

# Monastic Formation

## *Past Heritage and Future Prospects*

Sister Fernanda Barbiero, smsd

The subject I was given is one for which I feel completely inadequate, and so it probably needs to be studied more thoroughly. I don't intend to give you a conference in the academic sense of the term. Having read the questionnaires received from the 2596 monasteries. I only want in all simplicity to share my reflections on the questions you were asked to answer. These reflections have been deepened through the experience I've gained in recent years by visiting and accompanying several monastic communities.

### **1. Let's talk about formation**

Most of the responses have to do with the theme of formation which is also a point of interest for cloistered nuns who are seeking new and valid means of growth for both the community and the individual sister, as well as new and clearer ways of sharing the meaning of contemplative life.

*There is a widespread push toward a new approach to formation, a new vision of education.* Formation needs a change of perspective: *from content to a process* that facilitates the maturation of individuals and produces real changes. One is better formed when one learns to learn. Thus the responsibility for formation is transferred to the individual sister in training.

This new outlook on formation is not possible without a vision of the human being; namely a theological anthropology, which can be translated into the monastic experience that has come down to us with instruments received from tradition.

Actually, what is monasticism if not a vision of man and his destiny; of life and its future "becoming"; of time and its eschatological dimension; of space and its projection beyond the insecurity of contingent limits, a vision arising as a living source from the mystery of creation, incarnation, redemption, and transfiguration?

All of this is an existential vision coming from faith, residing in faith, pushing toward total faith. *"We are generated by faith, we are raised to life, a life that will never die again because we were evangelized by one who in faith has gone before us. And now it is faith that we generate, it is faith that, in and of itself, is inherently fruitful. Faith is inherently maternal and generative! Faith is not an adventure of intellectuals or theologians. Faith is the maternal event par excellence, which transmits the generated life received in its authentic fecundity, which is an inexhaustible fruitfulness corresponding to the word which comes from God"*<sup>[1]</sup>.

*Monasticism bursts forth from the constant human quest for the fullness of meaning and significance;* it is a vital striving toward happiness: a memory transcending time, as it looks toward an eschatological fullness of the future; it is a constant movement toward conversion and transfiguration of one's being: it is a starting from the incarnation and a returning to it, in order to meet the one unique and infinite Person of the Son of God, our salvation and destiny, the beginning and the end, the fullness of life and the source of all existence.

Expressed in a deep and thorough way, *formation is revealed as a profound experience of the human heart, transformed and renewed by the presence of God, so that one's humanity is reconstituted in truth itself, in order to be in solidarity with all humanity and to respond to the intimate desire of the heart of every creature. Formation is thus understood as a responsibility to promote the deepest identity of the person who is being called, and to lead them to the joyous maturity of their vocation*<sup>[2]</sup>. What vocation? The one described by St. Paul (II Cor 3.18): *"called to be transformed into the image of Christ."*

## 2. The monastic meaning of formation

The theme of the image of God is central in the spirituality of ancient monasticism. *Transformed into the image of Christ*. This transformation, through a long process of conversion, is the object of monastic formation.

In truth, none of the Monastic Fathers wrote about "formation" – at least not in the sense in which we use this word today. However, throughout their writings there clearly emerges the consciousness that their role, both as the Abbots and Spiritual Fathers, was to generate *Christ in their disciples*. They were to lead their monks to *be transformed into the image of Christ*. Indeed, it is precisely through this transformation that the monk gradually makes more visible in his life that likeness received at the moment of his creation and renewed in Baptism.

For the Fathers, monastic life was not a reality to which you could train someone, but rather a state of life into which someone allowed himself to be formed. Only by living the monastic life is one gradually transformed into the image of Christ and becomes ever more a monk monastic. He or she lives in the memory of the merciful presence of God: the grace of God's fatherly gaze precedes our every effort, and makes life something that is luminous. When this is forgotten, we are prevented from discerning the source of our life. Life fails if we think we can manage it according to our own plans.

*The monastic monk is more occupied with God and those beloved by God, than with himself.* (Thomas Merton). The center of monastic life is the pursuit of a relationship with God. It becomes increasingly clear that the initiative of this search is in the hands of God. A *vocation is a grace*, namely something completely free: you cannot purchase the free initiative of God. In reality, it is God who is the first to have a relationship with us.

Monastic life is not invented but received from the tradition that has its roots in the early centuries of the Church. But also, if there is no fidelity to the contemporary history of humankind, there is no monastic life. Standing before God whose love for all never changes, living uncertainty mystery in love, being conducted and led by Him, this is an extremely fragile condition. Of itself, the monastic life does not have evidence or logic that humans alone can understand on their own.

## 3. Who is the monk? A basic anthropology

But, in terms of formation, *who is the monk?* The monk is, above all, one who has the task of tending and cultivating his own soul. This is an image that inspired the way of life which Benedict and his disciples lived. The image of land cultivation conveys the meaning of formation as "artisan's work": of land being tilled and freed from weeds and thorns. Also, there are medical images, developed especially in the middle ages, where the name of Jesus is the most salutary medicine. These images help us understand that formation is not an experiment but a lifestyle, a constant need in the life of the monk. Man's inner training is the care of the soul; i.e. the formation of a firm and unshakeable consciousness. This formation is accomplished better by familiar things and lived values, and takes place entirely inside the enclosed space of the cloister<sup>[2]</sup>: within the individual, the community, and the physical separation of the cloister.

Choosing to live in a limited space allows the nun to participate in that particular annihilation assumed by the Son of God both in the *mystery of the Incarnation*<sup>[4]</sup>, in which the Word *enclosed his divinity within the narrow limits of Mary's womb*<sup>[5]</sup>, as well as in the *Paschal Mystery*<sup>[6]</sup> in which Christ entered the extreme limits of death to transform it into abundance of life<sup>[7]</sup>.

Spaces, times, things, relationships all form the heart *-spirit, soul and body*<sup>[8]</sup> - to an exclusive union with the humanity and the cross of Christ. The contemplative experience is of itself, therefore, a strongly formative, privileged space that orients and generates the person to a particular experience of Christ and a fruitful communion with Him in the heart of the Church.

For this reason the fundamental root of formation is to be found in the Holy Spirit. The real Formator is the Holy Spirit. Thus, formation must connect with the action of the Spirit within the person. But it is not always clear what the Formator or accompanying person or novice master or novice mistress should or should not do. Not so many years ago, the image of the spiritual guide blurred a bit too much into that of a psychologist or psychotherapist and here we've had disastrous results.

Today, in the face of increasingly evident shortcomings in the family and civil institutions, we can recover much from the terms *education and educator* which actually seem more appropriate than *formator* because they suggest the task of drawing *out from* the person what is already there inside her, even if hidden. In the same way, this is the task of the parent, teacher, father and spiritual teacher.

If we receive the person as a gift from God, we immediately discover that the human, Christian and monastic vocation is an identity already written within her with the divine call. We are to assist her in bringing this to light and making it grow, cultivating it, enriching it with all the gifts proper to the environment in which the Lord has placed her. And here we do well to recover the traditional term *Maestro*, Teacher which certainly expresses this educational task. Hence, the concept of the monastery as a *school* (a *school of the divine service* – St. Benedict), which is developed in the Cistercian *school of charity*.

#### 4. The monastic tradition of the search for God

In the Middle Ages the monastery was understood as a *school where true philosophy is learned*, namely a true and valid way to search for the profound *meaning* of life. This must certainly be recovered in an era when all forms of searching for the meaning of life -religion, theology, philosophy- seem to have given way to a single form of acceptable knowledge, that of modern sciences, i.e. of scientific knowledge that is experimentally verifiable, measurable and quantifiable<sup>91</sup>.

All of this directly refers to *the great monastic tradition of the search for God and for true Wisdom*. The entire monastic tradition taught us to heal man by healing his way of thinking. St. Benedict and his descendants, have delved into the art of thinking and seeking God even with *reason*<sup>92</sup>; and St. Bernard<sup>93</sup> helped us to discover the liturgy as the great educator of the *spiritual senses*, able to heal them and open them to a liturgical contemplation which is the greatest school of truth and love.

*A monk is recognized if he truly seeks God*, Saint Benedict says. This search, however, is composed of tests and losses, and the search engine is the capacity to live in the presence of a hidden God in a constant search for his face, that is, in a search for glimpses of Jesus Christ. Realizing that Jesus cannot be imagined, the monk finds Jesus in the Word and more concretely in his brothers. The community develops in fraternal communion.

The monastic community is not a society in which we try to carry out a project. There is no project! The community is something that receives its life and essence from the Trinitarian communion. "*As the Father has loved me so I have loved you*" – Jesus says. These are not just nice words, but a continuous work on oneself in order to live life as a gift of self to others. The good of one is the good of all and all are committed to helping the others grow. This clothes community life with beauty. It imparts joy: the joy of being together, a joy built on the renunciation of other joys!

Always and in every case, the monastery has been understood as a *workshop of practical apprenticeship for purity of heart and life*. *To form in the monastic sense*, therefore, means *to guide the education toward a way of life* where the norm becomes ever more one of thinking, loving, and acting. After all there is no growth in formation *if the vocation is not translated into one's life*, thus realizing the gaze of love God has for us.

#### 5. The theological foundation of formation

I would like to situate this discussion on formation in the context of a possible theological understanding, a theological basis found in Paul, Phil 2:5: *Have among yourselves the same attitude as Christ Jesus*. Having the same attitude as Christ Jesus means thinking, judging, seeing and acting in a way typical of the Son of God. To have sentiments of sonship, divine sentiments: for sons and daughters, this means being in relationship with the Father, as his divine children able to overcome the limits of sin and death, which mark of humanity without God.

*To have the attitude of Christ Jesus*, then, means to live in obedience to the Father, which for Him meant assuming our humanity to the full, except for sin, in order to bring all humanity back to the Father to live as his sons and daughters. Conforming to the attitude of Jesus Christ, that is, *to God* in Jesus Christ, who is true man and true God, brings us to something greater and different than categories of model or imitation: it is a dynamism of life, which brings us into a right relationship with the Father, that is, a filial human being living in confident obedience.

Now it is understood why formation should aim toward a "gradual identification with the attitude of Christ toward the Father," because formation is "a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the heart [...] to the inner attitudes of the Son" (cf *Vita Consecrata*, 65, 66). This is formation to the same sentiments as Jesus Christ in order that the divine life can shine forth in the human being. Formation has no other foundation. To achieve this objective, an integral formation must be attentive to all dimensions: intellectual and emotional, individual and communal, personal and social, affective and sexual.

### ***building a vital center***

Thus, it is urgent that from the outset there be a formative pedagogy together with a subject "disposed" to being formed, "*docibilitas formandi*" in a continual process of initial and ongoing formation. This is a fundamental requirement because life is not to be managed, but received as a gift. It is important therefore to develop a *capacity to build and rebuild one's life around a 'vital center'* which, for the believer, "*is the Paschal Mystery, the Cross of the Son who, lifted up from the earth, draws all to himself*". In this perspective, formation is directed to the *heart to make it able to welcome life as vocation, and that vocation as a divine life fashioning one's entire existence in the Passover of Christ's death and resurrection*<sup>[12]</sup>.

For this there are some supports: *silence* which accompanies and generates *solitude*. "*The monk is alone with the Alone*". Solitude can have two outlets: one negative, which mortifies our *egoism*; the other positive, which is a *waiting*. Waiting is the preparation for an encounter with the Other and with the others. Waiting day after day shapes the person so that he learns to take no account of himself but searches for the presence of the Other. This horizon of meaning does not reduce one to an existence turned back on self, but is one in which the heart becomes able and free to choose to give itself fully. Here pathways open to an ever deeper knowledge of self. Knowledge of self that is directed ultimately towards a sincere gift of self, of one's own life<sup>[13]</sup>: both in behaviors as well as in intentions<sup>[14]</sup>.

### ***having the sentiments of God***

To have the attitude that was in Christ Jesus, we need to start from the sentiments of a child in relationship with the Father, to share the sentiments of the children of God who welcome the revelation of being regenerated by God the Father, in the Son, through the Holy Spirit.

*To have the same attitude as Christ* means having the same sentiments as the Son of God. To have divine sentiments! Thus, to have the feelings of God for us means to think, perceive, reason, judge according to God! It is a mode of being!

This is the *theological* element basic to *monastic* formation. What can we observe from this *theological system*? We are presented with a *theological vision* of the human being. That is, we are presented with the reality of divine sonship in the human, being children of God. Being divine (God's children through Baptism) and divinized by the Holy Spirit, whom we have been given and in whom we were confirmed, we are called to incarnate this divinized nature.

### ***participating in the life of the Spirit***

This is the work of formation: to participate in God's way of thinking, to share his divine life through our entire humanity except for sin, making it shine with our baptismal divine sonship.

The dynamism of the formation inspired by Phil 2:5 brings us toward a being conformed even unto God which is *something greater and different than categories of model or imitation*. Our life is inserted into and involved with that of God: we share in the very life of God: "*partakers of the divine nature* (2 Pet 1, 3-4). The nature of God is holiness, is love. The life in which we participate is that of the Three Divine Persons, a participation that educates us and transforms us into children of the Father, expressing our *vocation* as the gift of self, as unity in diversity,

and as a communion of charisms. We are partakers in the life of the Trinity in the same way that we are living from the air we breathe<sup>151</sup>.

## 6. Continuing in the Tradition

We discover from this theological system that the life of the nun is not understood as a project: something to be thought up and then achieved. Rather, it is a gift from God that responds to a desire not always completely defined, but a desire for life before God and with God. The monastic life is discovered by living it because "*it's a hidden life*"! This is one of the definitions of monastic life. Life is not managed, life is received. If the Lord is in our lives we are not afraid even of difficult times.

The fundamentals proper to the whole contemplative monastic tradition are invoked with insistence and their validity affirmed, because in dialogue with life, they challenge and promote a unified maturation, a process of integrated growth<sup>161</sup>. It's about learning to interact with others, to live in unity, but also in tension. This is a vital and dynamic process we ought not take for granted in the development of human and vocational maturity....

*The points of formative insistence typical of the whole great monastic tradition* and specific to contemplative life are: *Lectio divina, liturgy, work and asceticism*. All are means leading to one's original vocation: Christ himself, to the full measure of Christ. Formation must foster the vocation to experience life ever more fully; and since the person is living in that relationship for which she was created, the formation will foster this identity more and not less.

Formation endorses all the means which lead to this fundamental identity: listening to the Word, prayer with the word, self-knowledge and the discernment of one's responses in relation to the Word and everyday life, attention to spiritual formation because we believe it is from the love that God pours into our hearts that we draw the divine love we are to give to others. We believe that the nun's vocation is not to do the good, but to *become like Christ*. Thus, formation should manifest the originality of the gift of God in Jesus Christ, who gave himself totally. And therefore formation always has to do with our freedom and with the Paschal Mystery.

We are all convinced of the need for a good balance of these fundamental monastic observances: *lectio, liturgical prayer, work (manual) and asceticism*, and we all believe that a healthy monastic life depends on this. Perhaps less often have we developed sufficiently the formative value of these and other instruments of the monastic patrimony; sometimes, their value has been taken a little for granted, with the result of nullifying it at least partially. Instead, we need to deepen the formative value of each instrument, and carefully explain its usefulness and use.

### *Lectio divina*

*Lectio divina*, is of capital importance in the life of the monk. Love for the Word has always been present in the monastic life. Guaranteed by a *serious biblical study*, *Lectio divina* allows one to dwell within the environment of the *Word of God*. It is there that the Master is revealed, educating the heart and the mind. It is there that the vision of faith matures until one has the "*mind of Christ*" (1Cor 2.16). It is there that the life of prayer and one's daily journey are nourished. It is there that the community receives the principle of its unity. Life that is rooted in the Word of God helps one to stretch with passion toward a *high standard of holiness*<sup>171</sup>, which is the means and the goal of the entire formational journey. The monk has no other task than that of living the Word: living the essentials by stripping himself of many things. He lives the Gospel in its simplicity. This seems paradoxical: the monk is happier the more he strips himself, living the essentials.

### *Liturgy*

*The liturgy*. The Eucharist, the Memorial of Christ's sacrifice, is the heart of the life of the Church and of the community. It remains above all the privileged place to meet the Lord who shapes the monk from within. The Liturgy of the Hours, carried out according to the traditions and rituals of the various monasteries, studied in the variety of its forms and in its theological significance, expresses *a living in remembrance of the Lord*.

Prayer has many faces: it goes from prayer that is done by closing the door, and asking to be renewed in an act of faith; then there is the prayer of the presence of God who is at work in the various activities of the day. This all leads up to liturgical prayer where you become one with the community, living the unity of the Trinity, in whose heart you live! Living in the world and with the world the praise that gathers all the dispersed back to the source of life. Through all of life and especially by prayer, the monk lives in Christ Crucified, becoming totally powerless; living the gift of the weakness of the flesh leads a person to the communion for which he was created, because friendship and communion mean to live in weakness and not in strength.

### ***Asceticism***

Celebrated in all of life, the liturgy leads to the recognition of how *indispensable asceticism*<sup>181</sup> is for the nun in following her vocation and learning the Cross, which means to be formed in the paschal wisdom of the Christian life. Asceticism is also an initiation *into solitude and silence*<sup>191</sup>. Without considering this outdated, one must pay attention to this dimension and find new forms of asceticism appropriate for our time<sup>201</sup>.

*Asceticism, namely the continuous journey of conversion, of purification directed to conforming one's own life to Christ*<sup>211</sup>. The person should be guided to grasp its true spiritual meaning; its preciousness, confirmed by the long journey of the monastic tradition; and to grasp as well its concrete and balanced application. Asceticism is an exercise that if well-lived should give one the taste for always beginning again. One of the sayings of the ancient monks is "*today I begin*".

### ***Work***

*Work* helps to balance the various aspects of life; it also has an element of solidarity with the poor and all who earn the bread they eat. Today it is necessary to impart *the evangelical meaning of work, a faithful commitment to it, and at the same time an inner freedom from it so that it does not become the source of one's identity and appropriation*. But it is also useful to acquire a certain professional competence. The problem of work also extends to the type of work: what types of work will produce remuneration and sustenance for the nuns of the future? A type of work that will ensure the proper maintenance of the monastery, is what is needed.

## **7. The monastic community**

If the spiritual life has first place in an authentic formative process, there must also be a *spirituality of communion*<sup>221</sup>, the *crowning point of human history in God's design*<sup>231</sup>. Taking place in *everyday fraternal life*, community is the place where we grow in an Evangelical quality of our relationships from which all fruitfulness of life depends<sup>241</sup>.

*Community life is imperative!* It is not an element you can put alongside many others. It is essential to grasp this. The monastic experience is transmitted essentially in and through the very form of community life and in this is the formation of the monk is carried out, from the time of his entering the monastery until his passage to the other side. It is here that the monks must seek the basic principle of monastic formation.

Monks -in- fact are those who live: a) *in community*, b) *under a rule*, c) *under an Abbot*. These are the three pillars of monastic life. *Community, Rule, Abbot*. These are the three essential elements of *conversatio* and by rightly living them in every stage of his monastic existence, the monk gradually becomes more a monk, and makes real his formation, namely his transformation.

*Thus, the community is a place of growth, both human and spiritual, emotional and affective*. Personal relationships that can develop within the community are also a school that renders one capable of a profound relationship with God and they are a sacramental expression of the mystery of the Church.

Fraternal life allows them to know themselves in the encounters of everyday life and to *discover their own need for conversion*. In this we can easily recognize ourselves as a *community of sinners who have all been forgiven* and who are now offered the possibility of allowing ourselves to be transformed through the practice of fraternal charity. After all, the authentic contemplative life does not consist in retreating from reality to live in an artificial or purely spiritual world.

All the opportunities for mutual understanding should be practiced, along with the sharing of spiritual goods and a growing sense of belonging to the community. *A lack of communication and of sharing, gives rise to the weakening of fraternity and one's spiritual experience then acquires an individualistic connotation*<sup>[25]</sup>.

Community is the place where we can *learn to read and interpret reality not just among ourselves but also around us*, and to penetrate to the heart of it. Moreover it is community that makes us understand the educational value of *the transmission of the charismatic patrimony received and handed on by the community who is living it*.

The community, often consisting of *elderly sisters*, has its limitations and poverty, but this calls for great attention to valuing their mode of existence, so it can be translated into the language of the younger generation, helping them understand the values that have been less accessible to them.

Transmitting the charism comes through these ways, and is vivified by a *continuous reflection on the Rule* and by confronting *it with the signs of the times*. This is a good method because it helps not only to actualize the text of the Rule, but even more when it is practiced with creativity, it becomes a formidable training force.

Reading the signs of the times in the light of two contemporary fonts: *the Magisterium of the Church* and that of one's own *Monastic Order* (circulars of the Superior, of the Abbess, the General Chapter) becomes a wise path of formation, so simple, yet overlooked and neglected in many monasteries.

## 8. Awareness of shortcomings

The most common cause of discouragement, at least in communities of women, is the lack of vocations; or, even worse, of the perseverance of vocations who left at one point. The main question is: why didn't they stay? Why aren't there more vocations? I believe it is very important to ask the question, and not to content ourselves with answers too quickly.

We are used to questioning changes in society in order to know the causes, and we consult the sociological analysis of current reality to find forms and projects for renewal. Naturally, even this must be done. But it is not enough, and it is not the most important thing.

Indeed, I am convinced that a renewal of monastic communities, in a way that enhances their formative ability, will not begin from the analysis of current reality, but from an ever new awareness of the monastic heritage, and from their ability to examine themselves on the responsibility and tasks incumbent upon the nun. Put simply: to do a good examination of conscience.

We all agree, I believe, on the goodness of monasticism and the important role it has played in history. The problem is believing in its effectiveness today! Indeed, to *grasp its efficacy today*. The question which sometimes echoes even among monks is this, "*Are we the last Christians?*" This is a clear expression of an attitude of weak faith and skepticism.

With this in view, an Abbess friend said, "I believe that the most important thing today is to think, to think with our heads and with the instruments of our faith, because our actions are based on and substantiated by our thoughts, and we must not follow behind trends, currents, fears, suggestions, illusions"<sup>[26]</sup>.

### *vocational discernment*

This belongs to the formative process, and is a fundamental prerequisite for verifying the presence of a *divine inspiration*<sup>[27]</sup> to use clear language. It is the first fundamental step that allows you to build a strong monastic life<sup>[28]</sup>. Then one must consider the individual's actual docility to the work of grace, their natural aptitudes which are prerequisite for the gift of vocation to take root and flower. In respect to the latter, it is necessary for the *Maestra* to be able to discern in the young the presence of personality traits that experience teaches are not compatible with cloistered life lived in a closed circle of female relationships.

And there is today a new aspect that concerns the insertion of foreign vocations into Monasteries. The motives and the formative capabilities of these candidates have not always been carefully evaluated, especially in those coming from different countries and continents. Considerable difficulties have been reported in regard to their full insertion into the community, and this is due also to the lack of sufficient basic culture and knowledge of the language used in the monasteries that welcome foreign vocations.

## *the training of Formators*

The *training of formators* is a subject of major interest within monasteries in spite of the poverty they report. The experience of the last decades, for those lucky enough to have received postulants, novices, etc. has been the often traumatic experience of finding ourselves faced with women who have problems. Today the norm is that girls and women who approach us have problems, sometimes even serious psychological ones.

Without tools we cannot even deal minimally with such situations. From this arises the immediate and urgent need for the one called to the service of formator to have help. And here is where we immediately collide with the norms. In a field like this a serious formation is indispensable, but this can only be given at qualified institutions with instructors and specialized programs.

While considering the importance of forming suitable persons through specific courses, it should be remembered that the Formators must be persons who are expert in the search for God, able to accompany others on this journey, capable of showing them the beauty of following the Lord and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. “*They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means*”<sup>[29]</sup>.

## *rethinking the Ratio formationis*

The *Ratio formationis*, applied in various monasteries<sup>[30]</sup> is a project considered extremely valid if well-planned. It indicates the way to transmit the charism and the means of living it at various stages of life, gradually progressing towards the full maturity of faith in Christ. It is important to return to the charism the central role as formator fashioning the unity of the life of the cloister and the community<sup>[31]</sup>.

Likewise, a need is felt to rethink the Ratio in regard to a formation to femininity. In various situations, we need to search for a type of formation appropriate for the women of the 21st century. Femininity and its need for formation has not been given much consideration. The woman has not been helped to understand and develop her particular vocation. Much remains to be done in monastic environments, and it is important not to pay a price for a deficient vision of one's proper identity and bodily nature<sup>[32]</sup>.

Feminine specificity must be affirmed with more courage in order to *bring to maturity spiritual women* capable of living for the other and thanks to the other<sup>[33]</sup>, consistent with a *spousal and maternal dimension*<sup>[34]</sup>. The harmony between the contemplative life and the feminine identity must be recognized and enriched in the light of a *spousal and Marian ecclesiology*. Exploring this avenue will be very beneficial to the development of women.

## *renewed understanding of ourselves as women of prayer*

The declining female monastic life was born in the shadow of that of the masculine, and for a long time it was universally believed that they should stay there, protected by rules. In this rigid march so much good energy was lost.

But the strength and richness of female monastic life is above all in silence that listens: that silence that listens to the Word. Where this fruitful silence has been safeguarded, the female monastic life has found a wealth in its gracious strength to innovate, good-naturedly bypassing any domination through a pure and intense affection.

The non-codified ministries of the female nuns of the Church are myriad: the ability to intercede, to narrate stories rich in meaning and to weave bonds, to take care of others and to heal them, to safeguard any sign of life, to intuit through empathy hidden and tenacious harmonies, allowing them to express a word, sometimes decisive, in the history of the Church and of humanity.

Today it seems to me that nuns are struggling to make their voices heard, and they are a bit suffocated by stereotypes. Perhaps they should together find their voices again: first of all by making themselves the voice of gracious and fruitful questions, outside of any pre-fixed ideals, simply exposing themselves to the power of the Gospel. Renewing the understanding of ourselves as women of prayer today is a great challenge that must be dealt with outside of that *genericism*, which is a weak, generic formation<sup>[35]</sup>.

A shallow formation easily adapted to worldly values which spreads even in some models and formation courses, that turn out to be poor in methodological indications, and in authentic pedagogical programs capable of making monastic values understandable for today's youth.

The so-called enclosure is a language that in and of itself speaks of the Gospel to those who live in seclusion. The unification of the heart (obtained by struggling against evil thoughts, and wrestling against the impulses of obsessive introspection, in the light of the one Gospel) - a dynamic proper to monastic life - urgently needs to be proposed once again today as empathy and a conscious openness to dialogue within a culture of fragmentation, complexity and insecurity. Thus I understand Pope Francis' insistent call to nuns to understand themselves as "*outgoing women*."

The legislation for enclosure conditions the means and the quality of formation. The issue is complex and presents opposing sides: some see the risk of frequently exiting the Monastery as an unsuitable choice for cloistered contemplatives.

Another position instead hopes for a breath of regenerated life in whose light old structures and traditions, too tied to a culture which was -beautiful but outdated-now appear obsolete. Such obsolescence runs the risk of rendering opaque and unreadable the witness of monastic life in the Church. Yet, the repetition of obsolete structures is not faithfulness!

And there's more. Today a certain form of papal enclosure appears to be based on a logic of privilege, which is questionable today more than ever in the Church and in society. This seems to be a concurrent feeling across the various expressions of female monasticism, Poor Clares, Carmelites, Benedictines and even the new forms of monasticism.

## **9. Monasticism of tomorrow will become the nuns we form today**

A Cistercian monk and prior of the Abbey of Boquen in Brittany writes: "*The modern world needs monks, 'monoi', that is to say men advanced on the way toward their own unity and interior freedom, living not in the nostalgia of past centuries, but in the heart of this twenty-first century that is both exciting and destructive, and also, if possible, in preparation for the 22nd century.*

*"If there are enough of us who are following these trails with confidence, or, in other words, if we are sufficiently numerous in comporting ourselves as men and women of faith, then we can look to the future with optimism. We will be able, if necessary, to move mountains.*

*"After a time of destabilization and of calling conventional rules into question, we will come, I am sure, we are in a time of rebirth. History progresses from beginning to beginning, from deaths to rebirths, with the questioning of certainties and established reference systems in order to give rise to new syntheses. It's up to us to contribute to the development of a synthesis that will replace those that have undoubtedly enlightened past centuries, but today have simply had their time"<sup>[36]</sup>.*

### *Nuns of the future*

These "*monastics of the future*" need to remember that the monastic life is an incessant return to an exodus of faith, because God abandons himself to us in a covenant without conditions; because He, and He alone, is always faithful. An outgoing monasticism! Outgoing in hope! Because hope is nourished by listening, contemplation, and patience until the time of the Lord is ripe.

*"Do we know how to wait for God's tomorrow? Or do we want it today?"* This question, addressed off the cuff, by Pope Francis to the Camaldolesi nuns of the monastery of Saint Anthony, on the Aventine (in Rome), during his visit on the Day for Cloistered Nuns, expressed his hope that contemplatives have "*an attitude that always looks forward to tomorrow.*"

From the extremely rich monastic tradition which is gathered from the pages of the questionnaires, this is precisely what emerges, in my opinion:

- ✓ a *particular vision of man*, of life, time, space, which gives the human experience a dimension of free gift and beauty;
- ✓ an understanding of *relationship* and coexistence that stretches across the entire field of fraternity and community, as a space natural to it;

- ✓ the meaning of a *conversion* toward a transfiguration, a "*being conformed*" to Christ, that goes beyond the narrow limits of ambitious, worldly achievement, and gives man an immense opportunity to encounter the infinite and truly real.

Thus, the monastic life is the recovery of a meaning of human experience that receives its fullest content from the Son of God. It is an understanding of life and destiny that is so radical it can be proposed to the world as an experience of a true and new humanity.

## Note

<sup>[1]</sup>P. STANCARI, *Lectio divina* on the Gospel from the fourth Sunday of Advent, 2015.

<sup>[2]</sup>In this regard there is not lacking a signal difficulty in letting go of many *traditional ways* (customs or manners crystallized in "it has always been done this way") that slow down the flow of the living water of the true tradition of sanctity and wisdom, and therefore of the capacity for the inculturation of the monastic experience.

<sup>[3]</sup>Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, *Vita Consecrata*, 59. CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*, on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, 10.

<sup>[4]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Verbi Sponsa*, on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns, 4.

<sup>[5]</sup>Cf ST. EPHREM THE SYRIAN, *Sermo III de diversis*, Opera Omnia III svr: et LAT., Romae 1743, 607; 3 *Letter of St. Clare to St. Agnes of Bohemia*: "cling to his most sweet mother, who begot a Son whom the heavens could not contain, and yet she enclosed him in the small cloister of her sacred womb and held him on her womanly lap".

<sup>[6]</sup>SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Venite Seorsum I; Verbi Sponsa* 3.

<sup>[7]</sup>Cf *Vita Consecrata* 59.

<sup>[8]</sup>1st 5.3; PI 9; cf JOHN PAUL II, APOSTOLIC Letter, *Redemptionis Donum* 4.

<sup>[9]</sup>There is no need for comments to speak of the incompleteness of this tendency which dangerously reduces man. The Magisterium of Benedict XVI warned us of this, as did particularly the Encyclicals *Veritatis Splendor* and *Fides et Ratio*, and so there is no need to insist upon it.

<sup>[10]</sup>Cf Rule Book chap. VII, first and fifth degree of humility, or the life of Benedict and episodes in the Cave

<sup>[11]</sup>And with him many more, above all St. Gertrude.

<sup>[12]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ* 15.

<sup>[13]</sup>Cf JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Mulieris Dignitatem* 7.

<sup>[14]</sup>Cf *Vita Consecrata* 65.

<sup>[15]</sup>Cf BENEDICT XVI, *Keynote speech addressed to the Roman Curia* on 22 December 2008.

<sup>[16]</sup>Cf CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 76.77.79.80.81. These various formative aspects must be lived in unity. *A segmented formation does not work. If we want the interaction between all human dimensions (heart, mind, will) it's necessary to combine them in unity, but in tension*, said Pope Francis to the Superiors General, Rome 27-29 November 2013. There is always a latent risk of going too far on one scope or another with the consequent loss of harmony in the development of the psychological components of mind, heart and will.

<sup>[17]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 23; cf JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, 31.

<sup>[18]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 36-38.

<sup>[19]</sup>*Ibidem*, 38.

<sup>[20]</sup>Cf *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 27; CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 37.

<sup>[21]</sup>Cf CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, Instruction *Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 36-38. *Vita Consecrata* 38.

<sup>[22]</sup>Cf *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 28; *Novo Millennium Ineunte*, 43.

<sup>[23]</sup>Cf *Starting Afresh from Christ*, 28.

<sup>[24]</sup>JOHN PAUL II, *Address to the plenary session of the CIVCSVA* on 11/20/1992.

<sup>[25]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Fraternal Life in Community*, 31.

<sup>[26]</sup>St. Benedict teaches this. He teaches that humility is not primarily an attitude nor a feeling, but a new way of thinking: thinking according to truth.

<sup>[27]</sup>*Rule of St. Clare*, 2.1.

<sup>[28]</sup>Cf NAZZARENO MARCONI, *Accompagnare all'incontro con Dio*, Cittadella Editrice, Assisi p. 26.

<sup>[29]</sup>*Vita Consecrata* 66

<sup>[30]</sup>There are still too many monasteries which have not drawn up their formation program. The *Ratio* responds to a truly urgent need today.

<sup>[31]</sup>And formation in the charism is not limited to transmitting its contents. That is important, but is not sufficient to become life. One must be educated to understand the meaning and the function which is to reveal the identity of the nun and the form of her complete fulfillment in Christ. The charism must be presented so that one does not come to the point of "charismatic disaffection," which generates a lot of confusion and instability among contemplatives.

<sup>[32]</sup>*Vita Consecrata*, 57.

<sup>[33]</sup>CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Collaboration of Men and Women in the Church and in the World*, 14.

<sup>[34]</sup>Cf *Verbi Sponsa*, 4; *Vita Consecrata*, 28.34.58; *Venite Seorsum* IV; *Mulieres Dignitatem*, 20; E. STEIN; *The Woman and Her Task According to Nature and Grace*, Ed. Città Nuova, Rome, pp. 137-140

<sup>[35]</sup>*Fraternal Life in Community*, 46.

<sup>[36]</sup>BERNARD BESRET, *Del Buon Uso della Vita*, in *Servitium*, Sotto il Monte, 1998, pp. 224-226,