

THE CONSTITUTION *VULTUM DEI QUAERERE*
IN THE LIGHT OF THE TERESIAN CHARISM
Meeting with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the USA
St. Louis (MO), 25 - 30 April 2017

I.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE AND ENCLOSURE

Dearest Sisters and Brothers in the Lord Jesus and in Carmel,

As I am honoured to begin this Course on Formation, I would like, first of all, to say thank you, and I include Frs. Daniel and Raphael in this, for having invited us to share with you our reflections and experiences and to compare them with your own. The exceptional number of participants makes this meeting all the more significant and valuable. I honestly believe that I have never met so many sisters all together. The fact that you have wanted to be here in such numbers is an indication both of your affection for, and deference to, the Central Administration of our Order, as well as of your lively interest in the themes we are about to discuss. My joy at seeing this is tempered by a fear of not quite fulfilling your expectations which will be understandably so high. May the Spirit of the Risen Lord “straighten that which is crooked” and enlighten what is obscure in what I am about to share with you.

By way of giving a general title to this course, I would see it as an attempt to study the new Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (VDQ) in the light of our Carmelite-Teresian charism. It is by no means an easy task. First of all we have the variety and complexity of the subject matter of the Constitution. Then there is the additional difficulty that we still do not have an explanatory document defining and clarifying some of the declarations in it. For the moment we have often to rely on various hypotheses and interpretations which may be confirmed or denied in the practical Instruction that is now being prepared by the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life.

We do not intend to directly deal with all the twelve headings that appear in the Constitution. As you are aware, the three of us have been assigned two themes each. Fr. Daniel will speak about Formation and Prayer (VDQ 13-18). Fr. Raphael will deal with the questions of the autonomy of monasteries, their inter-communion and, finally, Federations (VDQ 28-30). I myself will address the issue of enclosure or, better, the relationship between contemplative life and enclosure, as well

as the centrality of the Word of God (VDQ 31; 19-21). We will, obviously, touch on other themes indirectly. In my own case, for example, there will be inevitable references to questions such as silence (VDQ 33) and modern means of communication (VDQ 34).

1. *Women's contemplative life*

The first thing that we can note is that the subject matter of the Constitution is “women's contemplative life”. For some this might seem quite obvious, but, in reality, this is not the case. The pontifical document maintains continuity with former and, indeed, the very recent tradition of the Church, in reserving to female contemplative life a place and consideration, that differs, at least in some respects, from male contemplative life. However, especially in the monastic world, there are those who hold that distinctions between nuns and monks is past history and is the result of a view of women that no longer corresponds with today's culture and sensitivities. In this view, consideration of contemplative religious life should be re-formulated on the basis of its intrinsic characteristics which are common to both nuns and monks.

VDQ does not comment on the validity or otherwise of the distinction between male and female contemplative life but appears to accept automatically the traditional stance. Dating from the Instruction *Venite Seorsum* of 1969 the specific nature of female contemplative life is seen in relation to the following characteristics of the female “nature” itself:

- the spousality of a woman, as an expression of the mystery of the Church, the Spouse of Christ¹;
- female receptivity, signifying that a woman would be usually more open to receiving the Word than to proclaiming it in a missionary role²;
- her acute sensitivity to the needs of her neighbour³;
- finally, the Virgin Mary is presented as «a splendid model of the contemplative life», insofar as it was she who received the Word of God and conceived it «first in her mind before in her womb».

Successive documents, particularly *Vita Consecrata* (n. 59) and *Verbi Sponsa* (n. 4) simply repeat the same arguments. Similarly, the present Apostolic Constitution recognizes in female contemplative life «a sign and prophecy of the Church, virgin, spouse and mother» (n. 3). Reference to spousality is also repeated in the paragraph on enclosure, «which is the inner sanctum

¹ «These women, in fact, by their very nature, portray in a more meaningful way the mystery of the Church, the “spotless womb of the spotless Lamb”». *Venite Seorsum*

² «It is woman's role to receive the word rather than to carry it to the far ends of the earth, even though she can be summoned successfully to the latter vocation. It is her place to become thoroughly and intimately acquainted with the word and to render it fruitful, in a very clear, vivid and feminine way»

³ «For, in fact, once she has attained full maturity, woman intuits more keenly the needs of others and the assistance which they hope for».

of the Church as spouse: “a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things” (VC 59) ». And obviously a reference to the Virgin Mary as a model of contemplation is also made again (n. 10).

The argument might stop here with the conclusion that VDQ does not present any change from preceding Magisterium on this point. But while this may be true on a theoretical and purely linguistic level, other factors would seem rather to point towards a transcendence of the distinction between male and female contemplative life. The first indicator of this is the decision not to confine the theme of female contemplative life merely to enclosure (and as a sub-ordinate to federations of monasteries), as was customary in the past. In the context of VDQ, enclosure and federations are only two of the twelve elements that are deemed essential for the life of contemplative nuns. It can be said that what is stated about the other ten themes (formation, silence, work, asceticism etc.) can apply equally to both women and men contemplatives (and, obviously, where the men are considered as monks and not as ordained ministers). In actual fact, I find it is virtually impossible to discover any affirmation in VDQ concerning the life of nuns which could not be re-formulated for men, as having the same value and significance for the lives of monks.

I must point out that the transcendence of this distinction I am talking about would not refer to the different ways of thinking, feeling and acting that occur automatically as a result of the distinct natures and temperaments or sensitivities of males and females. These are precious gifts to be respected and safeguarded zealously. We are speaking rather of an “equality” on a juridical level, following the principle established in the elaboration of the new right of religious, to «avoid, at a normative level, any discrimination whatsoever between male and female institutions»⁴. Such an equality between monks and nuns certainly has not existed before this. I can think, in particular, of the limited faculties granted to a Prioress. Although she is the equivalent of a Major Superior, directly dependent on the Holy See⁵, she cannot give permission, for example, to any of the nuns to be absent for more than one week, nor can she dispense from temporary vows. So, with regard to this point, I wonder if the next Instruction will include new regulations resulting in a closer correspondence between the definition of a monastery as being *sui iuris* and the Prioress as a Major Superior and the actual realistic powers granted to the Prioress and to the community chapter.

Another indication or sign from the Apostolic Constitution is its frequent reference to the responsibility of the nuns. In many cases – and in a particularly significant way with regard to enclosure – the Constitution invites monastic communities to assume an active role, to engage in careful discernment and, as a result, to make suitable decisions regarding their own actual

⁴ Cf. *Principia quae iuris Religiosorum recognitionem dirigant*, in “Communicationes”, 2 (1970), p. 176: «Praeter principia directiva supra exposita, aliud adiungi potest quod constanter in mente Consultorum fuit: **illud nempe vitandi quamlibet discriminationem in statuendis normis inter instituta perfectionis virorum et mulierum**».

⁵ Cf. CIC 613 par. 2.

situation⁶. The idea that «each monastery» must «examine, evaluate, decide» re-occurs constantly⁷. In a certain sense, this is one of the most important innovations of the Constitution: inviting the nuns themselves to make decisions regarding the most salient aspects of their life. This obviously presupposes sound and thorough initial and on-going formation, as well as constant contact with the life of the Church, with the charismatic family which it is part of, and with other monasteries, «to avoid “the disease of self-absorption” » (VDQ 29).

It would be anachronistic to ask ourselves what St. Teresa might say about this “equality” between nuns and monks. There is no doubt, however, that Teresa, in a prophetic manner considering the times she lived in, energetically defended the autonomy of the nuns against excessive interference from male religious and various prelates. It can be very enlightening to read her letters to Fr. Gratian especially. On quite a few occasions, Teresa repeats that she has every right to express her opinions regarding the nuns: «In what regards nuns I can have a say, for I have seen many things»⁸; «In matters concerning the nuns you can trust me, for from what is happening here I can see what is going on there»⁹. She is particularly opposed to the burdensome and useless impositions of Visitators who think «they haven't made a visitation unless they have set down some decrees»¹⁰. Teresa makes one observation precisely about one such Visitor's decision and it captures exactly what she thought of clerical power that penalizes non-priests: «If the friars were not to have recreation on the days in which communion is received, then those who say Mass daily would never have recreation. And if priests don't observe such a rule, why should the other poor friars have to?»¹¹.

In general, while Teresa is very demanding on obedience and fidelity to the Constitutions, she holds that, unless there is a necessity, the liberty of the nuns should not be curtailed, especially in matters concerning their spiritual life. Again she writes to Gratian with motherly wisdom: «I understand the great importance this has for these nuns and their consolation, and how disconsolate they become in other monasteries when held spiritually bound. Souls that are restrained cannot serve God well, and the devil uses this restraint to tempt them. But when they have some freedom, they often pay no attention to it and make no use of it»¹². That is a golden rule that she has written

⁶ Cf. VDQ 12: «As a means of assisting contemplative women to attain the goal of their specific vocation as described above, **I would invite reflection and discernment** on twelve aspects of consecrated life in general and the monastic tradition in particular».

⁷ VDQ art. 4: «**Each monastery is to review** its daily horarium to see if it is centred on the Lord»; art. 5: «Given the importance of *lectio divina*, **each monastery is to establish** fitting times and means for respecting this requirement of reading and listening, *ruminatio*, prayer, contemplation and sharing of the sacred Scriptures», etc.

⁸ Letter 374 to Fr. Gracián, February 1581, n. 4: »En esto de monjas puedo tener voto, que he visto muchas cosas».

⁹ Letter 247 to Fr. Gracián, May 1578, n. 10: «En cosa que toque a estas monjas puéderme dar vuestra paternidad crédito, que veo lo que acá pasa».

¹⁰ Letter 150 to Fr. Gracián, 19th November 1576, n. 1: «Extraña cosa es que no piensan es visitar si no hacen actas».

¹¹ *Ibidem*, n. 1: «Si no han de tener recreación los días que comulgan, y dicen cada día misa, luego no tendrán recreación nunca. Y si los sacerdotes no guardan eso, ¿para qué lo han de guardar los otros pobres?».

¹² Letter 376 to Fr. Gracián, 21st February 1581, n. 3: «Según lo mucho que entiendo a estas almas y a su consuelo, y

in those lines: «Un alma apretada no puede servir bien a Dios». It is not more or less rigour or austerity that is important, but the freedom with which one offers oneself to God. When we enjoy this freedom, there is less risk of temptation and, usually, such freedom is not abused.

2. *Contemplative and entirely contemplative life*

On quite a number of occasions, the Apostolic Constitution makes the distinction between “contemplative life” and “entirely contemplative life”¹³. This terminology originated in Vatican II's Conciliar Decree *Perfectae caritatis* where no. 7 refers to «communities which are entirely dedicated to contemplation» and no. 16 distinguishes between «nuns engaged exclusively in the contemplative life» and «other nuns applied by rule to apostolic work outside the convent». It would be more appropriate that these latter nuns should have a type of cloister regulated by their own Constitutions rather than having papal cloister. It was on the basis of this Council text, which later became executive in the applicative norms of *Ecclesiae Sanctae*¹⁴, that the distinction between major and minor papal enclosure, ratified by *Sponsa Christi*¹⁵, was abandoned. As well as papal enclosure, a new concept, so-called constitutional enclosure, was introduced to describe enclosures that were compatible with external apostolate. In Canon 667, par. 3, the Code of Canon Law assumed and codified the distinction between «monasteries of nuns which are ordered entirely to contemplative life» and «other monasteries of nuns».

It might be said, accordingly, that this present Apostolic Constitution does not offer any innovation but simply re-confirms traditional categories. But again in this case, a more attentive reading gives rise to some questions. Is it really true that VDQ leaves untouched the canonical distinction between “monasteries of entirely contemplative life” and “other monasteries” with a different, or less exclusive, contemplative orientation? According to the Code of Canon Law (can. 667 par. 3), the difference between the two categories of monastery depends on the type of enclosure adopted: the monasteries of entirely contemplative life are those with papal enclosure, while other monasteries observe the type of enclosure defined by their own Constitutions¹⁶. Nowhere in VDQ, however, can we find this connection between the types of contemplative life and the modality of enclosure adopted. In principle, then, we cannot exclude that from now on it would be possible to speak of monasteries of entirely contemplative life even in the event that they

los grandes desconsuelos que hay en otros monasterios por tenerlas tan atadas en lo espiritual; y un alma apretada no puede servir bien a Dios, y el demonio las tienta por ahí, y cuando tienen libertad muchas veces ni se les da nada ni lo quieren».

¹³ Cf. VDQ nn. 5, 8, 33; art. 2 par. 1.

¹⁴ ES, II, no. 32.

¹⁵ *Sponsa Christi*, art. IV.

¹⁶ «Monasteries of nuns which are ordered entirely to contemplative life must observe *papal cloister*, that is, cloister according to the norms given by the Apostolic See. Other monasteries of nuns are to observe a *cloister adapted to their proper character and defined in the constitutions*».

do not observe the rules of papal enclosure, but have some form of Constitutional enclosure. If such were the case, the Constitution would waive par. 3 of Canon 667. It would seem extraordinary, however, that a derogation of such magnitude would not be formulated explicitly in the regulations of the Constitution.

On the other hand, the possibility of different types of enclosure in the same Order is an innovation that is explicitly introduced by the new Constitution. Until now, the choice of a particular kind of enclosure characterized the entire Order as “entirely contemplative” or simply “contemplative”. Instead, Vdq makes provision for the possibility of different ways of observing enclosure within the same Order. Such a plurality – in the words of Vdq – «should be seen as an enrichment and not as an obstacle to communion» (no. 31). As a result, we can deduce that the plurality of types of enclosure may be considered as a legitimate plurality of interpretations and incarnations of the same charism and should not cause internal divisions or rifts in the same religious family: «it is a matter of reconciling different approaches to a higher unity» (no. 31). Article 10 of the Constitution goes so far as to allow each individual monastery the possibility of requesting permission from the Holy See to adopt its own type of enclosure, even though this may differ from the type generally in use by the Order it pertains to¹⁷. As I see it, this sub-division of types of enclosure could be reduced in the event that the Constitutions of Carmelite nuns might envisage, apart from papal enclosure, another kind of enclosure, somewhat different yes, but still faithful to the charismatic Teresian identity. In such an hypothesis, we would have to consider this innovation as “constitutional enclosure” insofar as it would be in conformity with the norms established by the Constitutions but, in my opinion, this would not necessarily signify a switch-over to a way of life that is not entirely contemplative. This is a matter, however, that requires further research and clarification.

3. *Enclosure and contemplative life*

We have inherited a long tradition that has regarded enclosure as the determining and discriminating element of female contemplative life, even up to the point of identifying one with the other¹⁸. We have taken part in burning debates on the issue, leaving behind them a trail of polemics,

¹⁷ «<Each monastery, following serious discernment and respecting its proper tradition and the demands of its constitutions, is to ask the Holy See what form of cloister it wishes to embrace, whenever a different form of cloister from the present one is called for».

¹⁸ Cf. for example what a cloistered nun writes in *I diritti di Dio. Vita contemplativa e clausura*, “Rivista di vita spirituale” 23 (1969), p. 188: «Enclosure is not so much a part of the life of contemplation, and much less – as it may seem from a superficial perspective – one of its safeguards, it does but one thing only. It is an integral, essential expression of contemplative life: this means (...) that to touch enclosure means undermining contemplative life itself; and it is for this reason that enclosure is to be observed *sine glossa*». Positions like this, moreover, are not far from what John Paul II himself affirmed in his *Discourse to the Plenary meeting of CICLSAL* of 7 March 1980: «The abandonment of enclosure would signify the diminution of that which is more specific in one of the forms of religious life through which the Church manifests to the world the pre-eminence of contemplation over action, of that which is eternal over that which is temporal».

reciprocal judgements and condemnations without a court of appeal. Being aware of all this, I do not wish to trivialise it, nor to reduce it to a marginal and negligible question. We all understand its importance, however, and why monastic souls become so impassioned about it that they often prefer not to discuss it (somewhat like it was considered a rule of good manners among gentlemen not to speak about politics, religion or football!). But we must face up to the question and attempt to do so with sensitivity and objectivity, trying to understand before making judgements. This is particularly necessary at this moment as the traditional juridical-canonical position is being modified.

In effect, the first question we must put to ourselves regards the whole idea of enclosure itself: what are its contents? What elements should be held as essential and what can be considered marginal? What aspects should be common to all Teresian-Carmelite communities as being part and parcel of their charismatic identity and what other aspects can be interpreted more freely and could be subject to change? When confronted with the pluralism that obviously exists in the manner of living enclosure among Discalced Carmelite nuns, I have already stated on other occasions (using an expression of a Cistercian General Chapter), «agreed diversity is more valuable than discordant and enforced uniformity»¹⁹. I think that fundamental agreement, while respecting legitimate diversity, is also the basic intention of VDQ.

The Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*, developing Canon 674²⁰, defines the entirely contemplative life – to date corresponding to papal enclosure – as being qualified by three characteristics: total dedication to the search for union with God; exclusion of any kind of external apostolate and physical presence at events or ministry of the ecclesial community; separation from the world that is practical and effective and not merely symbolic²¹. I feel that that presentation provides a good starting point for answering the questions I have just posed. Effectively, the first two characteristics, the first positive, the second negative, are like the two sides of the same coin. Contemplative life is defined by its absolute gratuitousness and “inutility”: it exists only as a search in faith and without this it would be meaningless. Should we remove or even minimize the intrinsic scandal of the entirely contemplative life, we would change its identity and squander all its power. The scandal of

¹⁹ *La vita cistercense attuale*, n. 13.

²⁰ «Institutes which are entirely ordered to contemplation always hold a distinguished place in the mystical Body of Christ: for they offer an extraordinary sacrifice of praise to God, illumine the people of God with the richest fruits of holiness, move it by their example, and extend it with hidden apostolic fruitfulness. For this reason, members of these institutes cannot be summoned to furnish assistance in the various pastoral ministries however much the need of the active apostolate urges it».

²¹ *Verbi Sponsa*, n. 11: «An Institute is considered to be of wholly contemplative life if: a) its members direct all their activity, interior and exterior, to the fervent and constant quest for union with God; b) it excludes external works directed, even in a limited way, to the apostolate, and physical participation in events and ministries of the ecclesial community; such participation therefore should not be requested of nuns, since it would become a counter witness to their true participation in the life of the Church and to their authentic mission; c) it involves a separation from the world that is practical and effective, and not merely symbolic. Every adaptation of the forms of separation from the outside world must be carried out in such a way “that physical separation is preserved”, and must be submitted to the approval of the Holy See».

the contemplative life is the scandal of a “waste”²², a waste that confirms the primacy of God and of His grace with relation to human works.

As I see it, the heart of contemplative life is to allow space for the living God, for His presence and for His activity in the world. Judging by any human experience, this obviously presupposes a separation from the world and not only a radical simplifying of our way of living and emptying of oneself, but a cosmic change in one's whole way of being («ser tales» “to be the kind of persons”, as St. Teresa writes²³). We know that this involves a long, complex and trying process, during which one has to confront a whole series of temptations with both internal and external obstacles. Precisely here lies the dynamic of the contemplative life, which is in no way either lazy or inactive. Contemplation is sometimes confused with inactivity, while, in reality, it is an extreme kind of activity, although – or precisely because – it is focused on the internal rather than the external. There is also the danger that we substitute interior activity, which is the core of contemplative life, with a host of domestic chores. These latter, while being necessary, should not absorb all one's mental and spiritual energy. The life of a contemplative nun is the life of a searcher, of an explorer in the path of the Spirit, not that of a pious housewife, of a Martha so preoccupied with a welcome for her guest that she forgets the guest himself and her relationship with him.

Contemplative life has obvious need of an ambient, of a contemplative space/time that has numerous components. If we call this entire complexity “enclosure or cloister”, it means we are describing the whole with the name of a single part (synecdoche in rethorical language). That is true if we see enclosure in its very strictest sense as a set of norms that separate the nuns materially from the outside world and confine them in a determined, physical space. Such norms are important and are part of the discipline that goes with contemplative life but they must be integrated into a wider and richer prospective, taking into account all the ramifications of the human and spiritual journey of the individual and of the contemplative community.

Very appropriately, VDQ treats of contemplative life under twelve different headings, only one of which is enclosure strictly speaking. The numbers that follow the heading on enclosure, with regard especially to silence, means of communication and asceticism, are all, however, very closely associated with enclosure.

The Constitution recommends that particular attention be paid to silence. Silence establishes a way of life that helps us in being receptive and ready to listen to others: «Silence entails self-emptying in order to grow in receptivity» (no. 33). It does not mean merely being restrained in speech (staying shut-up!), but rather a way of being less self-centred (a loving silence). Insofar as it eliminates external sound and, more importantly, internal interference, silence leads to a fuller

²² Cf. *Mt* 26, 8-9: «When the disciples saw this, they were indignant and said, “Why this **waste**? It could have been sold for much, and the money given to the poor».

²³ C 3,2; 4,1.

experience of the realities that surround us and of our own selves. I feel that such silence, which is under so much threat these days, must be restored to our contemplative religious lives. I agree, whole-heartedly with what a Carmelite nun, Christina Kaufmann, wrote a few years ago:

The intensity of communication increases proportionately with the intensity of the solitude experienced in contemplation. I think there is a style of living together (life in common) that does not favour communication, nor gain nourishment from silence or solitude, nor even encourage these. It is just a way of living together that any group of women, with goals quite different to ours, might experience. On this point I feel that the Rule and all the teaching of our Saints are in agreement and that they invite us to deepen the eremitical aspect of our common life, «not only nuns, but hermits» (C 13,6)²⁴.

Teresian enclosure, effectively, «the extremely secluded life»²⁵, which characterized her foundations, has an irrefutably eremitical orientation. Teresa bears within herself an ideal image, exemplified by the original eremitical community of Mount Carmel: «Let us remember our holy fathers of the past, those hermits whose lives we aim to imitate»²⁶. As such, the contemplative community of her daughters is a community in which «the main disposition required for always living in this calm is the desire to rejoice solely in Christ, one's Spouse. This is what they must always have as their aim: to be alone with Him alone»²⁷.

I find a synthetic statement of Fr. Tomás Álvarez about the Teresian understanding of enclosure very balanced and profound: «Enclosure [for Teresa] expresses the community's desire for solitude, just as the cell expresses it on an individual, personal level»²⁸. St. Teresa constantly recalls the Rule and the eremitical roots of Carmel, believing that «the style of life we aim to follow is not just that of nuns but of hermits, and thus you detach yourselves from every creature»²⁹. The fundamental principle of the Rule of St. Albert: «Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's Law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers» (R 8), is extended to the whole community, called to remain in its own house to maintain a constant contemplative disposition and to safeguard fraternal (sisterly) communion. Teresian enclosure is basically an expression of “community eremitism”. Saying this, I do not exclude other ascetical and penitential motivations for the choice of a stricter enclosure³⁰, but these would not appear to be the fundamental or predominant reasons from a charismatic point of view. In short, this would be the specific of a Teresian community: to combine an authentic experience of common life with a deep and intense grounding in eremitical solitude.

²⁴ C. KAUFMANN, *La fascinación de una presencia*, Madrid 2007, pp. 216-217.

²⁵ C 2, 9: «el mucho encerramiento».

²⁶ C 11, 4: «Acordémonos de nuestros Padres santos pasados ermitaños, cuya vida pretendemos imitar».

²⁷ V 36, 29: «[...] el gran aparejo que hay para vivir siempre en él las que a solas quisieren gozar de su esposo Cristo; que esto es siempre lo que han de pretender, y solas con El solo».

²⁸ Cf. T. ALVAREZ, “Clausura” in *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2006², p.143.

²⁹ C 13,6: «Porque el estilo que pretendemos llevar es no sólo de ser monjas, sino ermitañas, y así se desasen de todo lo criado».

³⁰ I refer especially to what Teresa says in C 1,2-5, where she speaks of the generous offering of oneself for souls that are being lost.

How can such an eremitical orientation be compatible with the use of modern means of communication that are becoming more and more a factor in our lives? This is certainly one of the challenges that the times we live in present to contemplative life. VDQ, no. 34, recommends: «a prudent discernment aimed at ensuring that they remain truly at the service of formation to contemplative life and necessary communication, and do not become occasions for wasting time or escaping from the demands of fraternal life in community». There are no concrete prescriptions on the use of means of communication in the regulating sectors of the Constitution. Perhaps these have been postponed until the practical, normative Instruction. In any case, the question needs serious consideration since it concerns one of the crucial realities of today's world. These means of communication are no longer merely instruments for the user's benefit. It would be absolutely minimizing to define internet as an instrument. In reality it is an open doorway to today's world, presented in a virtual way with its whole wealth of stimuli, plus its complexity and ambiguity. I don't think we can pretend that this digital revolution of our culture has not taken place, especially given that the new generations that present themselves to our communities will be already “practiced digital users”. We must simply accept the challenge of digital communication and instruct ourselves in how best to live a contemplative life in this digital age. We need time to familiarize ourselves with this new reality, to come to a better understanding of it and to test and discern different experiences: a journey to be taken together³¹.

Conclusion

The theme I have attempted to present is undoubtedly vast since it deals with the conditions for living a fully contemplative life in the Church and world of today. I am firmly convinced that we cannot reduce the whole question to canonical norms on enclosure, even though this is obviously vitally connected with the demands of the contemplative life. The Apostolic Constitution, unlike earlier documents of the Holy See on the same question, leaves the argument on enclosure open and allows for possible internal pluralism in the same religious family regarding the kind of enclosure to be adopted. In this sense, some absolute set points of the past are no longer automatically so and what seemed obvious before is not quite so obvious now.

As I conclude my reflections, I would like to ask you a few questions that the new Constitution pose for me and to hear your answers:

1. May we still consider as legitimate a normative diversity between female and male contemplative life? Or, put in another way, do differing female and male sensitivities also justify a divergence in normative prescriptions?

³¹ Cf. *La vie spirituelle à l'heure du portable*, “Carmel”, Septembre 2010 (see especially the account of the experience of Frère David, abbot of the abbey of En Calcat, pp. 70-72).

2. The distinction on “entirely” contemplative life and contemplative life was based traditionally on the different kind of enclosure adopted. Do you think that this distinguishing criterion is still valid in the light of the new Apostolic Constitution? And, in your opinion, what would be the absolute, irrevocable (*sine qua non*) elements of an entirely contemplative life?
3. Silence and the use of means of communication are challenges for contemplative life today. In your experience, what risks and what opportunities do they pose for you?

II.

CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE AND THE WORD OF GOD

After having spoken of contemplative life as a place separated from the world, silent, emptied of all that is superfluous and distracting from the search for God, we should now turn to what fills this contemplative space with its presence and its dynamism of life: dialogue with God in personal and liturgical prayer, fraternal life in community, the sufferings and joys of humanity which surround it. We are reminded of all these realities in *Vultum Dei quaerere* which, however, assigns a particularly important place to the Word of God. Three numbers of the Constitution (19-21) and article 5 in the Conclusion and Regulations are dedicated to the centrality of the Word of God. Citing *Vita consecrata* 94, *Vultum Dei Quaerere* reiterates that the Word of God is «the first source of all spirituality». Contemplative life can and must draw from this source in order to grow in all its dimensions: to nourish personal prayer; to develop fraternal communion, in particular by the sharing of *lectio*; to acquire a sound judgment and supernatural discernment; to achieve an authentic ecclesial mission, through the sharing of the transforming experience of God's Word with all the members of God's people: priests, deacons, religious and the laity.

In stating all this, *Verbum Dei quaerere* stands in continuity with the previous magisterium of the Church starting with the Conciliar Constitution *Dei Verbum*, and in a particular manner with the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*. In this Pope Benedict XVI states that consecrated life itself «is born from hearing the word of God and embracing the Gospel as its rule of life», and that the Spirit who is at the origin of the Scriptures «is the same Spirit who illumines the word of God with new light for the founders and foundresses. Every charism and every rule springs from it and seeks to be an expression of it» (VD 83). Therefore, whenever religious stay listening to the Word of God, their very charismatic identity emerges strengthened and renewed. In the same number of *Verbum Domini* a mission is also entrusted to the old and new communities of consecrated life, who «are called to be genuine schools of the spiritual life, where the Scriptures can be read according to the Holy Spirit in the Church, for the benefit of the entire People of God».

The words of Pope Benedict and Pope Francis strongly challenge us: what relationship do we, as religious and contemplatives, have with God's Word? What place does it have in our personal and community life? Is it really the Word of God which gives form and life to our prayer, to our being fraternally together, to our permanent formation and to our ecclesial mission?

In this regard we ought to acknowledge that in the past, in Carmel as in the whole Catholic Church, sufficient importance was not given to God's Word, the essential need was not recognized of an attentive and loving listening to it in order to live the Christian life and, even more so, the

consecrated life. In the Teresian Carmel, in particular, the tendency to insist on the mystical aspect of the experience of God often led to reducing and marginalizing the role of Scripture in the spiritual life, almost as if God could be encountered more directly by leaving out meditation on his Word. Despite the fact that the Carmelite Rule itself gives central position to the precept of: «pondering the Lord's law day and night» (R 8), it does not place particular importance on reading God's Word. In 1946, before the Council, Fr Anastasio Ballestrero saw in the «material adherence to Holy Scripture» – as he put it – just «one element more, so that [Carmelite meditation] might be intimately permeated with faith and suavity, and more intimately revealing of God»¹. On the contrary, in the 1991 Constitutions of the nuns, in n° 81 you read: «Since prayer is a friendly conversation with God [...] progress in the life of prayer is not possible without sufficient knowledge of God's word. For that reason the Rule lays down that the nuns must continuously keep the word of the Lord in their minds and hearts».

God's Word is the origin of our being Christians, religious and Carmelites. For that reason, it ought to be at the same time the source of our faithfulness and our renewal. By believing in this we become born as Carmelites and we ought to live and grow by believing in it. Carmelites in today's world are men and women who today experience the vitality of God's Word and from it draw light and discernment. It is therefore the Word of God which creates a “today” for Carmelites and there is just one authentic way becoming renewed: learn to listen to God who speaks to us.

1. God speaks to us

We know that the Word of God is contained in Scripture (cf. DV 24), which does not mean that Scripture and the Word of God are simply the same thing. God talks to me, he speaks to me personally, but this word is contained in the Bible, that is, in a written passage, containing the most diverse of things, dating back to two or three thousand years ago. Therefore, what relationship can there be between my life and a passage so far away, distant, different to me in mentality, culture, etc.? The God present in the most intimate of my vicissitudes, the most personal, most secret, how can he speak to me so indirectly? How is it possible to gather a reference to me through so many mediations? How can Scripture be transformed into a Word of God? For us the expression Word of God has become something habitual, a ritual formula. But by understanding in depth what is meant by Word of God is, in my opinion, a height of maturity of the believer, which requires a long journey of faith and of prayer.

Speaking to someone else is the normal human way of forming relationships. The word “binds” together. In exchanging words there is an interlacing of lives, albeit minimal or even negative (deviant

1. P. ANASTASIO DEL SS. ROSARIO, *Lo spirito della Regola carmelitana*, in «Vita carmelitana» n° 8 (November 1946), p. 56.

forms of speech exist: the offence, lie, gossip). In the act of speaking with someone there is an implicit decision to share with the person a portion of one's own life even if it be for only one second, as when we greet one another with a simple hello or hi. This appears clearly in the full realization of the word, which is the word of love and friendship, where sharing extends to the whole of life. It seems to me that the maximum degree of exchange, of communion brought about by the word happens not so much in speaking of myself to the other, but in allowing the other to speak of myself and in being able to speak of the other as of myself. Two voices, but one sole word, which speaks the truth shared by being together. If I allow the other to speak to me about myself, to describe me, to tell me, to plan for me in a new way, it is a sign that our lives are already inseparable: something new has been born, our being together, so that in order to speak about himself, to plan for himself, there is a need for the other to speak also about me. My life is enclosed in his, just as his life is enclosed in mine.

When we say that God speaks to us, that he personally talks with us, we do not therefore mean that God just says something to us, that he communicates something to us. If God speaks to us, it means that he wants to share his life with us, and since the life of God is the fullness of life, definitive, eternal, his word is effectively a «word of eternal life» (*Jn* 6, 68), a word that communicates life to us. Our precarious life, (always subject to the risk of death, that is, the breaking of every relationship), enters into an imperishable relationship at the moment he or she is addressed or challenged by the Word of God. For this reason the letter of James is right when it defines the Word of God as «the word that is able to save your souls» (*Jas* 1, 21). God does not speak to us simply to make us understand mysteries that are above our human reason, but to meet us, to form friendship and live with us and within us. From being creatures who passively receive his creating action, God makes us friends, persons to whom he can speak. In this sense, it is the Word of God itself that regenerates us: «you have been born anew, not from perishable, but from imperishable seed, through the living and abiding word of God» (*1Pt* 1, 23). That God speaks to mankind means for mankind the beginning of a new life, a life of friendship with God, a life inseparable from God, just as the life of a bride is inseparable from that of the bridegroom, or the inseparable lives of friends.

We said that the full sharing brought about by the word of love is brought about by the fact that one may speak about the other as if of oneself. God also behaves in the same way. God expresses his love for us by speaking to us of ourselves, talking to us about our life that already is part of his. For this reason he can no longer speak about himself without also speaking about us. His word addressed to us is made human, it becomes a man. Christ Jesus, as Word of God, is the word that the loving God speaks to the person, loved by God as God loves himself. The distance that still existed between God and his people in the Old Testament (despite his wish to forge an alliance with them) by which the Word of God was law or prophecy, became an insuperable closeness in God-with-us (Emmanuel).

The Word of God *par excellence*, that in which God and man meet together in a closer and definitive way, is Christ Jesus. In him God speaks to us about mankind, and only in that way he speaks to us about himself. It is the man who pleases God, the man in God, the man-for-God. So when we say Word of God, let us keep in mind that its fundamental realization, in which every other realization is inserted, is Jesus Christ. The effort of understanding the written Word of God is, in reality, an effort to understand Jesus Christ and the other way around: negligence and ignorance of God's Word is ignorance of Jesus Christ (as St Jerome say, in the famous text quoted by DV 25). Vatican II urges religious in particular to read divine scripture frequently, in order to understand «the excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ» (*Phil 3, 8*).

The Bible, the written Word of God, is God's Word referring to the Word made flesh, to Jesus Christ: The Old Testament in as far as it prophesies Christ to come; the New Testament as it proclaims Christ who has come. But in saying that the Bible is God's Word referring to Jesus Christ, we also say that the Bible is God's Word referring to us, as Church, as the ecclesial body of Christ. We begin then to glimpse that between our life and the Bible, the written Word of God, there is a close and deep bond, that passes through the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ. If the Bible were just a book, even divinely inspired, it could never be a link to our history. It could contain sublime truths, precious moral teachings, shining examples of virtue, but it would remain external to our life: It could not be «living and effective» (*Heb 4, 12*). Structurally it would remain a book of the past, before our present life. Instead the Bible as the Word of God is never just a book that speaks about the past, but it is a proclamation of the future, «what must happen soon» (*Rv 1, 1*). We read it for this reason, since we are involved in the process of fulfillment of the Scriptures.

The Scriptures become understood as what ought to be accomplished. Firstly in Jesus Christ, then in each one of us, as members of Christ. Every Christian can state like Jesus: «Everything written about me in the law of Moses and in the prophets and psalms must be fulfilled» (*Lk 24, 44*). This is the perspective that opens the mind to understanding the Scriptures. What has *already* been accomplished in Christ, the head, must *still* be accomplished in his members.

2. How do we read the Word of God?

The problem that now arises is: how to read Scripture in order to manage to understand the Word of God which we are called to fulfil with our life? The first condition is *faith*. To the Word of God to man, man replies with the word of faith, which is man's word to God. It is not a philosophical or religious word, but the word of the child, the friend or spouse, who entrusts to another the whole of their life and speaks of the other as the sole foundation and meaning of their life, as simply of their own life («Christ, your life», *Col 3,4*). The approach of faith is that which allows the Word of God to become flesh in us, which allows Christ to relive his mystery in his

members. Faith could be defined as the approach which places our flesh, that is, our concrete historical existence available to the Word. This is how Mary acted: «Let it be done to me according to your word», that is: may your word enter into my life and may it transform me into his image. Thus the listening attitude of faith is in actual fact an attitude of obedience which pertains to faith, which is an obedience that can be justified only by unconditional love and an absolute trust.

But the becoming flesh by the Word in us is not possible without the work of the *Holy Spirit*. Only God can receive the Word of God in its fullness. God within us listens to God outside us. God who is in the present moment of our life makes the Word of God present for us.

There is yet another condition required for listening effectively to the Word of God without reducing it to a human word, but however letting us be transformed by it. It is *being Church*. God directs his word to each one of us, but not so as to isolated individuals, but as people gathered and called by that word to form one people. Because of this we must affirm that it is the Church which understands the meaning of the Scriptures.

We must therefore be on guard against some mistaken provisions in the approach in reading Scripture, which we can easily recognize by comparing them with the positive conditions mentioned above:

1) One approaches the Bible with faith, that is, by letting the Word of God become flesh in us, to take on our story in order to transform it. Often, however, there is the temptation to set out from one's own needs and one's own convictions in order to find confirmation for me in the Bible. To exploit the Bible in this way clashes with a faith-filled reading. Certainly Scripture is «useful» for us (*2Tm 3, 16*), but not in the sense that it can be utilized for our own ends. In this perspective there is a need to rediscover the personal nature of the Word of God: you cannot exploit persons, they must be listened to by us, in their diversity and in their liberty.

2) The Holy Spirit is the divine interpreter of the Word of God. But Holy Spirit does not mean spiritualism or supernaturalism. Reading the Bible does not alienate us from history, but on the contrary, it shows us the truth in it in a prophetic way. Reading the Bible cannot be carried out with the attitude of someone searching in it religious consolations or pious delights. It constantly brings us back to the concrete historical responsibility that the Lord has entrusted to us.

3) The ecclesial nature of listening is countered by reading that is individualistic and subjective. The normal place for reading the Bible is in community. The story that makes up the story of Christ is the history of the Church and of everyone of us, in that we are a member, a child of the Church.

The traditional method of prayerful reading of Scripture, *lectio divina*, recommended by *Vultum Dei quaerere*, has precisely these characteristics: a reading that becomes listening to God who speaks to us by means of the written word, a personal encounter with him, so that you can

become a pilgrim walking along the way that he points out to us. For this reason Scripture brings us back to our life, but it is important that, guided by the biblical word, we return there after a journey that has brought us out of our world to make us penetrate into the world and logic of God. Then we will be capable of appreciating our history as part of salvation history. As it says in number 20 of *Vultum Dei quaerere*, «*lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of God's word, is an art that helps us pass from the biblical text to life. It is an existential interpretation of sacred Scripture, whereby we can bridge the gap between spirituality and daily life, between faith and life. The process initiated by *lectio divina* is meant to guide us from hearing to knowledge, and from knowledge to love».

3. The Word of God and the Teresian charism

To apply the recommendations of *Vultum Dei quaerere* concerning *lectio divina* to our life and our charism, we must reflect more deeply on the experience of the Word of God special to Carmel, and first of all upon the experience of St Teresa.

I would like, first of all, to look briefly at number 8 of the Rule of Carmel, already quoted: «Each of you is to stay in his own cell or nearby, pondering the Lord's law day and night and keeping watch at his prayers». The precept to meditate upon Scripture is, in its turn, biblical. In fact, it is inspired by two quotations from the Old Testament:

Jos 1, 8: «Keep this book of the law on your lips. Recite it by day and by night, that you may observe carefully all that is written in it».

Ps 1, 2 «[Happy those for whom] the law of the Lord is their joy; God's law they study day and night».

To meditate upon the law of the Lord is neither study in the strict sense nor a pious exercise on Scripture. It is a continuous recall of it to memory, slowly making oneself connatural to it. The reasons for this continuous meditation are expressed by the two texts just quoted:

1) «that you may observe carefully all that is written in it»: you meditate on the law of the Lord in order to behave in conformity with it, to make of it the norm that directs the whole of your life;

2) «the law of the Lord is their joy»; the Hebrew verb used in the Psalm is very strong (*hps*) it indicates pleasure, enjoyment. The law of the Lord is meditated upon because it provides pleasure being in its company (rather than “in the company of the evil”), its presence is experience with pleasure, like being with a friend.

At the same time, meditation upon the law of the Lord signifies, in the word of the Letter of James 1: 25, being «a doer who acts» and because of this he «shall be blessed in what he does». The text from the Rule does not really give us a precept to follow, rather it points out to us a way of living our spiritual life by basing it on the Word of God. For a Carmelite, meditating upon it should

give rise both to the seriousness of his daily commitment to conversion, and joy and, I would almost say, the playful gratuitousness of his friendly relationship with God and the brethren.

But let us turn to St Teresa. To explain myself as briefly as possible, I would say that Teresa had a strong experience of the Word of God (let us say too, a *mystical* experience), while having a most limited experience of Scripture. The amount Teresa knew of the Bible was small. The explicit biblical quotations in her works are not very numerous (though on this point there is no agreement among scholars). We know, moreover, that this is due to specific historical reasons. The text of the Bible was literally taken out of hand by the measures of the Spanish Inquisition of 1559, which forbade the reading of many books in the vernacular and even the Castilian translation of the New Testament. So Teresa had to be content with the texts of the liturgy of the hours (though in Latin) and the readings from the Mass, which she could follow in a small missal in Castilian. In fact, for Teresa, the most important source for knowledge of the Bible was the *Meditations on the life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, called the Carthusian (Teresa makes specific reference to him in her *Life* 38,9).

Teresa had limited experience of Scripture. Notwithstanding this, however, she had a profound experience of the Word of God. It is interesting that the word the Lord spoke to her after the publication of the Index of prohibited books was: «Don't be sad, for I shall give you a living book»². Here the Lord is constrained to correct a decision of his Church by intervening personally. It is a point of great importance for understanding the ecclesial and historical significance of the mystical experience of Teresa. At a time in which the Church became rigid in defense and took away the opportunity for free expression of believers' faith, the Lord turned to a woman, and became for her a "living book" and directly instructed her, so that Teresa could conclude: «His Majesty had become the true book in which I saw the truths»³. Teresa did not learn truths as is done with a human teacher, but she *saw* them. The exceptional flowering of mystical graces with which Teresa was favored has then a quite definite historical significance: it is the living God who comes forward and reminds his Church that it is not possible to lock him up in an arid series of doctrinal formulations or in an exact repetition of rites. Teresa's graces are an expression of liberty and of God's trust in man (a God «desirous to grant favors»⁴) faced with the narrowness of a fearful Church.

Teresa *saw truths*. But even more profound was the experience she had «without seeing», when she understood that God «is Truth Itself»⁵. I refer to the mystical grace she speaks about in the last chapter of the *Life*. Beyond the truths of Scripture, Teresa had a radical intuition of God as

2. *L* 26, 5: «No tengas pena, que Yo te daré libro vivo».

3. *Ibidem*: «Su Majestad ha sido el libro verdadero adonde he visto las verdades».

4. *MS* 6, 12: «ganoso de hacer mercedes».

5. *L* 40, 3: «darme el Señor a entender que es la misma Verdad».

Truth. And the truth of God is specifically found: in Scripture. Truth is not the veracity of a verbal statement, but of a person who speaks directly to mankind. All the single truths depend on this Truth of the word of God to mankind. The truth about speaking directly is the truth of a relationship of love, of friendship.

Understanding of Scripture as the word of God, who is friend to mankind, has important consequences:

1) In the light of Truth-Word of God, the life of man appears to Teresa as «to be walking in truth in the presence of Truth Itself»⁶. The truth in which there is a need «to walk» is an existential truth composed of awareness of ourselves and of humble acceptance of one's own reality. The Word of God refers us to ourselves, reveals the truth that is hidden within us, the truth of our wounds and misery loved by God, through which God enters into dialogue with us. What is not directed to this dialogue between God and mankind (which is the Truth) is a lie and vanity. «I understood the great blessing there is in not paying attention to what doesn't bring us closer to God»⁷.

2) The Word of God is only understood when man listens to it as a word which comes from God's love for mankind and which calls man to a loving reply. The experience is enlightening for the Word of God and the Word of God is enlightening for the experience. This is the insight that underlies Teresa's most biblical work (at least in intention): *Meditations on the Song of Songs* (or *Conceptions of the Love of God*, a title which, if it weakens the biblical characterization of the text, shows however that the essence of the Word of God for Teresa is all in being a living witness of God's love).

Teresa sets out to write this work in order to help her daughters to gain clarity on what is from God that they experience in their spiritual journey of prayer. Teresa is aware that the Lord miraculously made her understand Scripture, and that not by means of study (which was forbidden her), but by means of the practice of prayer. Deepening her awareness of *the one who was speaking*, Teresa continued to gain a better understanding of the *words spoken by him* in Scripture. Teresa humbly states: «I am not thinking I am right in what I say»⁸. She wants to speak only «about what I think can be beneficial to us who engage in prayer»⁹. The *Sitz im Leben* [sociological setting] of her reading of Scripture is not that of study, but of prayer, Which is, – in her vision – a relationship of friendship with the one, we know loves us. For this reason Teresa read the *Song of Songs* in a simpler and more literal manner. In the first verse of the *Song of songs* «Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth», Teresa did not wish to search for profound allegorical meanings, because the

6. *Ibidem*: «andar en verdad delante de la misma Verdad».

7. *Ibidem*: «entendí el gran bien que hay en no hacer caso de cosas que no sea para llegarnos más a Dios».

8. MS 1, 8: «ni yo pienso acertar en lo que escribo».

9. MS 1, 9: «en lo que podemos aprovecharnos las que tratamos de oración».

sheer greatness of those words lays for her in the fact that God permitted her to turn towards him: «I confess that the passage has many meanings. But the soul that is enkindled with a love, that makes it mad, desires nothing else than to say these words. Indeed, the Lord does not forbid her to say them»¹⁰.

Teresa had an extremely concrete and vital perception of Scripture. There was no need to go beyond these words, trying almost to escape from their more obvious meaning. «Let Him kiss me with the kiss of His mouth» are words the bride says to the bridegroom. The kiss «is the sign of great peace and friendship among two persons»¹¹. For this reason, it is this that the bride asks from God: «she was asking for that union so great that God became man, for that friendship that he effected with the human race»¹². The «kiss of his mouth» refers then to the Incarnation, since only an incarnate God can kiss the bride as a man. But it can also refer to the Eucharist since, in fact, the bride receives this kiss from the bridegroom by approaching the Most Blessed Sacrament. The word “kiss” is fulfilled in reality, a “kiss” coming from the humanity of Jesus Christ, which continues to be fulfilled in the present reality of the Eucharist. See how Teresa, in an original manner, has interpreted the first verse of the *Song of Songs*, not by passing over it, not by *denying* its “anthropomorphic” reality, but by staying with it, in its truth as a word God has allowed mankind to say to him. From its Semitic past the word reaches the Christian present of Teresa, so that she can appropriate it as a word of her own:

Hence, my Lord, I do not ask You for anything else in life but that You kiss me with the kiss of Your mouth, and that You do so in such a way that although I may want to withdraw from this friendship and union, my will may always, Lord of my life, be subject to Your will and not depart from it; that there be nothing to impede me from being able to say: «*My God and my Glory, indeed, Your breasts are better and more delightful than wine*»¹³.

Then, in interpreting the Word of God you should not seek to adapt the Word to the small-mindedness of our life, to our tainted hearts. This is not the existentialist interpretation that the Word requires from us. On the contrary, it is our life that needs to be adapted to the Word, so that it can be spoken historically by us with the same truth with which we find it expressed in the text of Scripture. The Teresian principle of interpreting Scripture is a Marian one: «May it be done to me according to your word». Not surprisingly, it is exactly in this context, that Teresa goes back to the example of Mary receiving the Word of the Lord proclaimed to her by the angel, to explain how we should behave ourselves, faced with the mysterious wisdom of the Word of God:

10. MC 1, 10: «Yo lo confieso, que tiene muchos entendimientos: mas el alma que está abrasada de amor que la desatina, no quiere ninguno, sino decir estas palabras. Sí, que no se lo quita el Señor».

11. *Ibidem*: «el beso es señal de paz y amistad grande entre dos personas».

12. *Ibidem*: «pedía aquel ayuntamiento tan grande, como fue hacerse Dios hombre, aquella amistad que hizo con el género humano».

13. MS 3, 15: «Pues, Señor mío, no os pido otra cosa en esta vida, sino que me beséis con beso de vuestra boca, y que sea de manera que aunque yo me quiera apartar de esta amistad y unión, esté siempre, Señor de mi vida, sujeta mi voluntad a no salir de la vuestra; que no haya cosa que me impida pueda yo decir, Dios mío y gloria mía, con verdad que son mejores tus pechos y más sabrosos que el vino».

It is good to recall here how God acted with the Blessed Virgin, our Lady. In spite of all her wisdom she asked the angel: *How can this be?* But after he answered, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you; the power of the Most High will overshadow you*, she engaged in no further discussion [...] O Blessed Lady, how perfectly we can apply to you what takes place between God and the bride according to what is said in the *Song of Songs*¹⁴.

Remaining before the Word of God as before the Eucharist; permitting it to be what assimilates us to itself, transforming us, becoming in this way the dynamic principle of our life as human beings and believers; enjoying, finally, its presence, finding in it joy itself, being contented only that God allows us to say words of this kind to him: *Kiss me with the kiss of your mouth*. It seems to me these are the more important elements of the Teresian experience of the Word of God and of her concrete practice of the precept of the Carmelite Rule.

4. *Our journey of renewal*

All of us are engaged in a journey of renewal of the Carmelite life, a journey of creative fidelity. The first and most important advice from our *Constitutions* is the following:

[This religious family] joins fidelity to the spirit and traditions of the Order with the will of a constant renewal. In compliance with the words of our Holy Mother Teresa of Jesus: «For the love of God, I ask all of you to fix your eyes on the race of the Holy Prophets from whom we have descended» [F 29, 33]. She also says: «We are beginning now; but let those who come after us strive always to make a new start and to better themselves» (F 29, 32]

As children of St Teresa, we are called «to advance always from good to better»¹⁵. Even more so for us in this period of great historical change, in which, even within the Church, there is in process a rethinking of the heredity of the last council, which, at a distance of more than fifty years, is yet to be assimilated in depth.

It is exactly faced with this problem, which every morning we find «sitting by our gate» (*Wis* 6, 14), that the Word of God opens for us, not a secondary way, not a short cut, but the main way. We should definitely move towards a personal and community encounter with the Word of God, made in truth: the truth of our limits; of our infidelities, the truth of the sinful structures in which we are immersed. But even before this, the truth of our vocation, the truth of Carmel, of its message, of its extraordinary pertinence for modern times.

The Word of God is the source of every authentic faithfulness and of every authentic renewal. We said this at the beginning and we repeat this with greater awareness at the end. This is because it is the Word *of God*, not of man. Also God is faithful to himself in a ceaseless historical becoming. God *walks* with us. His word is not static. It is also a word for the journey, a word that

14. MS 6, 7-8: «Aquí viene bien el acordarnos cómo lo hizo con la Virgen nuestra Señora con toda la sabiduría que tuvo, y cómo preguntó al ángel: *¿Cómo será ésto?* En diciéndole: *El Espíritu Santo sobrevendrá en tí; la virtud del muy alto te hará sombra*, no curó de más disputas [...] ¡Oh Señora mía, cuán al cabal se puede entender por Vos lo que pasa Dios con la Esposa, conforme a lo que dice en los *Cánticos!*».

15. F 29, 32: «ir comenzando siempre de bien en mejor».

invents new itineraries, points out the direction, remembers the goal. For this reason, the first condition for *truly* drawing close to the Word of God is to begin walking. A journey, we said, of renewal, which means, first of all, of interior reform, of a return to the centre, of conversion. The Bible does not speak to us if we open it without this desire, this need, this search, which makes up our historical responsibility. The Bible is a book born in history, and its end is to make us live history to its very depths, our history, the history of Carmel. In fact, behind us there a whole tradition of Carmelite reading of the Bible, that we should absolutely continue today, if we do not wish the Order to die or lose its identity. The deepest root of the identity of our charism, in fact, is exactly in its way of reading Scripture.

Lectio divina for us Teresian Carmelites finds in prayer its real-life context. In it – as we have seen for Teresa of Jesus – the words of Scripture become contemporary, they can be pronounced by us with the same strength with which they were pronounced by the biblical author. I do not believe that today we have to invent new things, but rather to live in a new way our identity of a praying community, gathered around the Word made flesh, who is Jesus Christ. By this our way of living will also spread out the witness that the Church justly waits for from us as contemplatives, and because of this, listeners to the Word.

Allow me then in conclusion, to show you what task, what responsibility we have in facing the heredity left to us by our predecessors, to use the words of one of the greatest poets of our time, who was born exactly here in saint Louis, that is, Thomas Stearns Eliot:

[...] And what there is to conquer
 By strength and submission, has already been discovered
 Once or twice, or several times, by men whom one cannot hope
 To emulate - but there is no competition -
 There is only the fight to recover what has been lost
 And found and lost again and again: and now, under conditions
 That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither gain nor loss.
 For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not our business.
 [...]
 Old men ought to be explorers
 Here or there does not matter
 We must be still and still moving
 Into another intensity
 For a further union, a deeper communion
 Through the dark cold and the empty desolation,
 The wave cry, the wind cry, the vast waters
 Of the petrel and the porpoise. In my end is my beginning.¹⁶

16. T. S. ELIOT, *Four Quartets*, «East Coker», V.