



CONGREGATIO  
PRO INSTITUTIS VITAE CONSECRATAE  
ET SOCIETATIBUS VITAE APOSTOLICAE

Dear Discalced Carmelite Sisters: May the Lord give you his peace!

Today, on the day the Church celebrates the liturgical memory of the "Holy Mother", *Teresa the Great*, I begin the response to the letters that you have sent me over these months, some of them just two days ago. I begin to write, although I can confess that I have been thinking about the response for some time now. I can also assure you that I have prayed about it on several occasions.

After consultation, seeing that the content of your letters is practically the same, I thought of replying with a single letter to all those that have been received. In case there are particular questions I will personally answer those who ask them. This is a personal response, since all have written to me, but since they have done so as the Secretary of the Congregation, the response, as you can understand, has been agreed upon together with other members of the Dicastery - the Prefect and the *pro monialibus* Office, among others - and with the Holy Father himself.

What I will say comes from my being a religious, like you; belonging to a historical charism, like yours, and in need, also like yours, of a re-reading or purification in the light of Vatican II - "a sure compass for the journey of the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century" (St. John Paul II), "a positive event whose positive seed is bearing fruit" (Benedict XVI), "a beautiful work of the Holy Spirit" (Pope Francis), in the light of the development of the theology of consecrated life in these years that separate us from it, from the current magisterium of the Church, as well as from the "signs of the times". I do so out of great respect for your charism and your spirituality which have enriched and continue to enrich the Church and consecrated life itself with much holiness. I do so with the confidence that, by placing "our eyes on the future, towards which the Spirit urges us to proceed in order to do great things with us", we can not only "remember and recount a glorious history", but also build a "great history" for the future (St. John Paul II, *Vita consecrata* 110), for that I consider it essential to rid ourselves of everything that keeps us tied down and prevents us from advancing (cf. *Jn* 5:8), be it *threads or ropes*, because, as Saint John of the Cross says, a bird is tied to a thread as to a rope from the well! No matter how subtle the thread, the bird will remain tied as to the rope, until it succeeds in cutting it to fly. How well the *Holy Mother* understood this when she said: "God alone is enough" (cf. Poetry). Everything changes, God alone remains, *with him nothing can disturb or frighten us: God alone is enough*, as Pope Francis reminds us in one of his Twitter accounts, quoting Saint Teresa.

### 1.- Gratitude

For you and with you I give thanks to God (cf. *Rm* 1:8) for the "precious fruits of grace and mercy" which the contemplative life, in communion with the Holy People of God and in particular with other consecrated persons, has brought forth from the silence of the cloister (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 5). *By inhabiting human history, you are at the very heart of the Church and the world* (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 2).



By inhabiting human history, you are a precious gift for the Church, insofar as you support her weakest members, and for the world, insofar as you direct the hearts of men and women of our time towards that which is everything: the good, the all-good, the supreme good.

The Church needs you, as the world needs you, as *beacons* for those who walk on the high seas, *torches* to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time, *sentinels* of the morning (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 6).

Thank you, dear sisters, for what you are for the Church and for the world.

I have found great joy in being able to confirm through your letters the sense of belonging to the charism that you have embraced, as well as the knowledge that you love it deeply, wishing to live it with the fidelity with which many of your sisters have lived it from the beginning. This joy is increased by the fact that many of you wish to live it "hand in hand with the Church" and that you are "open to the will of God, manifested through your superiors and to what Holy Mother Church tells us". "We want—continues one of the letters—to continue to have a desire for holiness and to continue to live what Our Holy Mother left us. And like her to be able to say: "We are daughters of the Church".

In this context, I am happy to know that many of you welcome and appreciate "with heartfelt gratitude" the recent Church documents on the contemplative life: *Vultum Dei quaerere* and *Cor orans*, expressing "affection and attachment" to Pope Francis. I assure you that, as some have asked, I will tell the Holy Father of this communion.

Nor can I hide my great joy in reading some of your accounts and knowing that several of your communities are collaborating with other communities of the 1990s, helping them with personnel and even financially. I am happy to know that some of your monasteries also maintain a fraternal relationship with the Mothers of 1991 and that they have greatly improved their relationship with the Carmelite Fathers. This is the best way to heal "wounds of the past", to which at least two monasteries refer, and to respond positively to the desire of the Holy Mother. Some of you confessed to me that this path of communion is becoming possible because prejudices and complexes resulting from feeling better than others are disappearing.

I thank the Lord who inspires every good work for this path of communion that is opening little by little, between your monasteries and with the whole Carmelite family.

I am also happy that there are monasteries that appreciate the service that the Congregation gives to the contemplative life and that pray for all of us who work in this, your house. Thank you also for the appreciation you show towards me in your letters and for your prayer for my service. Thank you, dear sisters, for your appreciation and above all for your prayer.

Finally, I would like to thank you very sincerely for having expressed your "concerns and uncertainties" in complete freedom, which is a sign, among other things, of confidence. With that same freedom and confidence, I will try to answer the great questions raised in the letters. And to



avoid being limited in my response, I will keep in mind the latest documents that the Church has issued on contemplative life.

## 2.- The Dynamism of the Charism

Reading your letters, the impression is that the Carmelite charism has taken a definitive form with the death of Saint Teresa and therefore nothing can be changed. I would like to open a reflection on this with you. And I begin with Sacred Scripture.

Psalm 94:7-8 invites us to listen to the voice of the Lord today and not to harden our hearts. That today endures in the today of our times, for only in this way can the voice of the Lord question men and women of any time and place.

That voice of the Lord reaches us, among other intermediaries, through our founders, whom we all love deeply, but it also reaches us through the Church, which your *Holy Mother* loved deeply to the point of professing herself a "daughter of the Church" in which she wanted to live and die, through the Holy Father's magisterium and the "signs of the times".

Founders and Foundresses deserve all our respect, admiration, and if the Church has recognized the holiness of their lives, also devotion, they can never take the place of Jesus Christ: We cannot put our founders and foundresses "almost in the place of Jesus Christ" (Francis, *The Strength of a Vocation. Consecrated Life Today. A conversation with Fernando Prado*. USCCB, 2018, 33), just as the Rule and Constitutions can never take the place of the Gospel, "this (the Gospel) is the absolute" for our founders and for ourselves (cf. Francis, *Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, I, 2; Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 83). Our founders are simply intermediaries of something that surpasses them because it comes from the Spirit. They are, as I have said, worthy of all admiration, but they are not imitable in everything they have literally done or said, since many expressions are typical of their time and, therefore, pass with time. On the other hand, it is in the present day "where we must respond from our charism" to the inspirations of the Spirit who has raised up the various charisms "which continue to be enriched and adapted" constantly (cf. Francis, *Letter to All Consecrated Persons*, I, 2).

The voice of the Lord reaches us through the Church, and it is the Church that, through St. John Paul II, for whom you show great veneration, which seems to me to be right, has asked us to "reproduce the boldness, creativity and holiness of our founders and foundresses," so that we can offer a "response to the signs of the times that are emerging in today's world. It is always St. John Paul II who invites us, all consecrated persons to a "dynamic fidelity" by *adapting its forms to better respond to our mission* (the mission in your case as contemplatives) in the Church and in the world, "in full docility to divine inspiration and ecclesial discernment" (John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, 37).

That same Church, always assisted by the Spirit, reminds us through Pope Francis that charisms need to be purified and in that perspective asks all consecrated persons to "look at the past with gratitude, but not as if we were looking at a museum piece, but, instead, as one who looks at it to find the inspiring roots" (Francis, *The Strength of Vocation. Consecrated Life Today. A*



*conversation with Fernando Prado*. USCCB, 2018, 33). And the same Holy Father reminds us that we cannot make it *an exercise in archaeology or the cultivation of mere nostalgia* (Francis, *Letter to all Consecrated Persons*, I, 1).

The memory of the past that we are called to make is always, in the words of the Holy Father, *a memory in the deuteronomic sense*, if it is to be a *fruitful memory*, for only this “makes us live the present with passion and look correctly to the future. Consecrated life, even that of the Discalced Carmelites “is like water: if it’s stagnant, it putrefies” (Francis, *The Strength of Vocation. Consecrated life today. A conversation with Fernando Prada*. USCCB, 2018, 34-36).

Holiness, boldness, creativity, fruitful memories, finding the inspiring lymph in the past, water that runs, are words full of spiritual fecundity; words that open us to a present with passion and a future full of hope (cf. Francis, *Letter to all Consecrated Persons*, I, 1-3) and all without losing our identity which is always dynamic, as dynamic as the charism that the Church received through our founders and foundresses.

I invite you, dear sisters beloved in the Lord, to reflect on the dynamism of every charism, if we do not want it to lose its relevance and end up being an old charism; I invite you to put *the new wine* of our charisms into *new wineskins*, the structures that keep these charisms young (cf. Mk 2:22); I invite you to strengthen the deep sense of belonging to the Church and of communion with her, well aware that consecrated life, every consecrated life, “is a gift to the Church, it is born in the Church, it grows in the Church, it is indebted to the whole Church”. We cannot run the risk of being outdated, of being dispersed, of falling into that attitude of making religious families *shine*, on the basis of the foundational charism, leaving aside belonging to the Church as a whole” (Jorge Mario Bergoglio, *Contribution to the Synod on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World*, Rome 1994, 1).

As daughters of Saint Teresa I ask you “kissing their feet” (in the expression of Saint Francis of Assisi), to accept the dispositions of Holy Mother Church, beyond a formal obedience, with docility, humility and confident abandonment, as something characteristic of her Carmelite spirituality. I invite you, as a brother and companion on the journey, to welcome the Church’s new guidelines on the contemplative life with a heart and mind free of prejudice, as disciples who allow themselves to be instructed by the Church’s magisterium.

As contemplatives, I also invite you to remain open “to the interior voice of the Spirit who invites us to welcome in the depths of our hearts the designs of Providence” and who “calls consecrated life [also contemplative life] to present new answers to the new problems of today’s world. These are divine pleas which only souls accustomed to following God’s will in everything can assimilate faithfully and then translate courageously into choices which are consistent with the original charism and which correspond to the demands of the concrete historical situation” (John Paul II, *Vita consecrata*, 73).

In this context, I confess that I was struck by a phrase written by a monastery: “What will happen to those of us who do not agree with the revision of the constitutions of 1990? Well, I



don't know what would happen, since I trust that the dialogue will bear fruit and that is why I haven't asked myself the question and even less have I considered the answer. I hope that the dialogue this Congregation has maintained with you and which it does not wish to renounce, will bear the expected fruit, which will only be possible if both parties walk in attentive listening to what the Spirit is asking of us at this time. Therefore, beyond a phrase like the one I quoted that might even sound a little challenging, I prefer that the *Holy Mother* respond. Saint Teresa says: "From experience I have seen [...] what a great good it is for a soul not to depart from obedience. Thus is found the stillness, which is so precious in souls who wish to please God" (Saint Teresa, *Works*, 1847, 1).

I personally think that it is better to walk with the charism, hand in hand with the Church, than alone with a charism that would no longer be a charism, since it is only such in the Church, with the Church and as Church. This is what a founder, in this case St. Francis of Assisi, calls *charitable obedience* and which Saint Teresa was able to know through reading the Third Spiritual Alphabet of Francis of Osuna. The *Poverello* writes: "And should the subject sometimes see that some things might be better and more useful for his soul than what the prelate may command him, let him willingly offer such things to God as a sacrifice; and instead earnestly try to fulfill the wishes of the prelate. For this is loving obedience because it pleases God and neighbor." (*Admonitions*, 3, 5). Sisters, we must pay close attention to the evil/sin of appropriating one's own will, for this would lead us, as in the case of Adam and Eve, to eat the fruit of the knowledge of evil (cf. *Gn* 2:16-17).

No one can claim the privilege of owning the charism. This is a gift of the Spirit to the Church; it belongs to her and she is the one who interprets it. It is up to those of us who profess a charism to live it in communion with the Church so that we can bear fruits of holiness in her, making it real at all times, always at the Church's side, in order to be prophets in today's world. Here too it is very appropriate to keep in mind the saying of Saint Teresa, shortly before her death: "It is time to walk" (Anne of St. Bartholomew. Last actions of Saint Teresa's life).

### **3.- Some specific questions**

Having established this principle, which seems obvious to me, considering the Church's recent magisterium on consecrated life, I would now like to respond to some specific questions presented in the letters.

#### **3.1 - A clarification: What is an Association?**

At the basis of some difficulties in accepting the current legislation of the Church on contemplative life is an erroneous understanding of the concept of the Association. It is often thought of as a totally different structure from that of the Federation, which is incorrect. In this regard, *Cor orans* states: "The provisions of this Instruction for the Federation of Monasteries are equally valid for the Association of Monasteries and for the Conference of Monasteries". The same line of the Instruction states that "their own Statutes approved by the Holy See" are to be kept in mind (*CO*, 13). The same Instruction, in n. 8, states: "By the name Association of monasteries is



meant a structure of communion between several autonomous monasteries of the same Institute [...], the associated monasteries collaborate among themselves according to the Statutes approved by the Holy See." (CO, 8).

From this text it is evident that the structure of the Association does not differ substantially from the structure of the Federation, except in those points that this Congregation can approve after a serene discernment, as long as the purpose of the Federation/Association is not undermined: communion and collaboration between the monasteries that form it and those indicated by *Cor orans* in n. 13 in which the Association is equated to a Federation.

Regarding the collaboration, its concrete modalities need to be defined in the Association's Statutes, which allow for diversity both with the Federation and among the Associations themselves. An example: by tradition, this Dicastery does not oblige an Association to have an Assistant, something that we consider obligatory for the Federations.

From some of the statements that appear in your letters, I see that there is no clarity about what an Association is, as I tried to clarify earlier, as a Federation and not as a monastic Congregation. In this context it is very difficult for me to understand some of the statements which state that belonging to a Federation/Association (with which the latter behaves as stated above) is incompatible with the character, spirit and traditions of your Order, among other things, they say, because it endangers autonomy. This is not so, dear sisters, because while the monastic Congregation is a structure of government and therefore the President of said Congregation is above the Abbesses or Prioresses the Federation/Association, is never a structure of government and therefore does not take away any autonomy from a monastery, it simply favors communion between the monasteries that form it, avoiding isolation and independence.

The above implies therefore that we cannot pretend that the Associations are a completely different structure from that of the Federations. This is the reason why we have not yet approved the Statutes of the Association that have been presented, which is strange for many monasteries, and for which our Congregation has proposed modifications to adapt them to the current legislation. I hope that all the monasteries have received our proposed modifications, since some monasteries of the 90s have written to the Congregation lamenting that sometimes the information they receive is somewhat biased or at least incomplete.

And please do not attribute to me a power that I do not have. I am not the one who approves or does not approve the Statutes: it is the Congregation that approves or does not approve them and there is not just one person involved in this work. In the Congregation there is a section "pro monialibus" in which three officials work and there is certainly the Prefect and myself. There is also a dicasteral commission that gives its opinion on the Constitutions or Statutes. And all of this is considered when it comes to approving or not approving a legislative text that is presented to us.

### 3.2 - Some fears

After attentively reading more than one letter, it is easy to see that some sisters have certain fears that could be summarized in these words: they want to turn us all into nuns of active life by preventing us from living the papal enclosure, the autonomy of the monasteries is endangered, the Ordinary no longer has authority, they will force us to have a common formation...

#### 3.2.1. The loss of enclosure

Dear Sisters, I know how much you love your "hidden life with Christ in God" (Col 3:3) which is manifested in the choice of the papal enclosure through which you wish to manifest your total belonging to Christ (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 36).

The Church deeply loves your way of life, as Pope Francis made clear in his Apostolic Constitution, and thanks you for your service in the Church and in the world (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 5-6). The Church, and with her this Dicastery, also respects your choice of the cloistered form you have chosen, the papal form (cf. *Constitutions* 180-188). No one can prevent you from living it with the radicalism required of you by the Church, whose discipline on enclosure, as can be seen from the current legislation, has changed practically nothing from the previous one (cf. *CO* 183-203), except that now it is the Major Superior, in your case the Prioress of the autonomous monastery, who can dispense from it (cf. *CO*, 175, 196, 197).

Allow me two questions in order to answer some of your questions: Why attribute to the prioress or to the conventual chapter a lower capacity regarding papal enclosure than that which the Ordinary can have? Why, if a sister can go out to learn a job (cf. *Constitutions* 226), can she not go out for formation, if we observe what the current documents say? And when I ask myself this question, on which I ask you to reflect, I am not thinking of attending courses in a university, but of the courses that a Federation/Association can (and I do not say must) organize, which surely will not be dissipating.

In all this, however, I repeat what the current legislation states: that enclosure is not an end in itself, but is at the service of contemplation. Also you cannot forget the example of the Holy Mother, who is rightly called "andariega", since she has been like that, going from one place to another to found monasteries.

#### 3.2.3. The Co-visitor

This is one of the difficulties most often presented in your letters. It is certainly a new development (cf. *CO* 111). The fact that this form of canonical visitation, which according to *Cor orans* is carried out by the Ordinary and by the President as Co-visitor, responds to two principal objectives: to make the canonical visitation more effective and to foster charismatic communion with the Order, inasmuch as the one who carries it out is the President of the Federation or of the Association of monasteries with the same charism.



Regarding the first objective, to make the canonical visitation more effective, I invite you to re-read the words of Saint Teresa on this subject in the *Treatise on the Visitation of Monasteries*. In this Treatise, *Teresa the Great* reveals herself as a very realistic person who is well aware of the virtues and vices of human nature and of communities, and therefore is very concerned about the way a community is governed (cf. *Treatise*... 9.19.22.29) and consequently about the functioning of a community.

The *Holy Mother* in the above mentioned *Treatise* is well aware that many Visits made by the Ordinaries (at that time it was impossible to think that a Canonical Visit was made by a woman), since they cannot live inside the monastery and cannot see for themselves the reality, do not affect the life of the monastery and therefore, after the Visit, "let everything remain as it was" (*Treatise*, 51-52), moreover, some Visits may do "more harm than good" (*Treatise*, 54).

You are women, and a man, however good and great his intention, can never enter fully into the life of a female community, as one of you could hardly enter into the life of a male community. These are different dynamics that must be considered. I tell you that I have been Apostolic Visitor of five monasteries. And this was an Apostolic Visitation and not a simple Canonical Visitation. That is why now, whenever we are obliged to make an Apostolic Visitation, we always appoint either a female Visitor or a male Visitor accompanied by a female Visitor. Surely, in the case of the President, as Co-visitor, being a sister of the Order itself, she will be able to better recognize the weaknesses of a community so as to be able to correct them, and the strength to go from good to better at all times. Do not be afraid, dear sisters, to open your heart to a sister! Do not be afraid that a sister will know your life!

On the other hand, the new legislation, without diminishing the importance of the Ordinary, wanted to give concrete responsibilities to the sisters. Among them is that of being a Co-visitor. The experience of this time since the publication of the *VDq* and *CO* shows us that this practice is greatly appreciated by the sisters, also by the O.C.D. sisters who at first received this change with some misgivings. Accept it, perhaps you will also have the same joyful experience.

One monastery says that such a visit by the President limits autonomy. Another states that the President's Visit "destabilizes the community at its roots". I simply have to say that this is not so. If it were so, the visit of the Ordinary would limit it, but it is not so. The Visit is always a help to grow in fidelity and to promote unity and, if necessary (only if necessary) also to correct. On the other hand, it also does not diminish autonomy. The Co-visitor has no authority, she is not a major superior, the Visitation is simply *ad inquirendum et referendum*. Moreover, she does not make it alone but with the Ordinary. Could it be that we are afraid that someone who knows our life well may be able to study and refer?

Some monasteries say they have "the right not to be disturbed by anyone in their papal enclosure. Can a sister who goes to visit them in the name of the Church disturb them in their papal enclosure? And when they are visited by others and others even outside the context of a canonical visitation or during a canonical visitation, do they not disturb them? St. Paul VI said that the walls of cloistered monasteries are made of glass and that they let you see outside what is



going on inside. To "disturb" the life of a monastery it is not necessary to enter the cloister. It is possible to disturb it from a parlor or through a telephone call.

There are some sisters who, when they speak of the Visit that the President must make as Co-visitor, say that this is contrary to what the documents ask of exclusively contemplative sisters, because it would be, they say, an apostolic work. Allow me to express my total disagreement with this interpretation. What then should we say when the Church affirms that the contemplative life is "rich in apostolic fruitfulness" (Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 5)? Everything in the consecrated life, including the contemplative life, is "apostolate". I do not see the canonical visitation as an "apostolic work" properly speaking, but as a service of fraternal help, as when a sister goes to help another community.

Some sisters say that being a Co-visitor prevents the President of the Association from experiencing the enclosure. Think again of the Holy Mother and what she did to strengthen the reform of Carmel in the various monasteries she constantly visited. More than one of you has told me that "she was the first federal president before the Federations existed", precisely referring to her being "andariega".

Furthermore, to avoid having to visit the monasteries and therefore leaving the monastery itself for too long, it is necessary to change the President in accordance with the times indicated in the Statutes, avoiding that some sisters remain too long in this service. On the other hand, in extreme cases, the President may delegate to a sister of the Council. And always, to avoid the President being away from her monastery for too long, and to make the running of the Association compatible with the life of a Carmelite, we wanted the Associations to be smaller in terms of the number of monasteries that form it. There are Federations/Associations that are too large.

#### 3.2.4. The loss of autonomy

This is a fear that is at the base of the resistance that some sisters have, to accept the new legislation on contemplative life. Numbers 13 and 8 of *Cor orans*, already cited above, speaking of the Associations, as well as in the case of the Federations, define these as structures to animate, not to govern, autonomous monasteries.

No one doubts the existence of autonomous monasteries: "The Church recognizes that each monastery *sui iuris* has juridical autonomy, of life and government, by means of which the monastic community can enjoy its own discipline and be capable of preserving its nature and protecting its identity" (CO, 16), provided that there is "a real autonomy of life, that is, the capacity to manage the life of the monastery in all its dimensions: vocational, formative, government, relational, liturgical, economic...". In other words, as long as it is a "living and vital" monastery (CO, 18). Autonomy is a grace that can be lost if the minimum requirements are lacking.

You do not have to fear, dear sisters, the loss of autonomy due to belonging to an Association or Federation. As I said before, the President is never a major superior (cf. CO, 110). She is always the prioress. On the other hand, we are well aware that a just autonomy (which has



nothing to do with independence) "favors stability of life and the internal unity of each community" (CO, 17). They fear losing their autonomy, rather, because they do not have the necessary requirements to maintain it, as the Apostolic Constitution already indicated (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, II, art. 8, 1-2). Be afraid also to close in on yourselves in such a way that the monastery becomes an island. This would indeed be serious, knowing, as the Holy Father Francis constantly repeats to us, that the future is not built in isolation (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 29; *Letter to all Consecrated Persons* II, 3). We need each other. Even an autonomous monastery, such as yours, needs other monasteries if it is not to drown in its own self-referentiality (cf. Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 29) and become a prey to people, lay and clerical (which happens more than rarely, as experience shows us), who have their own interests and not precisely the interests of the contemplative life, as the Church thinks and desires.

They should try, by all means, according to their possibilities and the spirit of the Holy Mother, to foster communion with the other Carmelite monasteries, including those that follow different Constitutions, approved by the Holy See. Let them help each other by prayer, by the example of their lives, and by the possible forms of collaboration: giving and receiving, as Saint Teresa wanted (cf. *Letter to the Monastery of Valladolid*, May 31, 1579). In this sense the President, and with her all the Prioresses, must promote unity in fidelity to the contemplative-ecclesial ideal desired by Saint Teresa and always, let me repeat, hand in hand with the Church.

### 3.2.5. The Vigilance of the Ordinary

Some sisters manifest their desire to remain under the Bishop's vigilance. We have no objection to this just option which *Vultum Dei quaerere* already considers. It is true that the Apostolic Constitution speaks of favoring "the juridical association of monasteries with the corresponding male order" (Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, II, art. 9, 4; cf. CO, 79), but it is not imposed, nor is the vigilance of the corresponding male Order imposed. Let no one confuse you on this point, telling you that we want you to be under the ecclesial vigilance of the male Carmelite Order. I must strongly reaffirm that this is not true.

*Cor orans*, after listing the Presidents of Monastic Congregations and Major Superiors among those who can exercise the ecclesial vigilance of a monastery, also names the diocesan bishops. These exercise vigilance "in the communities of the monasteries present in their particular Church and entrusted to their special care in accordance with the norm of law" (CO, 75, 3). In some countries, such as in Spain, most monasteries are entrusted to the vigilance of the diocesan Bishop.

It is therefore up to each monastery, after appropriate discernment, to decide who to ask for ecclesiastical vigilance: either the major superior or the diocesan bishop, knowing that even those monasteries which choose to have such vigilance entrusted to the major superior of the corresponding male order have obligations to the diocesan bishop, as established by universal law, and these have certain responsibilities over the monasteries present in their dioceses (cf. CO, 80-85).



What I do not think is accurate is to say that if the Holy Father approves that the ecclesial vigilance of a monastery can continue to be exercised by the diocesan bishop, one cannot draw the conclusion that "the Pope approves the Associations as they are structured". This statement *does not seem to me to be in conformity either with the text of the Apostolic Constitution Vultum Dei quaerere or with the spirit of the text*. Moreover, even if it is the diocesan bishop who exercises ecclesiastical vigilance, he must abide by the provisions of *Cor orans* on the vigilance of a monastery (cf. CO, 74-82).

### 3.2.6. The Religious Assistant

Some letters refer to the question of the Religious Assistant. We all know that *Sponsa Christi* had already foreseen the figure of the Assistant, although it was not obligatory (cf. *Sponsa Christi*, VII, 7). I know that in your tradition, normally, this figure does not exist. The present legislation does not impose it on either the Federations or the Associations, even though all the Federations have it, and we strongly recommend it to the Associations, whether the Assistant is from the male Order corresponding to the charism of the Federations, or is a diocesan priest. In this, there is a choice to be made.

In any case it is important to clarify that the Assistant is a representative of the Holy See for the Federation (cf. CO, 149), not for the monasteries themselves, and that he is not a major superior (cf. CO, 151), and therefore has no authority over the Federation. His mission is to accompany the President and Council "in preserving the genuine spirit of the Institute", as well as in particular matters such as formation, finances... (cf. CO, 151).

### 3.2.7. The International Commission

There are many monasteries that refer to the subject of the International Commission that is to be appointed. Some monasteries that have written to me, while confessing that they are willing to accept whatever the Church asks of them, openly confess that they do not understand the objective of appointing an International Commission for a possible revision of the 1990 Constitutions. One monastery points out that they cannot understand how a Commission can be set up merely because it has been requested by a sister who "belongs to a convent of the so-called third way". One monastery argues that the 1990 Constitutions were given to the monasteries of San José de Ávila and Cerro de los Ángeles and to those who would like to join them, and that in case of renewal it is up to these monasteries to do this work. Some monasteries speak of the Commission as if it had already been appointed. Two monasteries speak of it being against synodality and one adds: "I do not understand that when the Pope speaks of synodality a commission has been appointed without the involvement of the majority of the monasteries that live these Constitutions approved by St. John Paul II".

I understand, my dear sisters, your love for the Constitutions of 1990. Some consider them "the greatest gift we have received from God," for they claim to "identify us with the desire and will of our Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus. All of this is understandable to me, but as important as these *Constitutions* are, we cannot *canonize* a text that is born in a certain context, a context that



has changed considerably in recent years, both at the level of the Church and of society. And even though some may think that they are recent, let us remember that it has been 30 years since their approval, which in our social and ecclesial context happens to be many years.

All the historical Institutes have known different versions of their legislative texts, adapting them to the new circumstances (our God is the God of history) and to the Church's legislation. In this regard, it should be recalled that *Vultum Dei quaerere* and *Cor orans* are texts approved by the Church and that, as stated at the end of *Cor orans*, the Holy Father himself, "supreme legislator" in the Church, has repealed various canons of Canon Law in order to change some aspects of the legislation of contemplatives. These texts are endorsed with the Holy Father's approval and therefore cannot be left to personal interpretation and, for our part, also on the part of contemplatives, assuming them falls within the scope of the obedience we owe the Holy Father. Here too we must ask ourselves not only what did Saint Teresa say and do, but what would the Holy Mother say and do today.

On the other hand, if Canon Law can and must change, and of this we have proof - the first Code of Canon Law dates from 1917, its revision was initiated by Paul VI and concluded by John Paul II who promulgated it in 1983 and - at this moment I know that the revision of Book VI dealing with penal sanctions in the Church has been submitted for the Holy Father's approval, integrating all the latest *Motu proprio* of Pope Francis - even more so, the *Constitutions* of an Institute. The *Constitutions* are not, as one of the monasteries that wrote states, "a perfect and untouchable text". In any case, it will be the Church that will approve these changes, after proper discernment, as it was the Church that approved the text of the 1990 *Constitutions*. And please do not quote *VDq* and *CO* to justify that the *Constitutions* of 1990 should not be changed, simply because these documents insist on being faithful to the spirit of our founders: faithful yes, but with dynamic fidelity, as St. John Paul II rightly asks in *Vita consecrata* 37.

And do not be afraid that the Church, through the Congregation, will change some articles of the 1990 *Constitutions* to adapt them to the current legislative texts. It is our duty, in communion with the Holy Father in whose name we try to serve consecrated life, that we all respond faithfully to the charism we have embraced by profession, but always keeping in mind what I have already stated about the dynamism of the charism.

In the *Constitutions* of 1990 there are many good things, indeed, very good things, and so I cannot understand how any monastery can ask itself whether we are not trying to impose the same *Constitutions* on all Carmelites and place them under the authority of the Father General of the Discalced Carmelites. Let me tell you that this is thinking badly and lacking any foundation. There are *wounds* of the past to which some of your letters refer and of which I am well aware, but let me ask you: Are only the sisters who follow the 1991 Constitution and the Carmelite Fathers guilty of these *wounds*? Is only one part faithful to the spirit of the *Holy Mother*? Why did the division occur? How did it come about? I leave it to the three parties to answer these questions. The truth is that the fear I spoke of earlier does not exist. And please, dear sisters, do not use the argument that the *Constitutions* of 1990 have been approved before those of 1991, as



some monastery wrote to us, almost to justify that some are better than others. Chronologically speaking, that is correct, the 90s are prior to the 91s, and nobody doubts that. But, knowing something of the history of how your Constitutions came to be approved, it is better not to discuss that point. We could encounter some unpleasant surprises.

The Congregation recognizes that your *Constitutions* have been approved by the Church and that therefore, as long as they are not abrogated (and for the moment, as far as I know, no one is thinking about doing so) they are valid. But, except for all the good that the *Constitutions* of 1990 contain, we must also recognize that there are things in them that are not appropriate to maintain. A simple example: according to your Constitutions the Prioress can also be a bursar (cf. n. 160). This can lead to an accumulation of power which is not compatible with consecrated life or, for that matter, with contemplative life. This is just to give an example. On the other hand, as a monastery (and not Sr. Gabriela's) states, these Constitutions contain "serious gaps under the pretext of fidelity to Saint Teresa", pointing out, among other things, the lack of freedom of conscience. A monastery, always according to the Constitutions of 1990, affirms that "the updating of the *Constitutions* of 1990, as requested by the Congregation, is a good occasion to correct these shortcomings".

On the other hand, the Commission has not been appointed yet and when it is, it will be a commission whose proposals for change will be submitted to the monasteries that are part of the 1990 group. We are aware of the importance of the monasteries of San José (Ávila) and Cerro de los Ángeles and therefore we have invited both monasteries to participate in this Commission. So far, we have not received any response to our invitation.

Let it be said, however, that the *Constitutions* are not only for these two monasteries, but for all who profess them. Perhaps they can be attributed a primacy in time, but now the Constitutions of 1990 are the spiritual patrimony of all the sisters who profess them. On the other hand, I find it difficult to accept that, as one monastery says, this commission "destroys rather than builds". How is it possible to affirm this if it has not yet been constituted and therefore has not yet begun its work? Reflect dear sisters, where do these statements and prejudices come from? And please allow me to tell you: Do not allow yourselves to be manipulated.

A final reference concerns the Commission that is to be appointed and to which the Holy Father has given his approval. Forgive my brotherly frankness: I do not find acceptable the strong statement of a community about the Commission, saying that it is "unfeasible and unacceptable", knowing that the day it is formed it will be approved by the Church, or that it could even be explicitly approved by the Holy Father. Reading such an affirmation, I cannot help but be grateful to other monasteries who, even though they think it is not necessary, accept it as coming from the Church.

#### 4. To conclude

Dear Discalced Carmelite Sisters who follow the Constitutions of 1990, I have spoken to you as a brother who is currently being asked by the Holy Father to serve consecrated life in a



Congregation which, according to the Apostolic Constitution, has as its objectives to *animate/promote* and *regulate* consecrated life. In all that has been said in this letter and in other statements I am not moved by any other interest than to fulfill that mission.

As a brother, I beg you: Do not be afraid to act on the current norms that the Church has given you. Do not be afraid to assume some changes that they propose. Only those who are not sure of their own identity are afraid to change. Walk hand in hand with the Church, always keep alive the *sentire cum Ecclesia*, knowing that this is manifested also in "diligent obedience to the Pastors, especially to the Roman Pontiff" (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 46). It is in this context that the profession of faith of Saint Teresa is well understood: "I am a daughter of the Church" (*Sayings*, 217).

The Church and this Congregation strongly desire to accompany you on this journey, knowing the importance of your life. What would become of the Church and the world without the contemplatives! "How much has the apostolate been enriched by the prayers and sacrifices radiating from monasteries! And how great is the joy and prophecy proclaimed to the world by the silence of the cloister! (Francis, *Vultum Dei quaerere*, 5).

The Church and the Congregation reach out to you for a fruitful dialogue. I would like this letter to help you to do that. Please do not see it as an imposition from above, but as the fruit of an ecclesial discernment made before the Lord and always moved by the great love that our Congregation and I personally feel for your lives.

I greet you and ask for your prayers for the Church, for the Holy Father, for all who work in this Congregation and for me in particular, so that in everything we may act according to the will of the Lord.

I bless you in the Lord, and please "do not cease to be joyful" (Saint Teresa, Letter 284, 4).

Vatican City, November 1, Solemnity of All Saints, 2020

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Archbishop Secretary of CICLSAL

