

***THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE***  
**(Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes, 4-7 March 1980)**

**INTRODUCTION**

On the basis of extensive research, the *Plenaria* of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes of 4-7 March 1980 considered the contemplative dimension of religious life. The theme had been chosen at the *Plenaria* of 1978, which dealt with the specific role of religious in the Church's mission for integral human promotion, especially in its socio-political aspects. In highlighting at the time the fundamental importance of the spiritual in all forms of consecrated life, the Fathers of the *Plenaria* saw the need and the urgency to stress the absolute primacy of life in the Holy Spirit.

The choice of this theme, which was approved by the Holy Father, was prompted by:

- - the emergence of many forms of prayer and new forms of contemplative life among the People of God and in many religious communities, and
- - the need to do away with the harmful dichotomy between interior life and activity in the personal and communal lives of religious in reaction to a certain period of down-grading of prayer and recollection, which has not yet completely disappeared.

The *Plenaria* did not wish to indulge in a theoretical, theological study; but, on the basis of a sufficiently concrete and accepted doctrinal specification, it desired to draw up some practical and formative guidelines

- - to encourage the integration of the interior life and activity in institutes of so-called active life and
- - to promote vitality and renewal in the specifically contemplative institutes.

In presenting here the principal guidelines formulated by the *Plenaria*, account has been taken not only of the conclusions reached by the Fathers at the time of voting but also of the main ideas that emerged in other sessions (for example, in the group discussions) and which complemented the thought of the Fathers. Furthermore, appropriate headings were sought for the subject matter of the conclusions, their content was arranged in order, and subdivisions were introduced in order to clarify and make more explicit the guidelines, which were very much condensed in the final proposals.

The synthesis consists of three parts:

- I. Description of the contemplative dimension.
- II. Guidelines for institutes of the active life.
- III. Guidelines for specifically contemplative institutes.

**I.**

**DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTEMPLATIVE DIMENSION**

1. The contemplative dimension is basically a reality of grace, experienced by the believer as God's gift. It enables persons to know the Father (cf. *Jn* 14:8) in the mystery of trinitarian communion (cf. *1 Jn* 1-3), so that they can enter into *the depths of God* (*1 Cor* 2:10).

It is not the intention here to discuss the many and delicate aspects of different methods of contemplation, nor to analyze contemplation in so far as it is an infused gift of the Holy Spirit.

We describe the contemplative dimension fundamentally as the theological response of faith, hope, and charity, by which the believer opens up to the revelation and communication of the living God through Christ in the Holy Spirit. "The concentration of the regard of one's heart on God, which we define as contemplation, becomes the highest and fullest activity of the spirit, the activity which today, also, can and must order the immense pyramid of all human activities" (Paul VI, 7 December 1965).

As the unifying act of all human movement towards God, the contemplative dimension is expressed by listening to and meditating on the Word of God; by participating in the divine life transmitted to us in the sacraments, particularly the Eucharist; by liturgical and personal prayer, by the constant desire for God and the search for his will in events and people; by the conscious participation in his salvific mission; by self-giving to others for the coming of the Kingdom. There results, in the religious, an attitude of continuous and humble adoration of God's mysterious presence in people, events and things: an attitude which manifests the virtue of piety, an interior font of peace and a person who brings peace to every sphere of life and apostolate.

All this is achieved in continual purification of heart under the light and guidance of the Holy Spirit, so that we can find God in all things and people and become the "praise of his glory" (*Eph* 1:6).

The very nature of consecrated life stands out in this way as the profound source which nourishes and unifies every aspect of the lives of religious.

2. "The subject chosen for the *Plenaria* must, therefore, be considered of prime importance," the Holy Father said in his letter to the participants, "and I am certain that from this meeting of yours there will result for all religious precious encouragement to persevere in the commitment to bear witness before the world to the primacy of the personal relationship with God. Strengthened by the directives which will issue from your meeting in Rome, they will not fail to dedicate with renewed conviction sufficiently long periods of time to prayer before the Lord to tell Him their love and, above all, to feel loved by Him" (1).

3. The *Plenaria*, which considered this subject, dedicates these reflections to institutes of the active life and to specifically contemplative ones (cf. PC 7-8). It is also concerned for new forms of religious life in which there is a notable desire for the contemplative life, and it hopes that their particular identity will become clearer in the ecclesial body for the service of the People of God.

## II.

### GUIDELINES FOR INSTITUTES OF ACTIVE LIFE

- A) Integration of activity and contemplation.
- B) Renewed attention to life in the Holy Spirit.
- C) Community animation.
- D) Contemplative dimension in formation.
- E) Developing the contemplative dimension in the local Churches.

#### **A. Integration of activity and contemplation**

4. - *What kind of "activity"?* -- For religious, it is not a question of any and every kind of activity. The Council speaks of "apostolic and charitable activity" (PC 8), inspired and motivated by the Holy Spirit. This is the only form of activity that "is of the very nature of religious life" since a sacred ministry and a special work of charity have been consigned to the institutes by the Church and must be performed in her name (cf. PC *ibid.*).

The special characteristic of this activity is that it is inspired by the love nourished in the heart of the religious, considered as the most intimate sanctuary of the person where grace unifies interior life and activity.

It is necessary, then, to form a personal and communitarian awareness of the primary source of apostolic and charitable activity, as a lived participation in that "mission" (of Christ and the Church) which begins with the Father (and) requires that those who are sent exercise their awareness of love in the dialog of prayer" (MR 16).

"In the case of religious of apostolic life, it will be a question of promoting integration between interiority and activity. Their first duty, in fact, is that of being with Christ. A constant danger for apostolic workers is to become so much involved in their work for the Lord, as to forget the Lord of all work" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 2).

5. *Renewal of prayer.* -- Prayer is the indispensable breath of every contemplative dimension. "In these times of apostolic renewal, as always in every form of missionary engagement, a privileged place is given to contemplation of God, to meditation on his plan of salvation, and to reflection on the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, so that prayer may be nourished and grow in quality and frequency" (MR 16). In this way, prayer, open to creation and history, becomes acknowledgment, adoration and constant praise of God in the world and its history and the echo of a life of solidarity with one's brothers and sisters, especially the poor and the suffering.

This prayer, personal and communitarian, will come about only if the hearts of religious reach a high level of vitality and intensity in dialog with God and in union with Christ, Redeemer of humanity (cf. PC 8; ET 10, 42). Therefore, in the sometimes exhausting rhythm of apostolic commitments, there must be well-ordered and sufficiently prolonged daily and weekly periods of personal and community prayer. There must also be more intensive moments of recollection and prayer every month and throughout the year (cf. Synod of Bishops 1971, AAS 1971, 913-914).

6. - *The nature of apostolic and charitable activity.* -- The very nature of apostolic and charitable activity contains its own riches which nourish union with God. It is necessary to cultivate every day an awareness and deepening of it. Being conscious of this, religious will so sanctify their activities as to transform them into sources of union with God, to whose service they are dedicated by a new and special title (LG 44).

Moreover, a strengthening of the concrete apostolic spirituality of their own institutes will help them still more to benefit from the sanctifying riches contained in every ecclesial ministry (cf. LG 41; PO 14; OT 9).

The Church's mission, to which the evangelical counsels unite religious in a special way (LG 44), can never, in fact, consist simply "in the activity of the exterior life.... The Church's mission is by its very nature nothing else than the mission of Christ continued in the history of the world. It consists principally in co-participation in the obedience of Him (cf. *Heb* 5:8) who offered Himself to the Father for the life of the world" (MR 15).

7. *Constant use of appropriate means.* -- Constant use of the means which favor the contemplative dimension is an indispensable consequence of fidelity to the theological demands of every religious life, according to the special nature of each institute. Among the means to be pursued there are some which are particularly suited for the achievement of a profound harmony between the active and contemplative dimensions.

This *Plenaria* indicates these in the following guidelines and appeals to the superiors of every institute and to all religious to make careful use of them.

### **B. Renewed attention to life in the Holy Spirit**

8. *The Word of God.* -- Listening to and meditating on the Word of God is a daily encounter with "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" (PC 6; ES II, 16, 1). The Council "forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life, to learn this sublime knowledge" (DV 25).

This personal and community commitment to foster the spiritual life more abundantly by giving more time to mental prayer (cf. ES II, 21) will be effective, actual and even apostolic if the Word is heard not only in its objective richness, but also in the historical circumstances within which we live and in the light of the Church's teaching.

9. *Centrality of the Eucharist.* -- Devout participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, "the source and apex of all Christian life" (LG 11), is the irreplaceable center and animating force of the contemplative dimension of every religious community (cf. PC 6; ET 47-48).

- - Priest religious, therefore, will give a preeminent place to the daily celebration of the eucharistic sacrifice.
- - Each and all religious should take an active part in it every day (SC 48) according to the concrete circumstances in which their community lives and works. "That more perfect participation is highly recommended, by which the faithful, after the priest's communion, receive the Body of the Lord from the same sacrifice" (SC 55; cf. ET 47; Synod of Bishops 1971).

"The commitment to take part daily in the eucharistic sacrifice will help religious to renew their self-offering to the Lord every day. Gathered in the Lord's name, religious communities have the Eucharist as their natural center. It is normal, therefore, that they should be visibly assembled in their chapel, in which the presence of the Blessed Sacrament expresses and realizes what must be the principal mission of every religious family" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 2; cf. ET 48) (2).

10. *Renewal in the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.* -- The sacrament of reconciliation, which "restores and revives the fundamental gift of conversion received in baptism" (Const. *Poenitenti*, AAS 1966, 180), has a particularly important function for growth in the spiritual life. There can be no contemplative dimension without a personal and community experience of conversion.

This was stressed by this Sacred Congregation in its decree of 8 December 1970, in which it reminded religious and, in particular, superiors of the necessary means for a proper appreciation for this sacrament (cf. AAS 1971, 318-319).

The Fathers of the *Plenaria* again appeal for:

- - an appropriate and regular personal reception of this sacrament;
- - the ecclesial and fraternal dimension which is made more evident when this sacrament is celebrated with a community rite (cf. LG 11; Const. *Poenitemini*, I, I, c), while the confession remains always a personal act.

11. *Spiritual direction*. -- Spiritual direction, in the strict sense, also deserves to be restored to its rightful place in the process of the spiritual and contemplative development of religious. It cannot in any way be replaced by psychological methods. Therefore that *direction of conscience*, for which PC 14 asks *due liberty*, should be fostered by the availability of competent and qualified persons.

Such availability should come especially from priests who, by reason of their specific pastoral mission, will promote appreciation for spiritual direction and its fruitful acceptance. Superiors and directors of formation, who are dedicated to the care of the religious entrusted to them, will also contribute, although in a different way, by guiding them in discernment and in fidelity to their vocation and mission.

12. *The liturgy of the hours*. -- "The divine office, in that it is the public prayer of the Church, is a source of devotion and nourishment for personal prayer" (SC 90). It is "designed to sanctify the whole course of the day" (SC 84).

The willingness with which religious communities have already responded to the Church's exhortation to celebrate the divine praises with the faithful shows how much they appreciate the importance of this more intimate participation in the Church's life (ES II, 20).

The contemplative dimension of the lives of religious will find constant inspiration and nourishment in the measure that they dedicate themselves to the office with attention and fidelity. A greater appreciation of the spiritual riches in the office of readings could also help achieve this.

13. *The Virgin Mary*. -- The Virgin Mary is a model for every consecrated person and for participation in the apostolic mission of the Church (ET 56; LG 65). This is particularly evident when we consider the spiritual attitudes which characterized her:

- - the Virgin Mary listening to the Word of God;
- - the Virgin Mary at prayer (*Marialis cultus*, 17-18, AAS 1974, 128-129) -- "a most excellent model of the Church in the order of faith, charity, and perfect union with Christ (LG 63), that is, of that interior disposition with which the Church, beloved spouse, is closely associated with her Lord, invokes him and through him, worships the Eternal Father" (*Marialis cultus*, 16);
- - the Virgin Mary standing courageously by the Cross of the Lord and teaching us contemplation of the Passion.

By reviving devotion to her, according to the teaching and tradition of the Church (LG 66-67; *Marialis cultus*, 2nd and 3rd parts), religious will find the sure way to illuminate and strengthen the contemplative dimension of their lives.

"The contemplative life of religious would be incomplete if it were not directed in filial love towards her who is the Mother of the Church and of consecrated souls. This love for the Virgin will be manifested with the celebration of her feasts and, in particular, with daily prayer in her honor, especially the Rosary. The daily recitation of the Rosary is a centuries-old tradition for religious, and so it is not out of place to recall the suitability, beauty and efficacy of this prayer, which proposes for our meditation the mysteries of the Lord's life" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 2).

14. *Indispensable personal and community asceticism.* -- A generous asceticism is constantly needed for daily "conversion to the Gospel" (cf. Const. *Poenitenti*, II-III, 1, c; *Mk* 1:15). It would, therefore, seem indispensable for the contemplative dimension of every religious life also.

For this reason, religious communities must be manifestly praying and also penitential communities in the Church (cf. ES II, 22), remembering the conciliar guideline that penance "must not be internal and personal only, but also external and social" (SC 110).

In this way, religious will also bear witness to the "mysterious relationship between renunciation and joy, between sacrifice and greatness of heart, between discipline and spiritual liberty" (ET 29). In particular, growth in the contemplative dimension certainly cannot be reconciled, for example, with indiscriminate and sometimes imprudent use of the mass media; with an exaggerated and extroverted activism; with an atmosphere of dissipation which contradicts the deepest expectations of every religious life. "The search for intimacy with God involves the truly vital need of silence embracing the whole being, both for those who must find God in the midst of noise and confusion and for those who are dedicated to the contemplative life" (ET 46).

"To achieve this, their entire being has need of silence, and this requires zones of effective silence and a personal discipline to favor contact with God" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 2).

All these means will be more effective and fruitful if they are accompanied by the personal and communal practice of evangelical discernment; by a periodic and serious evaluation of activities; by the uninterrupted practice of an ever more profound interpretation of the sacramental significance of everyday realities (events, persons, things), with the explicit aim of never allowing the activities of religious to be downgraded from their ecclesial level to a mere horizontal and temporal one.

### **C. Community animation**

15. *The religious community.* -- The religious community is itself a theological reality, an object of contemplation. As "a family united in the Lord's name" (PC 15; cf. *Mt* 18:20), it is of its nature the place where the experience of God should be able in a special way to come to fullness and be communicated to others.

Mutual fraternal acceptance helps "to create an atmosphere favorable to the spiritual progress of each one" (ET 39).

For this very reason, religious need a "place for prayer" in their own houses, a place where the daily search for an encounter with God, the source of unity in charity, finds constant reminders and support. The real presence of the Lord Jesus in the Eucharist, devoutly reserved and adored, will be the living sign of that communion which is daily built up in charity.

16. *The superior of the community.* -- According to the "grace of unity" proper to every institute (cf. PC 8), the superior of the community exercises the dual role of spiritual and pastoral animator (MR 13).

Those called to the ministry of authority should themselves understand and then help others understand that in communities of consecrated persons, the spirit of service towards all the members is an expression of the love with which God loves them (PC 14).

This service of unifying animation demands, then, that superiors not be strangers to or indifferent to pastoral needs; neither should they be absorbed merely in administrative duties. Rather they should

feel and in fact be accepted primarily as guides for the spiritual and pastoral growth of each individual and of the whole community.

#### **D. The contemplative dimension in formation**

17. *Religious formation.* -- The principal purpose of formation at its various stages, initial and ongoing, is to immerse religious in the experience of God and to help them perfect it gradually in their lives. With this in mind, there is need to "duly emphasize the apostolate itself" (MR 27). The primary objective of active institutes should be to integrate the interior life and the active life so that each religious will increasingly cultivate the primacy of life in the Spirit (MR 4), from which flows the grace of unity proper to charity.

The strongly ecclesial dimension of religious life (LG 44; ET 50; MR 10) demands that formation in every aspect be imparted in profound communion with the universal Church. This should be done in such a way that religious may be able to live their vocation in a concrete and effective way in the local Church and for the local Church to which they are sent, according to the mission of their institute.

"By your vocation," the Pope said, "you are for the universal Church; by your mission you are in a definite local Church. Your vocation for the universal Church, then, is exercised within the structures of the local Church. You must make every effort to carry out your vocation in the individual local Churches, so as to contribute to their spiritual development, in order to be their special strength. Union with the universal Church through the local Church: this is your way" (John Paul II, to Superiors General, 24 November 1978).

18. *Deepening the knowledge of one's institute.* -- Knowing the special character (MR 11) of the institute to which one belongs is an essential element in formation for the contemplative dimension.

Under this aspect also, it is important to implement that general principle of renewal which *Perfectae Caritatis* defines as "a constant return to the sources."

19. *Solid intellectual formation.* -- A solid intellectual formation, suited to the purposes of the vocation and mission of one's own institute, is also basic for a balanced and rich life of prayer and contemplation. Therefore, study and updating are recommended as components of a healthy renewal of religious life in the Church and for society in our times (PC 2, c-d; ES II, 16). "Studies should not be programmed with a view to achieving personal goals, as if they were a means of wrongly understood self-fulfillment, but with a view to responding to the requirements of the apostolic commitments of the religious family itself, in harmony with the needs of the Church" (MR 26).

20. *The need for suitable qualified formation personnel.* -- Those who are responsible for formation need to have:

- - the human qualities of insight and responsiveness;
- - a certain experiential knowledge of God and of prayer;
- - wisdom resulting from attentive and prolonged listening to the Word of God;
- - love of the liturgy and understanding of its role in spiritual and ecclesial formation;
- - necessary cultural competence;
- - sufficient time and good will to attend to the candidates individually, and not just as a group.

## **E. Promotion of the contemplative dimension in the local Churches**

21. *The bishop as "sanctifier of his flock."* -- The pastoral ministry of the bishop, who is primarily concerned with sanctifying the Church entrusted to him, highlights his mission: "to sanctify his flock, zealously promoting the sanctity of the clergy, religious and laity, according to the vocation of each one" (CD 15; cf. MR 7).

For this reason, the pastors of the local Churches will be mindful, especially in promoting the life of prayer and the contemplative dimension, that they are both "sanctifiers" of their people (MR 7, 28) according to the vocation of each one and witnesses by their own personal sanctification (MR 9d).

Under this aspect, their pastoral care for vocations, including vocations to all forms of consecrated life, assumes greater importance (MR 32) together with their concern to ensure that already existing communities not lack spiritual assistance.

Furthermore, there will be a more voluntary and fruitful collaboration between religious and clergy if the bishop promotes an understanding and esteem for religious life as such, independently of the activities of the various institutes (cf. MR 37). This will also better guarantee the preparation of qualified priests to support and accompany religious in their spiritual and apostolic lives according to the nature of religious life itself and the purpose of each institute.

"On their part, women religious must be able to find in the clergy, confessors and spiritual directors capable of giving them help to understand and put into practice their consecration in a better way. The influence of priests is, moreover, very often a determinant in encouraging the discovery and subsequent development of the religious vocation" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 4).

To achieve this, the study of the consecrated life in its various forms and under its various aspects appears necessary right from the initial stage of seminary education, so that diocesan clergy may have a complete ecclesial formation (cf. MR 30a, *ibid.* 49,1).

22. *Ecclesial participation of religious.* -- Religious, on their part, must give witness that they effectively and willingly belong to the diocesan family (cf. CD 34). They will do this not only by being available for the needs of the local Church according to the charism of their institute (cf. CD 35; cf. MR *passim*), but even moreso by sharing their spiritual experience with the diocesan priests and by facilitating prayer groups for the faithful.

"There is, furthermore, a particularly important matter which deserves to be mentioned today: that of the close relations between religious institutes and the clergy regarding the contemplative dimension that every life dedicated to the Lord must have as its fundamental element. Diocesan priests need to draw from contemplation strength and support for their apostolate. As in the past, they must normally seek help from experienced religious and from monasteries that should be ready to receive them for spiritual exercises and for periods of meditation and renewal" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 4). Besides, their participation in prayer experiences promoted by the local Church could contribute to the growth and enrichment of the spiritual life of the whole Christian community (cf. MR 24, 25).

23. *Co-responsibility and harmonious collaboration.* -- Co-responsibility, harmonious collaboration and the spiritual growth of the local Church will be greatly helped by periodic meetings between bishops and superiors of religious institutes in the diocese, and likewise by the creation of well-ordered, appropriate structures at the level of Episcopal Conferences and Conferences of Religious (cf. CD 35, 5-6; ES II, 42-43; ET 50; MR 29, 36, 50, 54, 56, 59, 62, 65).



### III.

#### GUIDELINES FOR SPECIFICALLY CONTEMPLATIVE INSTITUTES

24. *Importance of such institutes.* -- The *Plenaria* recognizes the fundamental importance of institutes of men and women dedicated to the specifically contemplative life. It is very happy to express its esteem and appreciation for what they represent in the Church. Of its nature, the Church has the characteristic of being "zealous in action and dedicated to contemplation," so that "in it the human is directed towards and subordinated to the divine, the visible to the invisible, action to contemplation" (SC 2). Convinced of the special function of grace that these institutes have among the People of God, the *Plenaria* exhorts them to continue faithfully to make the contribution of their specific vocation and mission to the universal Church and to the local Churches to which they belong.

It exhorts them also to preserve and nourish their rich spiritual and doctrinal contemplative heritage which is a reminder and a gift to the world as well as a reply to the people of our times who are anxiously searching, even outside the Christian tradition, for contemplative methods and experiences which are not always authentic (cf. Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 3).

25. *Actuality of the specifically contemplative life.* -- Those called to the specifically contemplative life are acknowledged as "one of the most precious treasures of the Church." Thanks to a special charism, "they have chosen the better part (cf. *Lk* 10:12), that is prayer, silence, contemplation, exclusive love for God and complete dedication to his service.... The Church relies a great deal on their spiritual contribution" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 3).

For this reason, "no matter how pressing may be the needs of the active ministry, these institutes will always have an honored place in the Mystical Body of Christ.... For they offer to God an exceptional sacrifice of praise, they lend luster to God's people with abundant fruits of holiness, they motivate this people and by their hidden apostolic fruitfulness they make this people grow" (PC 7). Therefore, they should live in a realistic way the mystery of the desert to which their *exodus* has brought them. It is the place where, even in the struggle with temptation, heaven and earth, according to tradition, seem to meet; the world rises from its condition of arid earth and becomes paradise anew... and humanity itself reaches its fullness" (*Venite Seorsum*, III, AAS 1969, 681).

For this reason it could be said that "if contemplatives are in a certain way in the heart of the world, still more so are they in the heart of the Church" (*ibid.*). Indeed, the decree *Ad Gentes* affirmed that the contemplative life means belonging to the fullness of the Church's presence, and it appealed for its establishment everywhere in the missions (18, 40).

26. *The apostolic mystery of such institutes.* -- The way of life of these Institutes -- "a particular way of living and expressing the paschal mystery of Christ which is death ordained towards resurrection" (VS, I) -- is a special mystery of grace which manifests the Church's holiness more clearly as a "praying community" which, with her Spouse, Jesus Christ, sacrifices herself out of love for the Father's glory and the salvation of the world.

Their contemplative life, then, is their primary and fundamental apostolate, because it is their typical and characteristic way in God's special design to be Church, to live in the Church, to achieve communion with the Church, and to carry out a mission in the Church. In this perspective which fully respects the primary apostolic purpose of the cloistered life, in which contemplative religious give themselves to God alone (cf. PC 7), they offer assistance -- without prejudice to enclosure and

the laws that govern it -- to persons in the world and share with them their prayer and spiritual life in fidelity to the spirit and traditions of their institute (cf. MR 25).

27. *Necessity for appropriate formation.* -- It must be emphasized that there is need for appropriate initial and ongoing formation for their vocation and their contemplative life of seeking God "in solitude and silence, in constant prayer and willing penance" (PC 7). There must be a serious effort to base this formation on biblical, patristic, liturgical, theological and spiritual foundations, and to prepare persons who are qualified to form others.

Special attention must be given to the developing Churches and to monasteries in isolated localities and in need of the special help and means to accomplish this. In collaboration with the Sacred Congregation for Eastern Churches, ways and means should be studied to give effective help to those monasteries in the area of formation (formation teams, books, correspondence courses, tapes, records...).

28. *Esteem and sensitivity in relationships.* -- The relations of the bishop as pastor, guide and father with contemplative monasteries, already stressed in a previous *Plenaria*, require continuing study of the various aspects of the matter so that, with the help of the hierarchy, the presence and mission of these monasteries in the particular Churches may be truly a grace which reflects the diversity of charism in the service of all the People of God.

The Fathers of the *Plenaria* also recommend that bishops seek to promote an understanding of and esteem for the specifically contemplative life among priests (even from their seminary formation, cf. OT 19; MR 80b) and among the faithful. This way of life does not make those called to it "aloof from the rest of humanity.... In solitude where they are devoted to prayer, contemplatives are never forgetful of their brothers and sisters. If they have withdrawn from frequent contact with them, it is not because they are seeking their own quiet comfort, but to share more universally in the fatigue, sufferings, and hopes of all humanity" (VS III).

29. *Papal enclosure.* -- The *Plenaria* expresses its esteem for monasteries of nuns of *papal enclosure*. If separation from the world is of the essence of the contemplative life, this enclosure is an excellent sign and means of achieving that separation according to the spirit of the different institutes. Therefore, the *Plenaria*, fully in accord with the request of the Second Vatican Council for a suitable renewal of norms which take into account the particular circumstances of time and place (PC 16), strongly exhorts these monasteries to preserve faithfully, according to the charism and traditions of each institute, *the special separation from the world* which is a most appropriate means for promoting the contemplative life.

## CONCLUSION

30. *The contemplative dimension.* -- The contemplative dimension is the real secret of renewal for every religious life. It vitally renews the following of Christ because it leads to an experiential knowledge of him. This knowledge is needed for the authentic witness to him by those who have heard him, have seen him with their own eyes, have contemplated him, and have touched him with their own hands (cf. *1 Jn* 1:1; *Philip* 3:8).

The more open religious are to the contemplative dimension, the more attentive they will be to the demands of the Kingdom, intensely developing their theological depth, because they will look on events with the eyes of faith. This will help them to discover the divine Will everywhere. Only

those who live this contemplative dimension will be able to see the salvific plan of God in history and to accomplish it in an effective and balanced way.

"Your houses should be especially centers of prayer, of recollection, of dialog -- personal and, above all, communitarian -- with him who is, and must remain, the primary and principal Person with whom you converse in the busy round of your daily lives. If you succeed in cultivating this atmosphere of intense and loving union with God, you will be able to carry out, without traumatic tensions or dangerous aberrations, that renewal of life and discipline to which the Second Vatican Council has called you" (John Paul II, 24 November 1978)

**EDUARDO CARDINAL PIRONIO,**

*Prefect*

**+ AUGUSTINE MAYER, O.S.B.,**

*Secretary*

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(1) Cf. *L'Osservatore Romano*, 8 March 1980.

(2) For a deeper understanding and evaluation of the "mystery and cult of the Most Holy Eucharist," it will be to the advantage of all religious to reread and reflect on the Letter of John Paul II To All Bishops of the Church (Holy Thursday, 1980). Likewise and especially from a formative point of view, it will be necessary to consider seriously the Instruction on liturgical formation in seminaries which was issued by the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education on 3 June 1979, and the Circular Letter of the same Congregation, dated 6 January 1980, on some "Aspects of Spiritual Formation in Seminaries." Cf. also the Instruction of the Sacred Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship, *Inaestimabile Donum*, on some norms concerning the cult of the eucharistic mystery, 3 April 1980.