



Seeking the Face of God with a Praying Heart

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

Federations at the Service of Charity —Part I

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We thank the staff of the INSTITUTE ON RELIGIOUS LIFE for this opportunity to reflect on the recent papal documents *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*. The Visitation Order has had federations since they were first recommended in the Apostolic Constitution *Sponsa Christi*. We would like to share our experiences throughout the years and how we see the federations at the service of the bond of love—at the service of charity.

The Visitation Order was among the first to establish federations after the publication of the document *Sponsa Christi*. We have not found it difficult to adapt to the idea of a federation, perhaps due to the structure of the Visitation. The commission working on updating our Statutes received a comment from



400th Anniversary in Annecy, France, in 2010

one of our federations: “There is no difficulty with the federations. The Visitation was a federation before there were federations.” That needs a little historical context. As an Order we have no superior general and we are not under a male counterpart. Each monastery is autonomous under the vigilance of the local ordinary. In the Coutumier (Custom Book) of 1624, Holy Mother (St. Jane Frances de Chantal) wrote: “Our very honored lord and father (St. Francis de Sales), wished that the Sisters of the Visitation should have no superior general but Jesus Christ, the Lord of all, and His vicar, our Holy Father.”

How were we to preserve the unity he desired for us? He gave us the way of charity. At the begin-

ning of the Vow Book at Annecy (and placed at the beginning of our Spiritual Directory), he wrote, “The humble glory of the Sisters of the Congregation. We have no bond but the bond of love, which is the bond of perfection (Col 3:14), for love is strong as death, and the zeal of love, firm as hell (Sg 8:6). What stronger bonds, then, can we

have than the bonds of love, which is the bond of perfection? The charity of Jesus Christ presseth us” (2 Cor 5:14). In this bond of charity, we are to look to Annecy as our Holy Source and find our unity there.

In her Answers, Holy Mother instructed our first sisters (and all Visitandines) in the union that must exist among us. Her answer is basically a commentary on the above paragraph. “It is undoubtedly true, my sisters, that if the Houses of the Visitation continue not to be united by holy charity, and in conformity with this Monastery of Annecy, in what it has received from our Blessed Father, we shall soon be of many kinds and colors, for we have no way of keeping ourselves in conformity, but that of faithful

observance; and no bond to bind ourselves together but that of holy love... which is, said he, the bond of perfection, which has hitherto kept us perfectly united together... we cannot preserve ourselves better than by the same means which have given us our being. And thus we shall show to those who come after us, that this sacred bond of charity has more power and efficacy in its gentleness, to preserve our union between the Houses, than all those which human prudence could have invented... I remember that one day, speaking familiarly, he said in the sweetest way: Although the monastery of Annecy is established in a small town, it has nevertheless been the will of Divine Providence that the germ of the Congregation of the Visitation should be formed there, and should have received in this place its law and foundations. And therefore, the other monasteries of the Visitation are always to acknowledge it as their mother and source, and maintain with it the closest union of charity, conforming themselves entirely to it, having particular communication with and recourse to it, in order to be instructed in the doubts and difficulties which may arise in practicing the things of the Institute.”¹ In Holy Mother’s words, “Ah, my dear Sisters, our beloved Visitation is a little kingdom of charity...”²

All of this is summarized in our Constitutions:³

There is to be “great communication, union and good understanding between the monasteries, accompanied by a readiness to help each other in their necessities.”⁴

In accordance with the will of the Church, the monasteries are grouped into federations. The sisters find in this institution a means of responding better to the tradition of the Order. The federations serve to reinforce the bond of charity, which according to the intention of the Founders, unites all the monasteries with that of Annecy, “the center of all the others... which should always find their union in that one.”⁵

¹ St. Jane de Chantal. *Answers* (London: R & T Washbourne, Ltd., 1911) 415 f.

² St. Jane de Chantal. *St. Jane de Chantal: Her Exhortations, Conferences and Instructions* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1929) 381.

³ *Constitutions of the Order of the Visitation of Holy Mary*, p. 223 f.

⁴ St. Jane de Chantal. *Answers*, pp. 464 f.

⁵ St. Jane de Chantal. *Coutumier 1850*, III.

Thus, the federations have not been feared but seen as a source of unity, a way of strengthening the bond of love among us through sisterly charity and concern, finding our union in Annecy. We have seen this throughout our history even before we had federations. We cite one instance:

The account of the life of Mère Marie-Philiberte de Monthoux of Annecy (A.S. pp. 593-596)⁶ paints a vivid picture of the still greater suffering brought about by the plague of 1720. “From 1710 until 1725, time of wars, of plagues and famine, when most of our communities, so to speak, suffered from hunger and from the accumulation of difficulties created by the Law system... Mère de Monthoux had the ineffable consolation of witnessing, as in the days of the Institute’s first fervor, the intimate union, the charity and the selflessness of our communities. Some took upon themselves the responsibility to pay off the enormous debts of other communities and to send generous alms to the most destitute; others, unable to offer the little that they themselves had been given, shared what remuneration they earned from their handwork. Thus was verified the word of our Holy Mother de Chantal: ‘Our beloved Visitation is a little kingdom of charity.’... It was especially during the time of the great plague of Marseilles in 1720 which wrought such havoc and mourning in all of France that the bonds of love bequeathed by our Founder were tightened....”⁷

For us, the federation is at the service of this bond of love which throughout our history has united us just as Holy Mother Church sees the federations uniting the monasteries. This is especially true as Visitation monasteries may be found throughout the world. Each federation unites all of its monasteries in the bond of love and with the other federations.

To be continued in the next issue. For more information on the Monastery of the Visitation in Toledo, Ohio, please visit: ToledoVisitation.org.

⁶ *Année Sainte des religieuses de la Visitation Sainte-Marie*. 12 vols Annecy : C. Burdet/Lyon : P.-N. Josserand, 1867-1871

⁷ A Peronne-Marie Thibert, V.H.M., translator. *I Leave You My Heart : A Visitandine Chronicle of the French Revolution*. Mère Marie-Jéronyme Vérot’s Letter of 15 May 1794. (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s University Press, 2000), 34 f.