

# The autonomy of the monastery

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## between potentiality and limits

### INTRODUCTION

In November of 2008, the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life*, celebrated the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation, on monastic life and its meaning in the Church and in the world today.

With the celebration of the Plenary, the Dicastery intended to reaffirm the value of the experience of consecration in a monastery, recognizing that this vocation is a unique source of enrichment for the life of the Church and for consecrated life and to ask monks and nuns for a renewed commitment to life, so that their witness might shine in the Church especially to show forth the primacy of God, of fraternal communion and to recall the worth of future goods.

Within these general purposes, the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* in the light of its experience and in the context of today's situation, sought to turn its attention particularly to the reality of the cloistered life of women.

Some new conditions affecting religious life in general, such as the decline in vocations, advanced age, difficult vocational discernment are also present and have troublesome consequences in the life of monasteries of nuns. Accordingly, various issues surfaced such as the lack of trained and capable persons for the service of authority and for formation, an “overly” poor liturgical prayer and the complex management of assets.

The very ordering of monasteries of nuns which involves the juridic autonomy of each community is not able to guarantee the overcoming of said situation by and within the same community, on the contrary it makes the possibility of an outside intervention to help and to seek solutions to various problems sometimes difficult

### TERMINOLOGY

It is well known that at the beginning of their lessons, the medieval masters, used to explain the object of their teaching in order to avoid any ambiguity. Referring to the experience of the ancients, the starting point of this report is the explanation of the expression "monastic life". As it is applied to different realities, it therefore deserves some clarification.

A first meaning of "monastic life" coincides with the word monasticism and is at a level of the original sense, that of a community of monks living in a monastery. In this sense it is the notion of a monastic community in the strict sense (in Latin canon law refers to the Benedictines and Carthusians, monks and nuns).

A second meaning of monastic life is the one we find in monasteries of women (an expression of reality that, in the masculine world, do not qualify as monks, ex. Claritians, Augustinians, Dominicans, Passionists ...).

The origin of such application is historical in as much as for many centuries consecrated life in the Church coincided with masculine and feminine monastic life prior to differentiating into various types of religious institutes.

This differentiation, which begins with the mendicant orders, does not appear in the corresponding expression of consecrated women. Therefore, in the Church, the notion of a feminine monastic way of life extended its original meaning, to apply to a wide range of experiences of religious life and

expresses a great spiritual wealth. The consequences resulting therefrom is that when it comes to monasteries of nuns different charisms and spiritualities must be taken into consideration. In this application the expression "monastic life" would correspond better to the words "monachal life" and, therefore, the notion of a "monochal community".

A third meaning of "monastic life" would be understood as the "lifestyle" in various associations of the faithful usually public but also sometimes private - that, having chosen some traditional aspects of life lived in monasteries, have taken on the terminology of monasticism and the monastic law, while not aspiring to become an autonomous monasteries.

Unlike the first two meanings - that concern members of institutes of consecrated religious life that is monks and nuns bound by public vows, who live a fraternal life in community and are separated from the world - in the third application we find the improper use of expressions such as "monastic life" and "monastic community" With juridic precision it would be correct to call such associations communities of evangelical life with monastic underpinnings and to qualify their life situation as "a type of monastic life". This, of course, not intended to be a judgment upon the experience that these associations of the faithful carry on, which sometimes is qualitatively superior to that lived in the community of certain monasteries.

A fourth meaning of the expression "monastic life" refers to those public associations of the faithful which born with the finality of becoming autonomous monasteries or a new forms of consecrated life according to can. 605. In these associations, expressions such as "monastic life" and "monastic community" are assumed in an analogous way with the intent of becoming an autonomous monastery or a new form of consecrated life monastically inspired in the light of Church legislation, with the consequent dissolution of the association itself, because it is declared "on its way".

Finally, a fifth meaning of the term "monastic life", which etymologically and historically is the most long standing, is the eremitical life, recognized by the law of the Church in canon 603 of the Code of Canon Law In the anchoritic life the experience of the consecrated person, marked by a stricter separation from the world, the silence of solitude and assiduous prayer, is done not in an institution, but individually, publicly professing, through a vow or some other sacred bond, the three evangelical counsels in the hands of the diocesan bishop and observing a rule of life under his leadership.

In this presentation we will deal with monastic life as understood in the first two meanings just set out, placing the emphasis monastic and monachal life of women which we qualify as a cloistered life.

## II STRUCTURES

### The autonomous Monastery

#### I.

The basic structure of monastic life is the *sui juris* monastery, a not easily translated expression taken from Roman Law, indicating autonomy.

The monastery is a particular religious house especially in as much as it enjoys juridic personality and juridic autonomy, it is the seat of initial and ongoing formation, its superior is a major superior, its community is firmly established and the goods of the monastery are Church goods.

In order to obtain juridic autonomy, a true autonomy of life must be assumed, i.e. the ability to manage the life of the monastery in all its dimensions (vocational, educational, governance, managerial, economic ...) and said autonomy of life must be constant to keep the juridic autonomy. In other words, the distinction must be made between a *de jure* erected monastery as an autonomous house and monastery that, *de jure and de facto*, enjoys real autonomy of life.

The monastery, like all religious houses is erected keeping in mind its usefulness to the Church and to the Institute. It must be noted that in indicating this the Legislator puts the usefulness to the Church in the first place. (cfr. Code of Canon Law, 610, §1)

One of the requirements for the founding of the monastery is the number of members of the community, which enjoys stability based on its very autonomy. Tradition and monastic law of the

Benedictine matrix insisted on a minimum numerical requirement for the erection of an autonomous - corresponding to the number of the apostles + Christ - placing it in the number of twelve monks + the Abbot, who according to the Rule of St. Benedict, takes the place of Christ in the monastery. The numerical requirement is present - though not always of equal magnitude - in the practice of the Dicastery and in all expressions of proper law (constitutions and statutes).

In the past, monasteries began as autonomous, while today the majority of the monasteries begin as a small group of monks / nuns who, while maintaining legal ties with the parent monastery, i.e. the founding monastery they gradually fulfill the requirements for full autonomy passing through intermediate stages of partial independence, either through permission of the major superior or through provision of proper law. •

What I must stress and which, in the foundation of a new monastery, in reference to the requirement of the number of those who will form the community of the future monastery, the aim is to achieve this number to achieve autonomy, sometimes even at the expense of vocational discernment. One must realize that, originally, the number to constitute a *sui juris* monastery was a minimum starting point, whereas now it seems to be understood as a point of arrival.

Moreover, most of the time, given the peculiarity of a *sui juris* monastery as a religious house the fact that the required number, in itself is not sufficient, is not taken into account. With regard to the numerical requirement, one must bear in mind that a monastery is truly autonomous when, within the community one is able to identify and clarify who can exercise the service of authority and formation. Even in the presence of a community with a large number of monks / nuns if it is not clear who from the monastery could serve as superior, formator, and or administrator (and those who can be a viable alternative in the government and in other tasks) it is not to be considered a monastery that has the requirements to be granted autonomy.

The foundation of new monasteries of nuns should be well thought out and never subject to improvisation. Today not a few cloistered communities experience, along with the desire to faithfully live their vocation, various difficulties of a structural nature, which originated - mainly but not exclusively –either in foundations of monasteries which occurred without proper preparation or due to lack of vocational discernment and formation.

### **Type of monasteries**

The Code of Canon Law, simplifying the previous legislation, presents three forms in which the monasteries may find themselves, namely:

1. they are congregated among themselves;
2. they are associated with an Institute of men of the same rule and / or spirituality
3. They are isolated on their own.

This tripartite division is clear from reading can. 615 of the Code of Canon Law and involves a different relationship with the ecclesial authorities. Therefore, when an autonomous monastery:

- does not have, in addition to its moderator, another major superior (as in the case of the congregated monastery);

- and is not joined to a Religious Institute such a way that the Superior of that Institute has real power defined by the constitutions (as in the case of the associated monastery);

- it is entrusted to the special vigilance of the diocesan bishop, under the law (as is the case of the isolated monastery).

In any kind of legal *status* (congregated, associated, isolated monastery) the Code of Canon Law safeguards the autonomy of monasteries, that are *sui juris* houses of monks (cfr. can. 613, §1) and nuns (cfr. can. 613 §1 and can. 606).

## a. Congregated Monasteries

With the title Congregated Monasteries- i.e. united in a monastic congregation -we understand, according to the Code of 1917 (because, by choice of the legislator, the present Code of Canon Law does not contain definitions ) the union of several autonomous monasteries-at least three - under the authority of an abbot president.

The monastic congregation - that can be either male or female is in effect, a religious institute – if it is masculine it is a clerical institute of Pontifical Right - with its own General Chapter and its own Superior General who is the Supreme Moderator of the Congregation.

The abbot president of a monastic congregation is a major superior (cfr. can. 620); as regards the Abbess President.(cfr. can. 620 in conjunction with CCL can. 606) –distinct in respect to local superiors of individual monasteries who are also major superiors (can. 613 § 2) - has the necessary power to govern the congregation, according to the constitutions of the congregation itself. The erection of the monastic congregation and the approbation of the constitutions of said congregation lies within the competence of the Holy See.

Today male monasteries of men, with few exceptions are congregated whereas there are few congregated monasteries of women

## b. Associated Monasteries.

The *consociatio*, a term used in Code of Canon Law in can. 614 and can. 615 (both new canons be it in the way they are expressed as well as in their content) in the strict sense is a type of juridic union of one or more monasteries of women to a male Institute, therefore the constitutions should define the power of the superior of the male Institute in regards to the monastery.

Regarding the Institute which the monastery belongs to, the latter may be associated with the male religious Institute, which presumes the same rule or at least the same spirituality either of a province, or of a monastic congregation or of a single male monastery.

The juridic type of association differ, by default, from the juridic link given by the congregation and, in excess, from the simple aggregation referred to in can. 580 which is a very broad relationship with another institution, especially of a moral and spiritual character. A natural association is seen to occur when one belongs to the same order or a so-called second order, even in cases where there is no legal dependence of the female monasteries to the religious authority of the male order. Therefore the terms "association", "belonging" and "dependency" are not equivalent.

It should be noted that the same term association is not free from ambiguity, and that one can distinguish various forms of *consociatio*, with relative differences as regards the relationship of the female monastery associated with the religious superior of the associated Institute:

- a. *voluntary spiritual association* of monasteries of women of an order having no male branch with an institute of male religious which they spiritually support.;
- b. *voluntary spiritual y association* of some female monasteries of an order which has several male branches, with one of them or with a given male monastery;  
The juridic element is not excluded as in the cases described in a) and b), but this may have a different content depending on the case.
- c. *Spiritual-juridic association* of female monasteries with monasteries or Institutes of men of the same religious family.
- d. *juridic association* with the male order respecting the autonomy of the individual female monasteries in as much as they are *sui juris* houses, thus excluding the peculiar vigilance of the diocesan bishop. In monastic law of the Benedictine matrix the term "incorporation" is used

With this premise, one can more easily understand read the contents of *consociatio* as delineated in can. 614.

Monasteries of nuns associated to an institute of men maintain their own ordering (remain *sui juris* monasteries, ie as autonomous houses) and their government (their superior is a major superior *ad normam juris*), according to the constitutions (approved by the Holy See).

The mutual rights and obligations (of the associated monastery of nuns and of the associated institute) are determined in such a way that the association can be of spiritual benefit. Thus the monastery of nuns is associated so as to safeguard the rightful autonomy of life, especially of governance, recognized by the Legislator (cfr. CJC can. 586), with a better chance of keeping their own identity on the basis of a common heritage (cfr. CJC Can. 578) between the associated monastery and institute with which they are associated.

The juridic sense of *consociatio* is derived from can. 615 which, while talking about the isolated monasteries, specifies in a privative sense that which the association must have, namely that "the Superior of the associated institute has true power over the (associated) monstery defined in the constitutions."

Thus it implies that, in order for the consociatio to enjoy spiritual benefits, there should be mutual rights and obligations - but they are not joined as far as number and degree in as much as the superior of the associated institute is to exercise true acts of power over the associated monastery as established by the constitution.

#### **Isolated monasteries.**

The term "isolated" refers to, monasteries of monks and nuns which are not organically grouped in an autonomous congregational way, nor are they, as regards monasteries of women, linked in an associative way to an institute of men (cfr. CCL can. 614). Therefore, except for the local superior, who is always a major superior, these monasteries have no other major superior.

Most of the monasteries of women in the Church are isolated monasteries in the sense just explained. Under CCL can. 615 a monastery is isolated from the moment that, other than its own superior it has no other superior- it is entrusted to the special vigilance of the diocesan bishop, who expresses it regarding the community, in accordance with the universal law and taking account of the constitutions of the isolated monastery, approved by the Holy See, which can attribute other or particular faculties to the diocesan bishop.

Even if, because of its isolation, the monastery, under can. 615, is entrusted to the special vigilance of the diocesan bishop, who is authorized to exercise a control almost identical to the "special care" that is his in regards to Institutes of Diocesan Right (cfr. can. 594), the isolated monastery must not be considered a Diocesan monastery

In fact the juridic title with which the diocesan bishop has to express the peculiar vigilance on an isolated monastery in his diocese and the special care of Institutes of consecrated religious life of the diocese is different.

#### **d. Confederated Monasteries**

Federations of monasteries of women have multiplied after the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* and were encouraged by the Second Vatican Council in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*: *Independent institutes and monasteries should, when opportune and the Holy See permits, form federations if they can be considered as belonging to the same religious family. Others who have practically identical constitutions and rules and a common spirit should unite, particularly when they have too few members. Finally, those who share the same or a very similar active apostolate should become associated, one to the other"*(n. 22).

Federations are different from monastic congregations of women mainly for the following reasons: 1. federations, unlike the monastic congregations of women are not religious institutions; 2. federations, unlike the monastic congregations of women, are not government structures but rather are structures of communion between autonomous monasteries; 3. federations, unlike the monastic congregations of women, do not have a president who is, as such, the supreme moderator and major superior of the federation; 4. federations, unlike the monastic congregations of women do not, have a General Chapter generally understood as supreme collegial power of the Institute (cfr. can. 631 § 1), but rather have only a federal assembly.

The erection of the federations of monasteries of women, the approval of their statutes, the entrance of individual monasteries into the federation and the departure of a monastery from the federation lie within the competence of the Holy See.

Congregated, associated and isolated monasteries can join a federation of monasteries of women without losing their particular *status* by becoming members of the Federation and therefore maintaining their juridic relationship, respectively with the president of the Congregation, the religious superior of the associated institute and the diocesan bishop

### **III. SUPERVISION AND CONTROL OF MONASTERIES OF WOMEN**

In each of the three status that might constitute monasteries of women -congregated, associated, isolated - the necessary and proper supervision is guaranteed, exercised mainly - but not exclusively - by the regular visit of an authority external to the monasteries themselves.

In accordance with universal and proper law, the service of vigilance belongs to:

1. the president of the monastic congregation of women in reference to communities of congregated monasteries;
2. the major superior of the male associated institute in reference to communities of associated monasteries of women;
3. the diocesan bishop in reference to the communities of isolated monasteries present in his diocese.

Each female monastery is entrusted to the supervision of a single authority, no longer present in the current Code of Canon Law is the regime of "double dependence", simultaneous and cumulative, that is of the bishop and the regular superior, present in various canons of the 1917 Code of Law Canon.

As for congregated monasteries of women, the scope and concrete modalities to perform the service of supervision should be taken from the constitutions of the monastic congregation of women. As for associated monasteries of women, the scope and concrete modalities to perform the service of supervision are taken from their own constitutions, which must define the rights and duties of the associated superior and the associated monastery of women, even as regards vigilance. As for isolated monasteries of women, the peculiar vigilance of the diocesan bishop is expressed towards the community of the monastery mainly in the cases determined by universal law, as diocesan bishop:

- a) he presides over the Conventual Chapter which elects the Major Superior (cfr. CCL can. 625 §2)
- b) he conducts the regular visit to the monastery, even with regard to internal discipline (cfr. CCL can. 628 §2 n.1);
- c) as Ordinary of the place, he examines, the annual report of the Economic administration of monastery (cfr. CCL can. 637);

d) as Ordinary of the place he gives written consent to particular acts of Administration (cfr. CCL can. 638 § 4);

e) he confirms indulgences of definitive departure from the monastery, granted to a professed temporary vows by the Major superior with the consent of the council (cfr. CJC can. 688 § 2);

f) he issues the decree of dismissal of a nun, even with temporary vows (cfr. CCL can.699 §2).

These cases, expressed to outline the scope and modalities of the special vigilance of the diocesan bishop, are the basis and scope of supervision by the superior of the associated monastery of women and must be present in the constitutions of the associated monastery.

#### **IV. RELATIONS BETWEEN MONASTERIES OF WOMEN AND THE DIOCESAN BISHOP**

All monasteries of women (congregated, associated and isolated) enjoy internal autonomy (cfr. CCL can. 586) and – the possible exemption of monasteries of women only if under the jurisdiction of the regular superior (see. Can. 615 of the Code of Canon Law of 1917), - external exemption (cfr. CCL can. 591) are subject to the diocesan bishop, exercising pastoral care in the following cases:

- a) in accordance with CCL can. 678 §1, a monastic community of women is subject to the authority of the bishop, who they are obliged to follow with devoted humility and respect has devoted respect and reverence in those matters which concern the public exercise of divine worship, the care of souls (cfr. CCL can. 392; Can. 680 ) and forms of apostolate corresponding to their nature ( CCL can. 394; can. 673; Can. 674 Can. 612);
- b) in accordance with CCL can. 683 §2, the bishop of the diocese, on the occasion of the pastoral or paternal visit or other visits in case of necessity, can take appropriate solutions (cfr. CCL can. 1320) when he finds that there are abuses and after notifications to the Superior have had no effect;
- c) in accordance with CCL can. 609, the diocesan bishop intervenes in the erection of the monastery with the previous written requires permission the Apostolic See;
- d) in accordance with CCL can. 567 The diocesan bishop intervenes as Ordinary of the place, in the appointment of a chaplain and, in accordance with the CCL can. 630 §3, always as Ordinary of the place, in approving the ordinary confessors;
- e) in accordance with CCL can. 616 §1, the diocesan bishop is involved in the suppression of the monastery, expressing his opinion;
- f) in accordance with CCL can. 687, an exclaustated nun remains dependent upon and under the care of her superiors and the local Ordinary;
- g) in accordance with CCL can. 667 § 4, the diocesan bishop has the faculty, for a just cause to enter the cloister and for a grave reason, and with the consent of the major superior, to allow other people to enter and nuns to leave it for a time when strictly necessary.

For congregated monasteries and associated monasteries the pastoral points just outlined are the only forms of possible intervention of the diocesan bishop, since the rights/duties of the president of

the congregation for the congregated monasteries and the rights / duties of the Superior of the associated Institute and the associated monastery must be safeguarded

For isolated monasteries, the points of pastoral care by the diocesan bishop just outlined are to be added to those which the Code of Canon law presents as expressions of peculiar vigilance of the diocesan bishop, to whom the isolated monastery is entrusted under CCL can. 615.

## V. PROBLEMS

1. The juridic autonomy of the monasteries is a strong point in living and vital community houses. If we all easily understand the distinction between a monastery erected as autonomous house and a monastery that enjoys real autonomy of life, at what point must one declare that a monastery no longer has the requirements to continue to be an autonomous house, especially in communities reduced to few members where, the autonomy becomes a source of problems and also an obstacle to offer help, if the community of the *sui juris* monastery does not ask for it.

It becomes aggravating whereas in the foundation of a monastery the praxis of the Dicastery and proper law are very careful and accurate one doesn't always have the clarity to make good decisions, in situations in which one must evaluate whether the incapacity of living as an autonomous monastery in all its dimensions (vocational, educational, government, management, economic ...) is only temporary or irreversible

In fact, if the competent authority does not intervene to downgrade an autonomous monastery, making it dependent on another *sui juris* monastery, or to suppress it, the monastery erected as a *sui juris* house, as long as it maintains the minimum of three perpetually or solemnly professed members i.e. with a minimum of *collegium*, retains *de jure* all of its peculiarity as an autonomous house which Church law affords it, that is, it remains a house of formation, with right of having a novitiate, its superior remains a major superior, etc.

2. A problem linked with a reduced number of members in the community of the monastery, is due to the change of the person of the Superior of the monastery with the evermore frequent recourse to postulation or where foreseen in proper law providing an Ecclesiastical office by appointing a superior administrator.

3. Another difficulty that touches the cloistered life is that of identifying people who are able to be formed. Evaluating the data received by the Dicastery one notes that new vocations come to the monastery at a more adult age than in the past and have the shortcomings (immaturity and fragility) and values (searching for the minimum) of today's youth.

On the other hand, many communities are not prepared to accept new vocations, but they do so anyway, when it is not possible to guarantee a real human, Christian, religious and monastic formation, it is not honest to accept and delude.

The recruitment of vocations from distant countries, an experience quite widespread in recent times, is the human response to a lack of vocations in many communities to ensure survival, hoping thereby to prevent suppression of the monastery, but this brings with it various kinds of difficulties.

If the survival of the monastery becomes the criterion for accepting or procuring new vocations - Pope Francis spoke of the trafficking of novices - it comes to the point of accepting anyone without a minimum of vocational discernment. While today we recognize that for all of religious life - and even more so for cloistered life - vocational discernment has become more delicate and difficult even in alive and vital monasteries.

The vitality of the cloistered life also depends on the quality of initial and ongoing formation

4. We spoke of the right / duty of supervision of the diocesan bishops on isolated monasteries which make up most of the monasteries of nuns within the Church. Given that a majority of the episcopate zealously promotes cloistered life, it must be recognized that, in some cases, this right / duty is not



suitably exercised in cloistered communities of the diocese. Many monasteries of nuns have not been canonically visited in many years.

Then there are bishops who do not favor monasteries associated to a male institute because they are afraid of "losing control" of the monastery.

Then there are cases in which there has been a paradox. The bishop and / or the clergy or the Christian community itself of a place are exerting pressure to keep a monastery open though everyone knows that cloistered life, worthy of the name is not being lived in it.

5. Of course, the help between monasteries of women, although it appears difficult at times should be supported, perhaps in ways that are different in respect to the past.

For a community of a few members this help may be an opportunity for recovery and rebirth when the autonomy of life is partially compromised. Certainly you have to keep in mind the difficulty for the nuns to leave their monastery and move to another monastery.

## **VI FUTURE PROSPECTS**

1. Prospects must move on two fronts: one on the promotion of the cloistered life in the areas of new evangelization, where this reality is not present or is developing, the other in reference to the areas of ancient evangelization, where the reality of the cloistered life, despite notable exceptions is in trouble. In both situations one must insist upon the competent authority - president of the monastic congregation, superior of the associated Institute, diocesan bishop – the exercising of the right / duty of care and pastoral concern.

2. In regard to the erection of new isolated monasteries of ancient religious institutions, as from the results of the Plenary Session of the Dicastery, in addition to the numerical criteria already set forth in proper law as a Congregation, the praxis has begun of requiring in addition to the number of nuns, specific qualities in some members of the community of the new monastery in reference to governance, formation and the administration of goods.

3. With regard the erection of a new monastery self, born a public association of faithful "on the way", erected with the goal of becoming a *sui juris* monastery, it is appropriate that the Dicastery does not easily erect such monasteries if it is the case of a true new charism, raising the number of members of definitive incorporation beyond that required today, and, in addition, requiring specific qualities in some members, in reference to the governance, formation and the administration of goods.

Erecting monasteries in this manner, we must be careful not to grant the title of abbey to such entities or to permit the superiors of such monasteries to use those signs (pectoral crosses, pastoral use of the pontifical ...) that by privilege belong to some traditional expressions of monasticism.

4. With regard to the existing monasteries, reduced to small communities, it is necessary to reiterate that the notion of autonomous monastery cannot apply to all forms of monastic presence, thus clearing up any confusion.

One must be aware of what the Second Vatican Council, more than fifty years ago, said in the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*: "*There may be communities and monasteries which the Holy See, after consulting the interested local Ordinaries, will judge not to possess reasonable hope for further development. These should be forbidden to receive novices in the future. If it is possible, these should be combined with other more flourishing communities and monasteries whose scope and spirit is similar.*" (no. 21) and, as it was established in the *Motu Proprio Ecclesiae Sanctae*: "*Among the criteria that can contribute to forming a judgment on the suppression of an institute or monastery, taking all the circumstances into account, the following especially are to be considered together: the small number of Religious in proportion to the age of the institute or the monastery, the lack of candidates over a period of several years, the advanced age of the majority of its*

members. If a decision for suppression is reached, provision should be made that the institute be joined "if it is possible, with another more vigorous institute or monastery not much different in purpose and spirit" (No 21 of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*). The individual Religious, however, should be consulted beforehand and all should be done with charity... "(VIII, 41).

5. If the monastery is in a difficult situation that appears momentarily, its autonomy should be temporarily suspended, by resorting to a form of temporary "adoption" by an independent monastery in name and in fact, to help it overcome the difficult time.

If the monastery is in a situation of structural difficulties, its autonomy should be permanently suspended, resorting to a form of "protection" which is a prelude to a merger or which accompanies extinction. In the case of "protecting" the community of the *sui juris*, monastery which is reduced to a dependent house can continue to live in their monastery.

6. The practice of the Dicastery to respond to situations involving "adoption" or "protection" has configured an Institute of "affiliation" still little known.

Affiliation is a particular form of aid, which the Holy See is establishing in situations of "adoption" and "protection" in favor of the community of an autonomous monastery that presents an alleged autonomy, but that in reality is very precarious or in fact non-existent.

Affiliation is designed as a support of a juridic nature that accompanies the situation of the weakness of the monastery in the event that this is only temporary (adoption) or irreversible (protection), helping the community of the affiliated monastery to overcome the difficulties (adoption) or to have what is necessary to enter into the suppression of the affiliated monastery (protection).

With the affiliation, the Holy See shall suspend the status of an autonomous monastery, rendering it *donec aliter provideatur* a dependent house on another autonomous monastery of the same Order.

The major superior of the autonomous monastery is constituted the major superior and legal representative of the affiliated monastery. The local superior of the affiliated monastery is a nun with solemn vows, nominated *ad nutum* by the major Superior of the autonomous monastery, with the consent of her council, after having heard the nuns of the community of the affiliated monastery. The affiliated monastery can accept candidates to the cloistered life but is not the seat of the novitiate, which must be fulfilled within an autonomous monastery. The celebration of Conventual Chapters are suspended in affiliated monasteries, however, they retain the possibility of celebrations of local chapters.

During the time of affiliation, the economy of the two monasteries is administered separately.

In order for cloistered life to continue to be a vital presence in the Church and have meaning for the community of the faithful it is necessary to take the appropriate steps to activate a system of dependencies between alive and vital monasteries and monasteries who, although unable to be an expression of an autonomous monastery any longer, can still be a presence.

7. If the weakness of a monastic community appears irreversible and the numbers are very low, the solution, as painful as it is necessary, is the suppression of the monastery, having the same criterion as indicated by the Legislator for the erection of the monastery, that is keeping in mind its utility to of the Church and to the institute.

8. The isolation of monasteries must be overcome calling for a connection between them in the various forms provided for by law or by associating them with greater juridic link to male institutes. In order for cloistered life to continue to be a vital presence in the Church and have meaning for the community of the faithful it is necessary to use the existing juridic structures and instruments - as in the case of federations - maybe strengthening them. It is certainly necessary to avoid the departure of a monastery from the federation without an appropriate reason while it is necessary to foster collaboration between federations of monasteries of women.

9. The creation of a monastic congregations of women is a possibility of connection between monasteries, perhaps still little known, however, the fact must be added that such a government structure, easily conceivable for female monasteries professing the Rule of St. Benedict, presents itself as a not easily realized novelty when speaking of monasteries of women belonging to the mendicant orders.

10. One must approach those who have the experience of federations, by adding specific competencies linked to the office of Federal President, to the council and to the Federation Assembly.

I believe that the monastic congregations of women as such and federations with some added powers can be the logical balance between the autonomy of the monastery and needs of centralism, making them interim instances between individual *sui juris* monasteries and the Dicastery.

## CONCLUSION

Holy Father, Pope Francis, declared the Year of Consecrated Life, which began on November 30 last year and will end on February 2nd 2016, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the promulgation of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis* of the Second Vatican Council (October 28, 1965)

Alongside the various activities planned for said year there was also the drafting of a document on cloistered life in which the findings of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation celebrated in 2008 can have a defined legislative location.

In fact, the legislation on the monasteries of nuns, to date, is directed by the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi* of Pope Pius XII, published on 21 November 1950. The delay in the publication of the conclusions of the Plenary Assembly of the Dicastery which primarily concerned the issue of the autonomy of monasteries and the way to handle the situation of those monasteries that no longer have the requirements for autonomy is due to the fact that it would be necessary to intervene - to integrate it - on a pontifical law and this was not within the competency of the Dicastery.

Pope Francis, who, as Cardinal Bergoglio, was a member of the Dicastery accepting the votes of the *Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life*, in an audience granted to the superiors of the Dicastery said he was open to the revision of the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*, unblocking, in fact, work on the document of the Congregation on the cloistered life, which was stopped for a long time.

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