought after beauty. It has been a vigilant and fruitful watchman of beauty's sacredness by elaborating on the vision and creating works that have expressed faith and the mysticism of the light through architecture, arts of intellect and science, and through visual, literary, and musical arts, in search of new epiphanies of Beauty.<sup>16</sup>

Contemporary reflection, which often hovers between the spiritualization of nature and the aestheticization of feeling, has resulted in the disregard for the cognitive and formative value of beauty and its meaning of truth, by confining it to an ambiguous gray area or relegating it to the ephemeral. We must mend the vital connection to the old and ever new meaning of beauty as the visible and tangible place of the infinite mystery of the Invisible. Inhabiting this distant place is how to tap into the source of beauty. If our existence does not take part in this mystery in some way, beauty remains unattainable and it gets lost in the emptiness of nonsense and in the emptiness of every meaning.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>16</sup> Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Artists* (April 4, 1999).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. N. BERDJAEV, *Il senso della creazione*, Jaca Book, Milan 1994, 300ss.

But more painfully, we remain without. In his book *La bellezza educherà il mondo* [*Beauty Will Educate the World*],<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, at the time a Cardinal in Buenos Aires, suggests the pedagogy of beauty, the formative request in which the human person is looked upon as the bearer of the eternal called to a life process that flourishes in respect and listening, in the integration of thought, emotion and feelings called to be integrated in maturity.

The need arises for a dual approach to formation of the human *ethos*: “True knowledge is being struck by the arrow of Beauty that wounds man, moved by reality, by the *personal presence of Christ himself*, as he says. Being struck and overcome by the beauty of Christ is a more real, more profound knowledge than mere rational deduction. We must foster the human person’s encounter with the beauty of faith. The encounter with the beautiful can become the wound of the arrow that strikes the heart and in this way opens our eyes, so that later, from this experience, we can take the criteria for judgment and can correctly evaluate the arguments”.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> J.M. BERGOGLIO - FRANCIS, *La bellezza educherà il mondo*, EMI, Bologna 2014.

<sup>19</sup> J. RATZINGER, *La corrispondenza del cuore nell'incontro con la Bellezza*, in *30 Giorni*, n. 9, September 2002, 87.

True and eternal beauty reaches inner man through what we can call the spiritual “senses” which Augustine in analogy with the senses of the body: “What is it that I love in loving thee? [...] It is true that I love a certain kind of light and sound and fragrance and food and embrace in loving my God, who is the light and sound and fragrance and food and embracement of my inner man – where that light shines into my soul which no place can contain, where time does not snatch away the lovely sound, where no breeze disperses the sweet fragrance, where no eating diminishes the food there provided, and where there is an embrace that no satiety comes to sunder. This is what I love when I love my God”.<sup>20</sup>

**53.** In our journey Christians and consecrated persons, we need to recognize the traces of Beauty, a path towards the Transcendent, towards the ultimate Mystery, towards God, precisely because it opens and widens the horizons of human consciousness, makes it go beyond the self, and makes it face the abyss of the Infinite. We are called to follow the *via pulchritudinis*, which is an artistic and aesthetic

<sup>20</sup> St. AUGUSTINE, *Confessions*, X, 6, 8.

journey, a journey of faith and theological enquiry.<sup>21</sup>

Benedict XVI often commented on concerts he attended, expressing how he could hear a theological truth and a response of faith in great music: “Anyone who has heard this, knows that the faith is true”.<sup>22</sup> The beauty expressed through musical genius was interpreted as pro-paedeutic to faith: “The music had such an extraordinary force of reality that we realized, no longer by deduction, but by the impact on our hearts, that it could not have originated from nothingness, but could only have come to be through the power of the Truth that became real in the composer’s inspiration”.<sup>23</sup> This could be why the great mystics, as poetic and musical literature confirms, loved composing poems and canticles, to express something of the divine that they had access to, in secret meetings of the soul.

Along with music, poetic, narrative, and figurative art are all paths that can be pro-paedeutic to contemplation: from the literary pages to icons and miniatures, from frescoes to paintings

<sup>21</sup> Cf. BENEDICT XVI, *Address to artists in the Sistine Chapel*, Vatican City (November 21, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> J. RATZINGER, *La corrispondenza del cuore nell'incontro con la Bellezza*, in *30 Giorni*, n. 9, September 2002, 89.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*.

and sculptures. All “on an inner way, a way of overcoming ourselves; thus in this purification of vision that is a purification of the heart, it reveals the beautiful to us, or at least a ray of it. In this way we are brought into contact with the power of the truth”.<sup>24</sup>

In *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis underlines the bond between truth, goodness and beauty: it is necessary to “renew esteem for beauty as a means of touching the human heart and enabling the truth and goodness of the Risen Christ”.<sup>25</sup>

**54.** We are, therefore, invited on a harmonious journey that can unite the true, the good, and the beautiful, where it sometimes appears that duty, as misunderstood ethics, prevails.

The new digital culture and new communication resources pose another challenge by emphasizing the language of images in a continuous flow without the opportunity for meditation, without an aim, and often without a hierarchy of values. Cultivating a present, reflective gaze that goes beyond what is seen and the bulimia of immaterial contact, is an urgent chal-

<sup>24</sup> *Ivi.*

<sup>25</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 167.

lenge that can introduce us to the Mystery and to bearing its witness. We are invited to take formative journeys that strengthen us to read into things. We are invited to follow the path of the soul along which the return from the forms of penultimate beauty to the harmony of the supreme Beauty is achieved. This is how we will realize the “hidden art which is the love story of each one with the living God and with his brethren, in the joy and effort of following Jesus Christ in the daily routine of life”.<sup>26</sup>

### *Pedagogy of thought*

**55.** Forming, therefore, the depths and the inner journey cannot be disregarded. Formation is a demanding and fruitful journey that never ends; a necessity that extinguishes with death.

Consecrated persons are called to practice “open thought”. Interaction with the cultures and values we are messengers to conditions our life to embrace the differences, and to see in them the signs of God. The intelligent and loving wisdom of contemplation trains for a vision that knows how to evaluate, accommodate, and relate everything to Love.

<sup>26</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Address* to the participants of the Pontifical Council for culture, Vatican City (June 15, 2007).

In his encyclical *Caritas in veritate*, Benedict XVI writes: “Paul VI had seen clearly that among the causes of underdevelopment there is a lack of wisdom and reflection, a lack of thinking capable of formulating a guiding synthesis, for which ‘a clear vision of all economic, social, cultural and spiritual aspects’ is required”.<sup>27</sup> And remarks: “Love in truth – *caritas in veritate* – is a great challenge for the Church in a world that is becoming progressively and pervasively globalized. The risk for our time is that the *de facto* interdependence of people and nations is not matched by ethical interaction of consciences and minds”.<sup>28</sup> Pope Francis comes back to this vital necessity in his conversation with the Union of Superiors General of religious men on November 29, 2013 referring to the challenge that complexity poses to the consecrated life: “To understand we ought to move around, to see reality from various viewpoints. We ought to get used to thinking”.<sup>29</sup>

Constant attention is needed when creating an everyday fraternal and community environ-

<sup>27</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Caritas in veritate* (June 29, 2009), 31.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, 9.

<sup>29</sup> A. SPADARO, “Wake up the world!”. *Conversation of Pope Francis with the Union of Superiors General*, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 165 (2014/I), 6.

ment, the first place of formation in which the development of a pedagogy of thought is promoted.

**56.** The service of authority plays a crucial role in this process. Constant formation requires those in the institutes and communities to direct their attention, first of all, to the consecrated person in order to direct him towards a life attitude of wisdom, to coach him in the human culture that is to be led to Christian fullness, to allow him to practice reflecting on values, to help him protect the sacredness of being so that he may not dedicate himself excessively to following the values of efficiency and utility, and to keep Christian wisdom from transforming into a constellation of services and technical competencies. He who serves in authority encourages and accompanies the consecrated person on his search for the metaphysical foundations of the human condition – where the Word lets its Light shine –, so that: “Under the action of the Spirit, they resolutely keep times for prayer, silence and solitude, and they never cease to ask the Almighty for the gift of wisdom in the struggles of everyday life (cf. *Wis* 9:10)”.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>30</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 71.

To solicit and facilitate this formative dynamic, sporadic gestures and some operative decisions or choices, are not enough. A permanent dynamic that has a relationship with and effect on the entire community and personal life must be created and sustained. For this reason, it is necessary to focus on and adopt a lifestyle that gives shape to an environment whose habitual climate facilitates a wise, attentive, and loving attitude towards life and people. An attitude focused on discovering and experiencing the opportunities for human and spiritual growth, one that inspires the creation of new thought, useful programs, and focused pedagogies. It becomes necessary to allow and facilitate the interpretation of introspection made up of self-reflection and existential discussion.

**57.** Soliciting a contemplative gaze means also encouraging the consecrated person so that with appropriate reflection he can take possession of his deep identity, reading and recounting his existence as a ‘good’ story, as positive thinking, as a relationship of salvation, as human experience recapitulated in Jesus Christ: “The self is perceptible by the interpretation of the traces it leaves in the world”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> P. RICOEUR, *Il tempo raccontato*, Jaca Book, Milan 1998, 376.

Our personal stories united with the stories of those who walk with us in fraternity and the seeds of the *Word dwelling* in the world today are traces of God to reread together; grace to be aware of, seed to make grow as new thought from the Spirit for us, to continue along the journey. Pope Francis, speaking to the community of writers of *La Civiltà Cattolica*, invited us to rediscover this pedagogy: “It is your duty to gather and express the expectations, aspirations, joys and dramas of our time and to indicate ways to read reality in the light of the Gospel. Today the important spiritual questions are more pressing than ever, but someone must interpret and understand them. With humble and open intelligence, ‘seek and find God in all things’, as St. Ignatius wrote. God is at work in the life of every person and in culture: the Spirit blows where he wills. Endeavour to find out what God has brought about and how to continue his action. [...] And seeking God in all things, in all the fields of knowledge, of art, of science, of political and social life and of economics requires study, sensitivity and experience.”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> FRANCIS, *Address to the Community of Writers of “La Civiltà Cattolica”*, Vatican City (June 14, 2013).

Cultivating thought, forming judgment, training for wisdom of the gaze and refinement of feelings, in the style of Christ (*Gal* 4:19), are paths that are propaedeutic to the mission.<sup>33</sup>

## **In the closeness of mercy**

**58.** A fruitful path to take in the exercise of contemplation is one that leads to closeness. It is in the journey of the encounter that faces seek and recognize each other. Every human face is distinct and unique. The extraordinary uniqueness of our face makes us easily recognizable in the complex social environment in which we live, and it facilitates the recognition and identification of the other.

If the quality of collective coexistence “starts with you”,<sup>34</sup> with giving value to the face of the other and to the relationship of closeness, Christianity proves to be the religion of the face, that is, the religion of nearness and closeness. “In a culture paradoxically suffering from anonymity and at the same time obsessed with the details of other people’s lives, shamelessly given over to

<sup>33</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 103.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. E. LÉVINAS, *Etica e infinito. Il volto dell'altro come alterità etica e traccia dell'infinito*, Città Nuova, Rome 1988.

morbid curiosity, the Church must look more closely and sympathetically at others whenever necessary”.<sup>35</sup>

God heals our nearsightedness and keeps our gaze from stopping on the surface where mediocrity, superficiality, and diversity find their home: God “cleanses, adorns, enriches, and enlightens the soul, as the sun, when it shines, dries, warms, beautifies, and brightens”.<sup>36</sup>

The contemplative person trains himself to look with the eyes of God upon humanity and creation until they *see the invisible* (cf. *He* 11:27), that is, the work and presence of God which remains ineffable and visible only through faith. Pope Francis invites us take part in the spiritual intelligence and the *sapientia cordis* which identifies the true contemplative Christian as the one who knows how to be eyes to the blind, feet to the lame, speech to the mute, father to the orphan, and neighbor to the lonely, recognizing in them the image of God.<sup>37</sup>

Christians “are, first of all, mystics with open eyes. Their mysticism is not a natural faceless

<sup>35</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 4, 2013), 169.

<sup>36</sup> St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *Canticle of the Soul* B, 32, 1.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, *Sapientia cordis*. “I was eyes to the blind, and feet to the lame” (*Gb* 29:15), Message for the XXIII World Day of the Sick, Vatican City (December 3, 2014).

mysticism. It is rather a mysticism that looks for a face, that leads to encounters with those who suffer, encounters with the face of unhappy people and victims. Open and vigilant eyes plot a revolt within us against the absurdity of innocent and unjust suffering; they arouse in us the hunger and thirst for justice, great justice for all, and they keep us from orienting ourselves exclusively within the minuscule criteria of our world of mere needs”.<sup>38</sup>

59. Only love can see that which is hidden: we are invited to this wisdom of the heart that never separates love of God from the love towards others, particularly towards the poor, the last, “flesh of Christ”,<sup>39</sup> face of the Crucified Lord. The coherent Christian experiences the encounter with attention of the heart and for this reason, along with professional competence and planning, the formation of the heart is necessary; so that faith becomes active through love (cf. *Ga* 5:6): “The Christian’s programme

<sup>38</sup> J.B. METZ, *Mistica dagli occhi aperti. Per una spiritualità concreta e responsabile*, Queriniana, Brescia 2011, 65.

<sup>39</sup> For example cf. FRANCIS, *Address* on the occasion of the Vigil of Pentecost with the Ecclesial Movements, new Communities, and Associations (May 18, 2013); IDEM, *Homily* on the occasion of the canonization of the Martyrs of Otranto and of two blessed Latin-American women (May 12, 2013); IDEM, *Angelus* (January 11, 2015).

– the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus – is ‘a heart which sees’. This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly. Obviously, when charitable activity is carried out by the Church as a communitarian initiative, the spontaneity of individuals must be combined with planning, foresight and cooperation with other similar institutions”.<sup>40</sup>

This attitude gives value to our living together, especially where new vulnerabilities arise and ask to be accompanied at a “steady and reassuring [pace], reflecting our closeness”.<sup>41</sup>

“For just as some people want a purely spiritual Christ, without flesh and without the cross, they also want their interpersonal relationships provided by sophisticated equipment, by screens and systems which can be turned on and off on command. Meanwhile, the Gospel tells us constantly to run the risk of a face-to-face encounter with others, with their physical presence which challenges us, with their pain and their pleas, with their joy which infects us in our close and continuous interaction. True faith in the incarnate Son of God is inseparable from

<sup>40</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est* (December 25, 2005), 31.

<sup>41</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 169.

self-giving, from membership in the community, from service, from reconciliation with others. The Son of God, by becoming flesh, summoned us to the revolution of tenderness”.<sup>42</sup>

The face of the Father, in the Son, is the Face of mercy: “Jesus of Nazareth, by his words, his actions, and his entire person reveals the mercy of God”.<sup>43</sup> Every consecrated man and woman is called to contemplate and bear witness to the face of God as He who *understands our weaknesses* (cf. *Ps* 102), and to apply the ointment of nearness on the wounds of man by contrasting the cynicism of indifference.

“Let us open our eyes and see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hy-

<sup>42</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* (November 24, 2013), 88.

<sup>43</sup> FRANCIS, *Misericordiae vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy (April 11, 2015), 1.

pocrisy and egoism”.<sup>44</sup> Contemplation of divine mercy transforms our human sensitivity and holds it in the embrace of a heart which sees.

### **In the dance of creation**

60. “Be praised, my Lord, through all Your creatures”.<sup>45</sup> This canticle by Francis of Assisi continues to resonate at the beginning of the twenty-first century with a voice that knows no fatigue, calls to wonder, and recognizes the original beauty that marks us as creatures. In Francis of Assisi we find the perfect humanity of Christ in whom *were created all things* (Col 1:16); the glory of God shines, and the immense is seen in the infinitely small.

The Lord plays in the garden of His creation. We can catch echoes of that game when we are alone on a starlit night; when we see children in a moment when they are really children; when we know love in our own hearts; at such times the awakening, the “newness”, the emptiness and the purity of vision that make themselves evident provide a glimpse of the cosmic

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, 15.

<sup>45</sup> St. FRANCIS OF ASSISI, *Canticle of Creatures*, 1.

dance to the rhythm of silence, the music of a wedding feast.<sup>46</sup>

We are participants in this dance of creation in the humble way of singers and guardians. Singers: called to revive our identity as creatures, we give praise in the immense symphony of the universe. Guardians: called to watch over the beauty and harmony of creation like sentinels waiting for dawn. Pope Francis asks us to remember that we are not masters of the universe, he asks us to reshape our anthropological vision according to the vision of He who *moves the sun and other stars*,<sup>47</sup> respecting our unique dignity as human beings, creatures of this world who have the right to life and happiness.<sup>48</sup>

Modern anthropocentrism has ended up prizing technical thought over reality, compromising the intrinsic dignity of the world, in the complementarity of its order and all creatures. Human beings, Pope Francis continues, citing Romano Guardini: “See nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere ‘given’, as an object of utility, as raw material to be hammered into useful shape; it views the cosmos

<sup>46</sup> Cf. T. MERTON, *Semi di contemplazione*, Garzanti, Milan 1953.

<sup>47</sup> D. ALIGHIERI, *Divine Comedy. Paradise*, XXXIII, 145.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (June 18, 2015), 43.

similarly as a mere ‘space’ into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference”.<sup>49</sup> We are experiencing an anthropocentric excess.

**61.** A new relationship with nature is not possible without a new heart, one that can recognize the beauty in every creature, the unique dignity of man, the need for relation, and openness to a *you* in which everyone recognizes the same origin, the divine You. As consecrated persons, we hear the call to relational circularity, to a heart capable of laudatory prayer as an expression of ascesis that calls to conversion, to the passage from self-referentiality which makes us proud and closed off – while humiliating people and nature – to the hospitable holiness of Christ in whom all is embraced, healed, and returned to its own dignity as humans and creatures.

We hear, by virtue of what the intelligent wisdom of the heart suggests to us, the call to make concrete choices and actions for the person, communities, and Institutes that manifest a reasonable and just lifestyle.<sup>50</sup> We are invited with all brothers and sisters of humanity to take on the “great cultural, spiritual, and educational

<sup>49</sup> *Ivi*, 115.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. *ivi*, 203-208.

challenge [that] stands before us, and [that] will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal”.<sup>51</sup>

### *A Philokalia tale*

**62.** The necessity still resounds for continuous formative action – a Philokalia tale – that opens, substantiates, and activates the contemplative *habitus* in us consecrated men and women: “By learning to see and appreciate beauty, we learn to reject self-interested pragmatism. If someone has not learned to stop and admire something beautiful, we should not be surprised if he or she treats everything as an object to be used and abused without scruple”.<sup>52</sup> Pope Francis calls us to the passion for educational commitment according to an ecological spirituality “grounded in the convictions of our faith, since the teachings of the Gospel have direct consequences for our way of thinking, feeling, and living”.<sup>53</sup>

A spirituality that calls to conversion and, therefore, to an ascesis in which, recognizing our ways of life as sometimes unbalanced by *routine*, we apply ourselves to exercises of inner

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, 202.

<sup>52</sup> *Ivi*, 215.

<sup>53</sup> *Ivi*, 216.

transformation: “The external deserts in the world are growing, because the internal deserts have become so vast”.<sup>54</sup> In order to enrich the desert, we plant in our interior, fraternal, and missionary lives the seeds of care, tenderness, gratitude, gratuitousness, and joy that takes pleasure in the small and simple things, the pleasure of encounter and of service, “in developing their gifts, in music and art, in contact with nature, in prayer”.<sup>55</sup>

In the time of creation there was a seventh day on which God created rest. We do not seem to know the pleasure of rest. We work with commendable dedication, but this often becomes the model we follow in our consecrated life. The invitation resounds to rediscover the day of the Risen One in our lives and our communities. It is the day we arrive at and the day from which we leave again, but above all, it is the day in which we linger in the savoring of the glory of the beloved Presence.

**63.** *Set me like a seal on your heart* (Sg 8:6) asks the bride of the *Song*, as if to secure love in a bond of faithfulness. The care needed to ac-

<sup>54</sup> BENEDICT XVI, *Homily* on the occasion of the beginning of the Petrine Ministry, Vatican City (April 24, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Cf. FRANCIS, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (June 18, 2015), 223.

company our faithfulness to the *sequela Christi* in our special consecration is made evident in a time when it is often weakened by the fragility of our life in the Spirit (cf. *1 Th* 5:17.19). The contemplative dimension of the consecrated life will mature if formative spaces are opened. Paths that are chosen, intentional, and followed.

Hence, we feel called to account for our *Ratio formationis*, the formative practices and experiences, and for our formative *habitat* in the variety of forms of consecrated life. We must question our personal way of daily and fraternal life: how to pray, meditate, and study, how to live in relation and in the apostolic life, and how to rest. The contemplative attitude questions our surroundings and everyday dynamics: our preferences, moral agendas, oversights, ways and habits, plurality of choices and decisions, and cultures. Everything is scrutinized in discernment and illuminated by the beauty of the Mystery that lives within us. Such Light must be brought to humanity and through humanity: the consecrated as “a city on a hill, which testifies to the truth and the power of Jesus’ words”.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>56</sup> FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter *To all consecrated people*, on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life (November 21, 2014), II, 2.

## EPILOGUE



*Come, my Beloved!*

Song of Songs 7:12



## Listening

64. Love is an occurrence that transfigures time, instilling an energy that, as it is spent, regenerates. It is characteristic of love to endure waiting, to learn how to wait. This is the case for Jacob who was in love with Rachel: *Jacob had fallen in love with Rachel. So his answer [to Laban] was, "I will work for you seven years to win you younger daughter Rachel" ... To win Rachel, therefore, Jacob worked seven years, and they seemed to him like a few days because he loved her so much (Gn 29:18.20).* Jacob's love for this woman becomes his reason for living, and so, hard work and time become secondary. In the *Song* time seems to disappear. Love removes man from the tyranny of time and things and substitutes the space-time coordinates, or better yet, oxygenates them in the atmosphere of a freedom that gives primacy not to doing, but to dwelling, contemplating, and embracing.

He who loves is anxious to see the face of his beloved again and knows that the joy of the encounter will be followed by an endless longing. With the invitation to the beloved to escape

*over the spicy mountains* (Sg 8:14), the dynamics of longing and seeking are reignited. It is an open canto that celebrates the beloved beauty that will never be possessed unless its alterity, with the body as its symbol, is recognized. The search starts again so the two lovers can continue to call to one another ceaselessly, letting out the cry of the most incisive plea: *Come!* It is a call of mutual desire (Sg 2:10.13, 4:8; 7:12), a call aimed at overcoming their solitude, an invitation to communion.

In the spousal dynamics of the consecrated life, this impulse of the soul is transformed into constant prayer. The Beloved is invoked as an active presence in the world, fragrance of resurrection that comforts, heals, and opens to hope (Jr 29:11). We make the invocation that closes the Biblical revelation: *The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come'. Let everyone who listens answer, 'Come'* (Rv 22:17).

### **On the mountain in the sign of fulfillment**

**65.** *“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the Temple of the God of Jacob that he may teach us his ways* (Is 2:3). Attentions, intentions, will, thoughts, feelings, emotions, all of you that are in my heart, come: let us climb

the mountain, the place where the Lord sees and is seen”.<sup>1</sup>

If the call to contemplation, the call to climb the mountain of the Lord, is the same vocation as that of the Church and if all other activities are ordained in it and subordinate to it,<sup>2</sup> it acquires meaning and a permanent importance for monastic communities, prayerful communities integrally dedicated to contemplation, according to the specific charism of each religious family.

Monastic life is the original form of communities of consecrated life and still today signifies the presence of men and women who love God, who live in search of his Face, and who find and contemplate God in the heart of the world. The presence of communities placed like cities on a hill-top and lamps in the lamp-stand (cf. *Mt* 5:14-15), even in the simplicity of life, visibly represent the destination of the entire ecclesial community that “advances down the paths of time with her eyes fixed on the future restoration of all things in Christ”.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> WILLIAM OF SAINT-THIERRY, *The Contemplation of God*, Prologue, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 59.

What can the women and men who choose to live their lives on the mountain of intercession represent for the Church and for the world? What meaning can a community that dedicates itself essentially to prayer and contemplation have in a context of evangelical *koinonia* and laboriousness?

**66.** The life of contemplative persons presents itself as an image of love, men and women who live *hidden with Christ in God* (cf. *Col 3:3*). They inhabit the furrows of human history, and, situated in the heart of the Church and the world,<sup>4</sup> they stand “before God for all”.<sup>5</sup>

Praying communities do not propose a more perfect fulfillment of the Gospel but rather ask for discernment at the service of the entire Church. It is a sign that indicates a path, reminding all People of God of the sense of what it lives.<sup>6</sup> Consecrated in the fruitful intimacy of

<sup>4</sup> SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium*, 44; JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 3.29.

<sup>5</sup> E. STEIN, *Letter to Fritz Kaufmann*, in M. PAOLINELLI, “*Stare davanti a Dio per tutti*”. *Il Carmelo di Edith Stein*, OCD, Rome 2013.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. SECOND ECUMENICAL VATICAN COUNCIL, Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae caritatis*, 5.

intercession, communities of contemplative men and women are an image of the longing for Heaven, of God's tomorrow, ardent expectation of the bride in the *Song*, "sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things".<sup>7</sup> Contemplative communities are called to live the categories of a present that is already given<sup>8</sup> as a mission, aware that present and eternity no longer come one after the other, but are intimately connected.

"The monastic vocation", as Pope Francis said, "is a *tension* between being hidden and being visible: tension in the fundamental sense, the tension of fidelity. Your vocation is going onto the battlefield, it is fighting, it is knocking at the heart of the Lord".<sup>9</sup>

The monastic *stabilitas*, leaves room for God and announces the certainty of his presence in the vicissitudes of human life, wherever it is to be found: where man lives is where God has come to live, in his Son, Jesus Christ. Communities of contemplative men and women are

<sup>7</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 59.

<sup>8</sup> BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi* (November 30, 2007), 9.

<sup>9</sup> FRANCIS, *Address to consecrated men and women of the Diocese of Rome*, Vatican City (May 16, 2015).

places inhabited by those who do not pass by, as the Levite or the priest from the parable; they are inhabited by those who know how to dwell in a stable way, allowing themselves to encounter man and his needs, to welcome the wounded humanity into their personal relationship with God.

Expressing love to God and telling men a parable of the Kingdom of Heaven: this is the integral contemplative life. For monks and nuns, the world is the horizon of their prayers: its sounds and the silence of its desolation; its joy, treasure, hopes and stresses; its deserts of solitude and its anonymous crowds.

This is the path of pilgrims seeking the true God, it is the story of every contemplative person who stays vigilant, while accepting in himself the *sequela Christi* as configuration to Christ. The *stabilitas*, reveals itself to be a path, the chance to go out beyond the boundaries of time and space, to become the outpost of humanity: "Let us go for our people" Edith Stein will say to her sister Rosa when she is arrested at the monastery in Echt and taken to Auschwitz in holocaust.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Last words of Edith Stein - St. Benedicta of the Cross, to her sister Rose at the Echt Monastery.

67. The monastic life, in large part that of women, is rooted in a silence that is generative. “Understanding one another today as women in prayer is a great challenge”, nuns declare, it is to live a creative vital *status*.

Female monastic life becomes the heart of intercession, the narration of true relationships, of care, and of healing: it is the protector of all traces of life and, through empathy, it can sense harmonies even when they are hidden and tenacious. Nuns know how to be and are able to be the voice of gratuitousness and of fruitful questions, without any preconceived idealizations, while letting themselves be shaped by the power of the Gospel. Unification of the heart, the dynamism of monastic life, urgently requires that monastic life be re-proposed as empathy, as a laboratory of narrations of salvation, as conscious disposition towards dialogue within the culture of fragmentation, complexity, and uncertainty, shying away from the fascination of imaginary peace.

All of this requires a demanding formation in the life of faith, matured as docility to the Spirit. It also requires active listening to the signs of the times in a real relationship with history and with the Church in her unique realities, and not one that is made up of only information and abstract

relations. It requires intercession that impassions and engages life, the place in which prophecy comes to be.

**68.** From this human frontier, contemplative communities are able to see beyond, to see the Beyond. Eschatology is not home to those who pass over what is human but to those who, while spending their entire lives seeking God, attend historic events to discern the signs of the presence of God and to serve his plans. The walls that outline the space are there to serve the search, the listening, the prayers; they do not represent a phobic separation or the attenuation of care or acceptance: they express our essential heartbeat of intense love for the Church and our charity towards our brothers.

Integral contemplative life recounts the harmony between time and eschatology. Time is abbreviated. *Sequela* and waiting walk together. Jesus' command to his disciples to *follow me* cannot be fulfilled without the parousia that is proclaimed in the choral prayer of the Church; hope that prays, *Come, Lord Jesus (Rv 22:20)*. The Church as the Bride is enriched by the testimony of this "beyond" because the eschatological dimension corresponds with the exigency of Christian hope.

The contemplative community placed on a solitary mountain or within chaotic and noisy urban centers resembles the living relationship between time and the eternal. The community that contemplates reminds us that we do not have infinite time at our disposal, an eternal return, a homogeneous *continuum* devoid of shocks, and it bears witness to a new epiphanic possibility of time. Our days are not an empty eternity, shattered and liquid in which everything can happen except for something essential. May the eternal enter time and let things run their course. The dimension of time filled by the eternal is experienced. Christian eschatology is no longer experienced as an inert fragment in our brief time but as continuous and luminous evolution.<sup>11</sup> Contemplatives do not experience time as something that is irritated by waiting, but as the continuous flow of the Eternal in daily time. It is a prophecy of life that constantly reminds us of the essential link between the *sequela* and waiting. We cannot eliminate one component without seriously compromising the other, we cannot live without the breath of the infinite, without waiting, without eschatology.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. J.B. METZ, *Tempo di religiosi? Mistica e politica della sequela*, Queriniana, Brescia 1978.

69. This evangelical culture, so dear to monasteries, has demonstrated throughout the centuries that the Christian hope experienced in waiting takes the shape of *opus Dei* which does not lead to historical and social detachment but generates responsibility and sets the conditions for healthy humanism. In a culture that has generated the dark eschatology of *boredom*, time without time, a culture that avoids facing transcendence, the time of contemplative persons can and must be ignited; the time of those who have something else to say. Through a sober and joyous life, a prophetic life, and by evading manipulations and compromises, they attest to the uncertainty and the ephemeral character of every present culture that limits life.

Contemplative communities, in which men and women live the search for the Face and the listening of the *quotidie* Word, knowing that God remains an unknowable infinite, are immersed in a dialectic of *already and not yet*. Logic that concerns not only the relationship between time and eternity, but also, the relationship between the experience of the living God and the awareness of his mysterious transcendence. It all plays out in their own lives, in the difficulty of things, in the flow of days and events.

Vigilant humanity, sentinels on the mountain who watch out for the early signs of dawn (cf. *Is* 21:12) and announce the *adventus* of the God who saves.

### **In the streets to protect God**

70. “Seeking the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening; This is what it means to be contemplative in the heart of the world”,<sup>12</sup> wrote Blessed Teresa of Calcutta.

If communities integrally dedicated to contemplation light and guide the way, then the entire life of special consecration is called to be the place of embrace and the place where where the company of God is given.

Authentic Christian contemplation cannot exclude a movement towards the outside, a gaze that, from the mystery of God, turns towards the world and becomes active compassion. *No one has ever seen God (Jn 1:18)*, but Jesus made himself the exegete, the one who is the visible Face of the invisible Father. Only by letting ourselves be engaged by Christ and by

<sup>12</sup> J.L. GONZÁLEZ BALADO (edited by), *I fioretti di Madre Teresa di Calcutta. Vedere, amare, servire Cristo nei poveri*, San Paolo, Cinisello Balsamo (MI) 1992, 62.

his choices will it be possible to contemplate. He who wants to contemplate God accepts living in a way that allows the men and women of his time to recognize Him. To those who live bearing witness to the God of Jesus Christ in the world, he reveals himself as a guest and commensal.

We are called to savor the mystery of the *merciful and compassionate God, slow to anger, rich in kindness and faithfulness* (Ex 34:6), of the God who *is love* (1Jn 4:16) and protect him in the human streets, and even in the sign of the fraternity.

Pope Francis invited Korean consecrated persons: “You are challenged to become ‘experts’ in divine mercy precisely through your life in community. From experience I know that community life is not always easy, but it is a providential training ground for the heart. It is unrealistic not to expect conflicts; misunderstandings will arise and they must be faced. Despite such difficulties, it is in community life that we are called to grow in mercy, forbearance and perfect charity”.<sup>13</sup> It is in such vision that our fraternal life is evaluated: a place of mercy

<sup>13</sup> FRANCIS, *Address to the religious communities of Korea, Seoul* (August 16, 2014).

and reconciliation, or an inefficient space and relationships where mistrust and judgment abound to the point of condemnation.

71. Contemplation can occur at any time and in any place, on the solitary mountain just as on the paths of the peripheries of the inhuman. And it is redeeming. Communities of consecrated men and women who act as watchmen in cities and on the borders between nations are where sisters and brothers ensure for themselves and for everyone else the space to give attention to God. An invitation to be prayerful communities in which God is present; a call to be vigilant in the organization of time so that it is not filled with things, activities and words. Through continued contact and dialogue with cultures, the apostolic communities, fraternities, and individual consecrated persons in various forms protect God's time in the world and the reasons and way of the Gospel: "Places of hope and of the discovery of the Beatitudes, a place where love, drawing strength from prayer, the well-spring of communion, is called to become a pattern of life and source of joy".<sup>14</sup> It is the sign

<sup>14</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 51.

of He who always comes to encounter us as the Living One.

In a time of bitter global conflict (1943) and in a place (Auschwitz) in which everything proclaimed, or rather cried out, the death of God and man, Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman, senses with contemplative intuition the intimate bond between the fates of one and those of the other, and rediscovers within herself the human truth as a place for relationships of compassion in which the presence of God survives. She gives herself a task: to protect and preserve, not just her physical life, but more importantly, her deepest inner nucleus. This is the mystical experience that prayerful people have: “Dear God, these are anxious times. Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. [...] But one thing is becoming increasingly clear to me: [...] we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safekeeping instead of guarding You, dear God. [...] You have made me so rich, oh God, please let me share out Your beauty with open hands. My life has be-

come an uninterrupted dialogue with You, oh God, one great dialogue”.<sup>15</sup>

When the spirit understands, sees, and savors the richness that is God himself, it disseminates it as salvation and joy in the world. Isaiah’s promise comes to be: *The Lord will always guide you, giving you relief in desert places. He will give strength to your bones and you shall be like a watered garden, like a spring of water whose waters never run dry* (Is 58:11-12).

**72.** Contemplation, faithful and coherent in fulfillment of the mission, has called consecrated men and women to the extreme of ecstasy: “The shedding of their blood, being perfectly configured to the Crucified Lord”.<sup>16</sup> This is the ecstasy foretold by Father Christian de Chergé, Prior of the Monastery in Tibhirine, who was decapitated along with six brothers in the Atlas Mountains in Algeria, in May of 1996. Seven monks who chose to bear witness to the God of life in silence and solitude, in the daily embrace with people.

“Obviously, my death will appear to confirm those who hastily judged me naive or idealistic:

<sup>15</sup> E. HILLESUM, *Diario 1941-1943*, Adelphi, Milan 1996, 20<sup>th</sup> edition, 169-170; 682.

<sup>16</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita consecrata* (March 25, 1996), 86.

‘Let him tell us now what he thinks of his ideals!’ But these persons should know that finally my most avid curiosity will be set free. This is what I shall be able to do, God willing: immerse my gaze in that of the Father to contemplate with him His children of Islam just as He sees them, all shining with the glory of Christ, the fruit of His Passion, filled with the Gift of the Spirit whose secret joy will always be to establish communion and restore the likeness, playing with the differences. For this life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I thank God, who seems to have willed it entirely for the sake of that *joy* in everything and in spite of everything”.<sup>17</sup>

Life becomes a hymn of praise, while contemplative prayer flows as a blessing. It heals and restores, and opens to unity – going beyond ethnic groups, religions, and cultures – while it introduces to future fulfillment.

“My body is for the earth,  
but, please,  
no walls between her and me.  
My heart is for life,  
but, please,  
no affectation between her and me.

<sup>17</sup> C. DE CHERGÉ, *Testamento spirituale*, in C. DE CHERGÉ and the other monks of Tibhirine, *Più forti dell'odio*, Edizioni Qiqajon, Bose Monastic Community 2006, 219-220.

My arms are for work,  
they will be crossed very simply.  
As for my face:  
may it remain bare  
as to not hinder the kiss,  
and the gaze, let it see".<sup>18</sup>

The *eschaton* is already present in history, a seed to bring to fulfillment in the hymn of life that contemplates and makes hope real.

<sup>18</sup> *Ivi.*



FOR REFLECTION



### 73. Provocations from Pope Francis

- We too can consider: how does Jesus gaze at me today? How does Jesus look at me? With a call? With forgiveness? With a mission? [...] On the path that He made, we all are under Jesus' gaze: He always looks at us with love, asks us for something, forgives us for something and gives us a mission.<sup>1</sup>

- There are many problems that you encounter every day. These problems compel you to immerse yourselves with fervour and generosity in apostolic work. And yet, we know that by ourselves we can do nothing. [...] The contemplative dimension of our lives becomes indispensable even in the midst of the most urgent and difficult tasks we encounter. The more our mission calls us to go out into the peripheries of life, the more our hearts feel the intimate need

<sup>1</sup> FRANCIS, *Morning meditation* in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Vatican City (May 22, 2015).

to be united to the heart of Christ, which is full of mercy and love.<sup>2</sup>

- May you continue on the journey of renewal that you have begun and, to a great extent, accomplished in these 50 years, examining every novelty in the light of the Word of God and listening to the needs of the Church and of the contemporary world, and using all the means and wisdom that the Church has made available to advance on the journey of your personal and community holiness. And among these means, the most important is prayer, even spontaneous prayer, prayer of praise and adoration. We consecrated men and women are consecrated to serve the Lord and to serve others with the the Word of the Lord, are we not? Say to new members, please, say that praying is not a waste of time, adoring God is not a waste of time.<sup>3</sup>

- Life is a journey toward the fullness of Jesus Christ, when the second coming occurs. It is a journey toward Jesus, who will come again

<sup>2</sup> FRANCIS, *Address* for the Celebration of Vespers with priests, men and women religious, seminarians and various lay movements, Tirana (September 21, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> FRANCIS, *Address* to participants at the Meeting of the Congregation for Institutes of consecrated life and the Societies of apostolic life, Vatican City (November 27, 2014).

in glory, as the angels said to the Apostles on the day of the Ascension. [...] Am I attached to my things, to my ideas, closed? Or am I open to the God of surprises? [...] Am I a stationary person or a person on a journey? [...] Do I believe in Jesus Christ and in what he has done?, that is, he died, rose again... do I believe that the journey goes forth toward maturity, toward the manifestation of the glory of the Lord? Am I capable of understanding the signs of the times and of being faithful to the voice of the Lord that is manifest in them?<sup>4</sup>

- Often times we make mistakes, for we are all sinners, however, we recognize we were wrong, we ask forgiveness and give forgiveness. And this does good for the Church: it makes the lymph of fraternity circulate in the body of the Church. And it also does good for the whole of society. This fraternity presupposes the pater-nity of God, and the maternity of the Church and of the Mother, the Virgin Mary. We must reestablish ourselves in this relationship every day, and we can do so with prayer, with the Eucharist, with adoration, with the Rosary. We thus renew our “being” with Christ and in Christ every day, and in this way place ourselves

<sup>4</sup> FRANCIS, *Morning meditation* in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Vatican City (October 13, 2014).

in an authentic relationship with our Heavenly Father and with Mother Church, our Hierarchical Holy Mother Church, and Mother Mary. If our life always renews these fundamental relationships, then we are also able to achieve authentic fraternity, a testimonial brotherhood, which attracts.<sup>5</sup>

- God works. He continues to work and we can ask ourselves how we should respond to this creation of God, which was born from love because He works through love. [...] To the ‘first creation’ we must respond with the responsibility the Lord gives us: “The earth is yours, foster it; make it grow!”. [...] We too have the responsibility to make the earth flourish, to make creation flourish, to safeguard it and make it flourish according to its laws: we are lords of creation, not masters.<sup>6</sup>

- Every day you live the life of a person in the world, and, at the same time, retain contemplation. This contemplative dimension with the Lord and in relation to the world, to contemplate reality, to contemplate the beauty of the

<sup>5</sup> FRANCIS, *Address* to participants in the National Assembly of the Italian Conference of Major Superiors (CISM), Vatican City (November 7, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> FRANCIS, *Morning meditation* in the chapel of the *Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Vatican City (February 9, 2015).

word as well as the great sins of society, its deviations, all these things, and always in spiritual tension... This is why your vocation is so fascinating, because it is a vocation which is spot on, where the salvation not only of people but of the institutions are at stake.<sup>7</sup>

- And to the work that the Holy Spirit does within us, of reminding us of Jesus' word, of explaining to us, of making us understand what Jesus said: how do we respond? [...] God is person: He is the person of Father, the person of Son, the person of the Holy Spirit... our response to all three is to safeguard creation and make it flourish, to let ourselves reconcile with Jesus, with God in Jesus, in Christ, each day, and to not grieve the Holy Spirit, to not push Him away: He is the guest in our heart, the One who accompanies us, who makes us grow.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> FRANCIS, *Address to participants in the General Assembly of the Italian Conference of Secular Institutes*, Vatican City (May 10, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> FRANCIS, *Morning meditation in the chapel of the Domus Sanctae Marthae*, Vatican City (February 9, 2015).



*Hail, Woman clothed with the sun*

74. Our thoughts turn to Mary, the Ark of God. Beside her Child, flesh of her flesh and origin that comes from Above, Mary is united to the Mystery. Indescribable happiness and unfathomable enigma. She becomes a temple of silence without which the seed of the Word does not grow and the amazement before God and his wonders does not flourish; a place where the vibrations of the Word and the voice of the Spirit can be heard like a soft breeze. Mary becomes the bride in the enchantment that adores. The divine event admirably fulfilled in her is received in the nuptial bed of her life as a woman:

*Adorna thalamum tuum, Sion,  
Virgo post partum, quem genuit adoravit.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Liturgia Horarum*. Celebration of the presentation of Jesus to the Temple, Office of Letters, 1<sup>st</sup> responsory.

Mary becomes a treasure trove of memories of the Child, facts and words matching the predictions of the prophets (cf. *Lk* 2:19) and pondered, with the Scripture, deep within her heart: she jealously protects all that she is not able to understand, waiting for the Mystery to be revealed. The story of Jesus' infancy as told by Luke is a *liber cordis*, written on the Mother's heart before being written on parchments. In this place of depth, each of Mary's words, of joy, hope, and pain, has become the memory of God for assiduous contemplative rumination.

Throughout the centuries, the Church has progressively comprehended the exemplary value of the contemplation of Mary. Seeing the Mother as an icon of contemplation has been the work of centuries. Denis the Carthusian defines her as *summa contemplatrix* because as "it was conceded that in a singular way by her and through her, the mysteries of human salvation would be realized, so she was given in an eminent and deeper way to contemplate them".<sup>2</sup> From the Annunciation to

<sup>2</sup> S. DE FIORES, *Elogio della contemplazione*, in S.M. PASINI (ed.), *Maria modello di contemplazione del mistero di Cristo*, Ed. Monfortane, Rome 2000, 21-22.

the Resurrection, through the *stabat iuxta crucem*, where *mater dolorosa et lacrimosa* acquires the wisdom of pain and tears, Mary weaves the contemplation of the Mystery that lives within her.

In Mary, we glimpse the mystical journey of the consecrated person, set in the humble wisdom that savors the mystery of ultimate fulfillment. A Woman dressed with the sun appears as a magnificent sign in heaven: *A great sign appeared in heaven: a woman, adorned with the sun, standing on the moon, and with the twelve stars on her head for a crown (Rv 12:1)*. She, New Eve married under the cross, woman of the *Song* comes up from the desert leaning on her Beloved (*Sg 8:5*) and in the world and time of fragment and weakness gives birth to the Son, fruit of universal salvation, joy of the Gospel that saves:

You will go, as we pray to you...  
You will fly from spire to spire  
around the cupolas,  
you will enter from the ogives of the churches  
and behind the forest of skyscrapers,  
in the heart of the palace,  
in the middle of the steppe:  
you will emigrate, pilgrim, and now

and wherever you will give birth to your Son  
joy and unity of things,  
O, eternal Mother.<sup>3</sup>

Vatican City, 15 October 2015

*Memory of St. Teresa of Avila,  
virgin and doctor of the Church*

João Braz Card. de Aviz

*Prefect*

✠ José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M.

*Archbishop Secretary*

<sup>3</sup> D.M. TUROLDO, *O sensi miei... Poesie 1948-1988*, Rizzoli, Milan 1990, 256.

# INDEX

<i>Dear brothers and sisters</i> . . . . .	7
<b>Prologue</b> . . . . .	11
Listening . . . . .	15
Consecrated life, <i>statio orante</i> in the heart of history . . . . .	18
<b>Seeking</b> . . . . .	35
Listening . . . . .	39
The daily apprenticeship of the search . . .	41
<i>Pilgrims deep within</i> . . . . .	45
<i>Quaerere Deum</i> . . . . .	47
The search in the night . . . . .	49
<i>Desire</i> . . . . .	50
<i>Hope</i> . . . . .	53
<b>Dwelling</b> . . . . .	57
Listening . . . . .	61
In the form of Beauty . . . . .	65
<i>The Beauty that wounds</i> . . . . .	71
<i>Beauty that recreates</i> . . . . .	77
In the exercise of truth . . . . .	80
<i>The holiness that embraces</i> . . . . .	81
<i>Listening that sees</i> . . . . .	83
<i>Quies, requies, otium</i> . . . . .	87
<i>The ineffable memory</i> . . . . .	90

<b>Forming</b>	95
Listening	99
In the way of beauty.	102
<i>Mystagogical pedagogy</i>	104
<i>Paschal pedagogy</i>	106
<i>Pedagogy of beauty</i>	110
<i>Pedagogy of thought</i>	115
In the closeness of mercy	120
In the dance of creation	125
<i>A Philokalia tale</i>	128
<b>Epilogue</b>	131
Listening	135
On the mountain in the sign of fulfillment.	136
In the streets to protect God	145
<b>For reflection</b>	153
Provocations from Pope Francis	155
<i>Hail, Woman clothed with the sun</i>	161
Index	165



