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BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

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Vultum Dei quaerere: a post-Conciliar Apostolic Constitution

This morning in the Holy See Press Office Archbishop José Rodríguez Carballo, O.F.M., secretary of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life presented the Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere*, on women's contemplative life, recalling first that this "illustrious portion of Christ's flock", as St. Cyprian described it, constitutes the beating heart of faith and of the love of the Church for the Lord and for humanity. Nonetheless, in recent decades it has been somewhat neglected at a legislative level, and has been regulated until now by an Apostolic Constitution, the *Sponsa Christi*, which dates from 1950, during the papacy of Pius XII. *Vultum Dei quaerere* is therefore valuable inasmuch as it fills the gap of the post-conciliar years, the consequences of which were starting to become evident.

"This gave rise to the concern of Pope Francis, a pastor attentive to the life of his flock, and his decision to give a new document to all those who in the Church, 'men and women called by God and in love with Him, [who] have devoted their lives exclusively to seeking His face, longing to find and contemplate God in the heart of the world'", continued the prelate.

The Holy Father, to underline his esteem for this particular form of consecration, called mysteriously to give light to all humanity from silence and from the cloister, gives precise indications regarding the fundamental elements of a life of contemplation that, while not the exclusive prerogative of women, is mostly female. "Therefore, in outlining the essential elements there is no lack of explicit references to contemplative women, to whom there is presented the icon of Mary as *summa contemplatrix*, "Mary, Virgin, Bride and Mother, who welcomes and treasures the Word in order to give it back to the world ... to help to bring Christ to birth and increase in the hearts of men and women".

The archbishop focused on the key points of the new Apostolic Constitution, emphasising that not by chance the first of these is formation, a theme which has for many years been of special interest for the Magisterium. "In this regard, the Holy Father on the one hand recalls that the usual place for formation for a contemplative community is the monastery, yet on the other expresses his hope for collaboration between more than one monastery, in various ways: the exchange of materials, the prudent use of digital media, common houses of initial formation, and the willingness of some sisters prepared to help monasteries with fewer resources".

With reference to the ample space that the document dedicates to prayer, he indicated the Pope's important clarification that prayer and contemplative life cannot be lived as a form of self-absorption, but must instead enlarge the heart to embrace all humanity, especially those who suffer. "If it is a profound desire in the heart of Pope Francis to have an outbound Church", he affirmed, "this is also applicable to those who are called to live out their lives within the walls of the cloister: the attention of the heart, in its maternal care, must continually extend the boundaries of prayer, so that it not only looks upward, to contemplate the holy face of God, but also descends to the depths, to encounter the suffering of man at his loneliest and most marginalised".

Archbishop Rodríguez Carballo also referred to another two elements that are currently a subject of discernment and reflection for monasteries of contemplative life: autonomy, linked to the role of federations, and cloisters. All monasteries, except in special cases, judged by the Holy See, are to be grouped in federations, and there is the interesting possibility for membership of federations to be based not only on geographical criteria but also on the basis of affinities of spirit and traditions. Likewise it is hoped that this will lead to the association, also juridical, of corresponding monasteries of men's Orders, comparable to the formation of the international Confederations and Commissions of the different Orders. With regard to cloisters, the three types of cloistered life already considered in *Vita Consacrata* are redefined: that is, the papal, constitutional and monastic cloisters, enabling individual monasteries to carry out careful discernment, respecting their own right to eventually ask the Holy See for permission to embrace a form of cloistered life different from their current one.

Archbishop Rodríguez Carballo concluded by reiterating that in *Vultum Dei Quaerere*, the Pope has considered all areas of contemplative life. "With this Apostolic Constitution, his thought is translated into clear guidelines, that will be presented to the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life, who will have the task of drafting a new document to substitute the existing one, *Verbi sponsa*, which contains the legislation regulating the formation, autonomy and cloistered life of monasteries of contemplative or wholly contemplative life".
