



Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart

Reflections on *Vultum Dei
Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*

Stay the Course!

By Mother John Mary Reed, C.P.

My community joins me in thanking the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE for this timely series of articles on *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*. We are particularly grateful to Rev. Thomas Nelson, O.PRAEM., for his proto-article (“Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart—The Contemplative Vocation”), which was read aloud in our refectory. Shortly before the May/June/July 2022 issue of the magazine arrived at our monastery, a visiting priest had “subtly” expressed his negative views of these documents to our community during a parlor visit. Father Nelson’s article was a balm to our collective soul! I am also honored that I have been asked to contribute to this series by sharing my experience and that of my community of Passionist Nuns here at St Joseph Monastery in Whitesville, Kentucky.

A hhh...where to begin?! As a young Passionist in the late ‘90’s, I would come across newsletters that showed collaboration among other contemplative congregations and orders, such as Poor Clare Collettines, Trappistines, and Carmelites. I could see that their juridical communion drew their communities together ... they had rare but consequential meetings for those in formation, for formators and for superiors ... they helped each other by sharing personnel as agreed upon by the monasteries ... they even put out association/federation newsletters. I must admit I had a holy jealousy! Why didn’t Passionist Nuns have something like this? As a young sister I longed to feel support among the world-wide family of Passionist Nuns like I saw in other contemplative congregations. Rev. Fabiano Giorgini, a Passionist priest, had worked for decades—with mixed results—to help various Passionist Nuns’ communities in Europe enter into a closer collaboration with each other. He attempted

the same with the English-speaking communities in the 1980’s, but it didn’t work out.

Initial Steps

Fast-forward to April 2014, when I had been in the monastery almost 20 years. Unexpectedly, we received the major questionnaire that was sent to all contemplative monasteries around the globe. The Holy See saw the troubles in cloisters worldwide:

- In some places, the temporal, physical and spiritual needs of community members were neglected due to an aging community;
- Formation, liturgy, finances, and maintenance in some monasteries were neglected;
- Many communities were *juridically* autonomous but were no longer *so in reality*.

These world-wide problems were severe in some places, especially throughout Europe, and the Church wanted to do something about it. After all, what Mother wants to see her children suffering?

Some contemplative monasteries, or at least those in leadership in those monasteries, were suspicious of the questionnaire and refused to participate. I even found out later that some other monasteries were so isolated that they never even received it! However, for most communities the questionnaire evoked a broad range of emotions from distrust to delight. I was grateful for the response my own community gave—a thoughtful, prayerful effort to do what the Church was asking of us. Our superior at the time, Mother Catherine Marie, led us through community meetings and worked with a canon lawyer to bring us to a final reply.

A year later, in May 2015, all Passionist Nuns’ monasteries received a letter from Archbishop Carballo, OFM, of the CICALSAL, “concerning the delicate and difficult situation of a significant number of the monasteries” of the Passionist Nuns. Apparently, the dicastery was aware of the predicament that Passionist Nuns were facing world-wide: lack of vocations, large monasteries with few nuns, no

structure of communion in place to assist each other, etc. We were surprised and touched to see this evidence of how highly the Holy See values our Passionist contemplative life; they wanted to take this special step to ensure that we would not go extinct! Sr. Fernanda Barbiero, smsd, who worked in the CICLSAL, was assigned as our General Delegate, with the Passionist, Rev. Floriano De Fabiis, as her assistant. Sister Fernanda took on this assignment with her whole heart and soul... “promoting the contemplative Passionist life, a precious charism of the Spirit given to the Church.” Over these years she visited our monasteries around the globe, which at that time numbered about 40. We are now about 28 monasteries, several of which are affiliated to others.

In September/October 2015, the monastery superiors of the Passionist Nuns were called to an assembly in Italy. To make a long story short, the decision was made to incorporate the Passionist Nuns not as a federation or an association, but a *congregation*. One reason this form was chosen is because the hierarchical structure of federation/association would be difficult to fulfill since we are so few monasteries and spread out in different countries. We did not really know what this meant, but we would learn in time. We did know, though, that this meant one of our own, rather than an “outsider,” would be our representative, our leader, and our visitator. The goal of our congregation would be to grow in a deeper zeal and love for our common Passionist patrimony, as well as to safeguard autonomy and promote communion among the monasteries. We had many questions, but deep down we knew the Holy Spirit was doing something new for the betterment of our contemplative life.

New Documents & A New Reality

In 2017, Pope Francis issued *Vultum Dei Quaerere* (VDQ)—the first Apostolic Constitution for cloistered nuns since Pope Pius XII’s *Sponsa Christi* in 1950. We were told the norms from CICLSAL would be issued in a “few months,” but in typical Roman fashion, they didn’t appear until April 2018! However, in the mean-



time we were forging ahead on our journey of juridic communion, seeking to understand a draft version of our new Congregation’s General Statutes.

Of course, there were “growing pains” to contend with. I had been elected superior in June 2016, and my council and I were trying to maneuver waves of distress coming from outside sources.

There were many questions, fears, and suspicions among contemplatives. Negative articles were beginning to pop up online. Some priests, bishops, religious, and even canon lawyers, were encouraging nuns to resist the changes. It was a very confusing time. We sought advice from other contemplative monasteries who were already in a juridic structure, but they too were in the dark and at a loss as to how to be helpful. Eventually my Council suggested that we just go to Rome and ask them what all this means. I was flabbergasted, but as time passed a great peace filled my soul at the idea. We would ask our delegate, Sister Fernanda, if we could come and speak with them about all that was transpiring. Well, one thing led to another, and we were on our way to Italy in a matter of weeks!

This trip was very graced and anointed. I wish all nuns could have had this type of experience, to have all their concerns listened to and questions answered. The meeting brought greater understanding, peace, and answers for us to take back home.

Eventually, commentaries and conference talks on the new documents began to be translated and disseminated. These helped us to better understand what was happening on the world-wide scale in cloistered monasteries and the dire situation some are in, and to appreciate the new documents. It was very heartening as these articles were shared among monasteries. We were experiencing Holy Mother Church’s desire to save the contemplative vocation in the heart of the Church. Our contemplative vocation is so precious, so precious that the Church has given us these documents and norms to help revive us from the fragile state in which we found ourselves. She is a good Mother and wants the best life for her daughters.

(Continued on page 9)

runs the risk of being deprived of the fullness of the consecrated life, which is the consummation of that betrothal for all eternity. Both professionally and spiritually, the religious must take the initiative to discover and seek guidance in embracing the means available for growth in the areas previously mentioned. At the same time, the responsibility of the Superiors of the Institute to provide such opportunities cannot be understated. A mature dialogue will result in determining both the need for and the implementation of specific retreats, speakers, literature, personal encounter, spiritual direction, education, etc., for the purpose of enabling the members of the Institute to soar in their spiritual life first, and in the apostolates secondarily, always with due diligence as to the benefits for each. Insofar as religious give evidence of their belonging completely to God, both in their ministry and in their “presence,” their sisters and brothers in the world will be brought to a greater desire to know, love and serve God who has been so ardently embraced by the consecrated religious they meet in the course of their lives.

Mary, Joy & Hope of Religious Life

Before the *Essential Elements* Document ends with a brief synopsis of each previous section, we find a short but tender paragraph entitled: “Mary, Joy and Hope of Religious Life.” No matter how perfectly begun or how carefully the Constitutions are formed, and despite a Community’s understanding of the centrality of prayer or the evangelical counsels or the specific charism, no Institute cannot long flourish without a true and tender love for Mary, Queen of the religious life. The very identity of the consecrated religious is meant to be a reflection of the purity of the Mother of Jesus, Bridegroom of the soul. Mary teaches us how to love Him. She breathes the Spirit of Jesus into the life of every religious person, and into every convent, seminary, friary, abbey or monastery. The imprint of her unwavering fidelity is laid across the framework of the Institute giving it the beauty of the Indwelling Trinity. The mystery of the cross which first saw the quiet suffering of Mary beneath it, sheds its light upon every apostolic endeavor, however hidden

or public. And the surrender of Mary, *Theotokos*, teaches the religious to repeat Her “Yes” a thousand times over in the course of one’s life, pouring the individual out for the love of the Beloved and for the salvation of souls, as Mary did. In our times, when the glorification of self seems to be the cult into which so many individuals are drawn, the world desperately needs the moral compass of Mary who releases especially our young people away from such deception into the truth that alone can set them free. Beyond this, the witness of the consecrated life joyfully lived becomes a beacon to those who are clutching at straws in an effort to find hope and to those who have lost it through no fault of their own. Devotion to the Mother of Jesus, Spouse of the Holy Spirit, Daughter of the King, is a hallmark of a Community and of a religious man or woman who treasures the essence of the Consecrated life as put forth in *Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life*.

Mother Marie Julie, SCMC, is the Superior General of the Sisters of Charity of Our Lady, Mother of the Church (SistersofCharity.com)

Stay the Course! (cont. from pg. 7)

In June of 2018, the Passionist Nuns received the official decree of erection of the Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ. At this time our statutes were also approved and confirmed. We were on our way! I later heard that one of our Passionist monasteries here in the states even had an ice cream party to celebrate!

In January/February 2019, we had our first General Chapter, graciously hosted by our Passionist men at their generalate of Sts. John and Paul in Rome. At this Chapter, the first Mother President was to be elected. The term “Mother President” was chosen as a link to Our Holy Founder, St. Paul of the Cross, who in our Primitive Rule used this title for the monastery superior. As providence would have it, we ended up electing a nun from our own Monastery of St. Joseph—Mother Catherine Marie Schuhmann, C.P. The Lord asked our community

to give up one of our very own sisters who, for several decades, was a pillar in this community. Our Lord asked this little 75-year-old cloistered nun from small-town Kentucky to lead the nascent Congregation of the Nuns of the Passion of Jesus Christ. How amazing is that!?

Mother Catherine Marie currently lives with our Passionist Nuns in Lucca, Italy at the monastery that houses the shrine of St. Gemma Galgani—a major pilgrimage destination in Italy. At the time of Mother’s election, this large monastery was struggling with only a small group of nuns, some of whom were transfers from other communities. However, thanks to implementing the new norms of VDQ and CO, they have become one of our Congregation’s first “success stories.” The Passionist Nuns of Genoa, who had to close their own monastery due to lack of vital autonomy, came to join the Lucca community in 2021—and the fruits of this union have been incredible.

(Continued on page 10)

Stay the Course! (cont. from pg. 9)

The Sisters from both communities now rejoice that they have more time to live their lives of contemplation with shared duties, better liturgy, a greater spirit of silence, more time for intellectual formation and, most importantly, for prayer. They have even begun to receive new vocations for the first time in many years! These Sisters are certainly a living witness to the life-giving effects of faithfully implementing Mother Church's guidance.

I look forward to the day when our world-wide congregation will be able to regularly offer more of the fruits of a juridic communion—those fruits which are already beginning to appear in our monasteries around the world. All of us enjoy a greater communion of spirit and more intimate sisterly relations among our worldwide family of Passionist Nuns. We have shared, corresponded with, and visited each other's monasteries ... all of this and more has given a greater appreciation for how each community lives our one charism. Perhaps in the past there was more suspicion that differences meant lack of fidelity. I believe now there is a greater openness to the different workings of the Holy Spirit in each monastery, and this brings joy, not fear.

Effect on Our Community

After focusing on the "big picture" of the Passionist Nuns' Congregation, what of the effects of *VDQ* and *CO* on our own little community here in Whitesville, Kentucky? As I mentioned earlier, the new documents have been devalued and even demonized by many. Thank God, none of those attitudes got a foothold in our community; rather, when *VDQ* and *CO* were promulgated, we took the words to heart, pondering and praying with them. We read them both in our refectory and personally, and as a community we wrote reflections on the various themes. Several times we have re-read the essential elements listed therein and have examined ourselves personally and communally on how we are doing.

Of course, it wasn't all a walk in the park. There were some points that we found challenging. For instance:

We were disappointed that the documents spoke very little about our particular form of communion (mo-

nastic congregation), focusing more on associations and federations. Since the norms about these latter structures do not always apply to us, we have had to gradually learn to navigate the differences.

The thought of any of our younger sisters being transferred to help "shore up" another monastery was frightening. After all, they are the future of our own community! Also, what about this concept of a common novitiate? How would such a thing work for contemplatives? And what about affiliation. We have no experience of

this. What does it mean canonically? How does it work?

We took these concerns to higher authorities to get more insight and understanding. Even though we don't have all the answers, thankfully peace reigns when we put our trust in the Lord and seek to remain open and discerning, with praying hearts.

As a result of all this, we decided to ask a former religious superior (outside the Passionist congregation) to make a visitation of our community, to help us reflect on how we are doing both practically and spiritually. We explored our strengths and weaknesses, and how we can move forward in the riches of our contemplative life. Among other things, we discerned that we needed to build a new wing and renovate some of our inadequate communal spaces in the cloister. As this plan developed, we realized it was a continuation and a completion of our monastery needs that we were unable to do when our community relocated to a rural setting in 1995. God is bringing that first vision to fulfillment!

Our day-to-day life has changed very little. It did take us a while to figure out how the new, longer aspirancy program would work, but that is going smoothly now. We already had a one-year postulancy and a two-year novitiate, and we actually had a six-year juniorate. I think we were all delighted to make the juniorate five years instead!

It gives me great joy to share with you our community experience. I hope this article will encourage other cloistered communities to "stay the course," and to strive for the deepest contemplative life possible, in communion with other monasteries. You can learn more about our Passionist community at PassionistNuns.org. 

