

## The Congregation of St. John - Resurgence

The decision of the Holy See was made known by Bishop Brincard, the present Pontifical Delegate, in a letter sent on Tuesday, July 1, to the contemplative Sisters. The Holy See's decision is firm and expressed in four points: a pontifical commissioner will be named to accompany the whole Family and its priors-general to replace Bishop Brincard, pontifical delegate for the contemplative sisters but also religious assistant for the apostolic brothers and sisters, who had made it known that he was ill a few months ago. In addition, "The Congregation of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John will hold its General Chapter as soon as possible to choose its own government.

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And, probably the most awaited decision the ex-sisters who canonically left the Congregation of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John and the lay people who want to unite, "may freely form a public association of the faithful in order to become a religious institute. "However, the letter states " in the event that an association refers in any way to Father Marie-Dominique Philip, the Diocesan Bishop, before erecting such a public Association or approving its internal norms, must seek the advice of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and follow the instructions that the dicastery will give him, taking into account that the contents of this charism are at present the object of discernment". Finally, the Sisters who had been removed from the offices of the government will be "definitively excluded from religious life"

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### A complicated story

Let's go back over this complicated story. For some time now, the contemplative branch has been strongly divided.

"Dissent is present within most of the community," explained Michel Cacaud, Episcopal Vicar in Lyon and Assistant Pontifical Delegate, a few months ago. Four people are highlighted but they are not the only ones. A whole group of sisters has formed around them and they are not in agreement with the Pontifical Delegate." Others described an alarming situation: "Some contemplative sisters are deeply wounded by years of dysfunctional experience. To one sister who disagreed with her, for example, a Prioress explained that she was "tempted" . In one of the priories, the expenses for nervousness and anxiety medication amounted to more than 1000 euros per month. »

Problems among contemplatives are not new. In 2003, while the Brothers of Saint John were in turmoil, Cardinal Barbarin, Archbishop of Lyons, named a bishop emeritus and then two former abbesses at the request of the Congregation of Religious to look into the contemplative branch. In 2009, in view of the gathered information, he asked Sister

Alix, the Prioress General at the time, then 85 years old, to resign with her council, in agreement with Cardinal Franc Rhodé, Prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life.

What is happening then among the contemplatives? The reasons for the eviction of Sister Alix remain secret. But those close to the case and the families of former contemplatives evoke "an overly affective style of governance leading to situations of emotional dependence", too great a "personalization of power, "too rapid entry into the community, without sufficient discernment, generally causing "a deficiency in the institution." In replacement of Sister Alix, in 2009, therefore, Cardinal Barbarin named a Dutch contemplative, Sister Johanna, but, as Henry Brincard, Bishop of Le Puy en Velay and current Pontifical Commissioner in charge of accompanying the Contemplative Sisters, explains in a letter published in March 2013 on the site of the Saint John Family:

"The reactions of opposition among the sisters to these dispositions taken by the Archbishop of Lyon have made the task of the new Prior General, Sister Johanna, impossible."

The question of government

It is then the Bishop Emeritus of Nice

In November 2009, John Bonfils was entrusted with the thorny mission of governing the Congregation of the Contemplative Sisters, while Pope Benedict XVI decided to remove four former leaders of the Congregation from office: Sister Alix, the former prioress, who for 19 years was assistant to Father Marie-Dominique Philippe at the University of Fribourg, Sister Marthe, Sister Isabelle, the twin sister of Sister Marthe, former superior of a convent of formation in Cenves and Sister Agnes-Marie, former assistant general.

An approach to the dossier explains "Sister Marthe was Mistress of Novices, Mistress of Studies, Mistress of Formation, principal teacher, principal Elder Sister (The Elder Sister plays the role normally devolved to the spiritual director, so that the two forums, external and internal, are mixed). The accumulation of charges over a very long period of time may not be indicated in the Code, but it is avoided in practice. We can clearly see the danger of entrusting everything to the same person without there being any means of regulation".

So, there is a serious falling out between the sisters attached to the former government and the others. At the time, some of the sisters who supported the former government and disagreed with the Pontifical Commissioner asked to be allowed to leave the community and go to Mexico, but the Vatican put a stop to the project. The split deepened at the end of 2011 when Henri Brincard, who succeeded Jean Bonfils as Pontifical Commissioner in February of that year, decided to organize a time of

formation and discernment at Saint Jodard, the motherhouse of the Contemplative Sisters of Saint John and a place of formation for the brothers. "Some sisters agreed to participate in this formation. Other sisters opposed it in the name of the integrity of the charism of which they believed themselves to be custodians." continues Henri Brincard in his letter.

The Vatican's intervention

Sign of the seriousness of the situation

The file of the Contemplative Sisters of St. John passes from the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, which is under the responsibility of Joao Braz deAviz at the Secretariat of State and Henri Brincard, now the Pontifical Delegate, who must report directly to the Pope on whom he depends. From then on, the situation is going from bad to worse within the branch of contemplatives. It is hemorrhaging. Of the 380 Sisters of St. John present in 2009, 70 would have left between 2009 and 2013. Of the 300 sisters who remained, nearly half of them are in disagreement with Henri Brincard and are leaving for the diocese of Cordoba in Spain where they will create in June 2012 a public association of the faithful called "Sisters of Saint John and Saint Dominic", in agreement with the local bishop, Demetrio Fernandez. This is possible for them because they are novices or sisters who had not taken final vows.

The Vatican was quick to react against this association and it was dissolved in January 2013 by rescript of Benedict XVI. The Sisters find themselves without status because they are former novices or simply professed, i.e. they have not pronounced their vows. "Hope and Dialogue", an association of friends and families of "brothers and sisters of Saint John", created on the day of the dissolution of the Sisters of Saint John and Saint Dominic to help these sisters, in a letter in response to Henri Brincard, refutes the accusation of disobedience by some of the sisters formulated in Benedict XVI's writings. In addition, this association actively defends the memory of Marie-Dominique Philippe, founder of the "Saint John Family" who had been the object of a posthumous scandal last May when the present prior, Father Thomas, revealed the existence of "convergent and credible" testimonies on failures of chastity with women for whom he was the spiritual guide.

Anna, who prefers to remain anonymous, is an Oblate of Saint John and is part of this association. Questioned a few months ago, she explained that, according to her, Marie-Dominique Philippe was a victim of "outrageous defamation." When the accusations made against Sister Marthe and Mother Alix were mentioned, she replied : "It's not my experience. Sister Marthe is very free and that's what's scary." Anna described the situation as follows: "The contemplative sisters of St. John are in two branches: those who obey Bishop Brincard and the others, who recognize Sister Alix as their foundress."

In other words, the Holy See's decision to exclude from religious life those sisters who had been removed from government offices risks causing a certain amount of turmoil, even though the possibility left to those sisters who wish to found a new institute will no doubt be welcomed as a relief.

### Letter of Bishop Henri Brincard

Bishopric

2, place du For July 1, 2014

43000 Le Puy-en-Velay

My sisters,

As Pontifical Delegate, it is my duty to inform you of a series of important decisions taken by the Holy Father at an audience granted to His Excellency Bishop Angelo Becciu, Substitute, who made them known to me in a letter, of which I am sending you the extracts.

1 : A commissioner will be appointed to continue the work of accompanying the Family of Saint John, and of the general superiors, in this delicate stage of their history: "the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, in agreement with [the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith], will appoint a full-time "ad hoc Commissioner": This Commissioner has not yet been appointed and it will be up to him to specify his duties himself.

2: "The Congregation of the Contemplative Sisters of St. John will hold as soon as possible its General Chapter to choose its own government; this Chapter will be presided over by Your Excellency as Pontifical Delegate, your term of office ending at the closing of the Chapter. In the event that you are unable to do so, then H.Em. the Cardinal Philippe Barbarin, Archbishop of Lyon will preside. »

3: In addition, former sisters who have canonically left the Congregation of the Contemplatives Sisters of St. John and lay people who wish to unite, "will be able to freely constitute a public association of the faithful with a view to becoming a Religious Institute. However, in the event that an association refers in any way to Fr. Marie-Dominique Philippe, the Diocesan Bishop, before erecting such a Public Association or approving its internal norms, must seek the advice of the Congregation for Consecrated Life and must follow the instructions that the dicastery will give him, taking into account the fact that the contents of this charism are currently the object of discernment.»

4 : At the end of his letter H.E. Archbishop A. Becciu wrote: "By communicating to Your Excellency the Holy Father's decisions, I must finally convey his desire that the people whom the Holy See has already removed from positions of governing should be completely excluded from religious life. »

I invite you to welcome these decisions of the Holy Father in prayer and peace. The Lord leads you through his Church so that you may respond to his call to belong to him totally and thus give your life all its spiritual fruitfulness.

I bless you with all my heart and pray for you.

+ Henri Brincard

Pontifical Delegate