

*The following is the Question and Answer Session that took place during the Meeting with Religious of the Diocese of Spain. It was translated from the Spanish by the Carmel of Rochester.*

### Questions and Answers Session

*Do the Sisters who made temporary or simple vows before the publication of Cor Orans have to comply with the new norm of 5 years of temporary profession before making solemn profession?*

AC: At this time, Secular Institutes already have the obligation of having 5 years of temporary vows before the definitive vow. But we can apply here canon 1313 of the Code of Canon Law, which states that in cases where difficulties with an individual arise, the most favorable decision should be applied in their case. As such, the candidates that have already been approved for solemn profession are not obligated to follow the norms of *Cor Orans* in reference to time frames. However, all others have to do so.

*What should we be concentrating on for the revision of the Constitutions and the Federation Statutes?*

AC: It is necessary to harmonize the proper law, that is the Constitutions, with the new norms. However, realistically speaking, this poses a problem. We understand it is very difficult for the Nuns to initiate the revision of their Constitutions. Why? Because you do not have a centralized structure of government as do the Institutes of apostolic life.

This is why we have written you a letter (from the Congregation) in which we propose the following:

as your Institutes are not as yet able to revise your Constitutions, you begin by updating the Statutes of each Federation according to the new norms. This is something you are not only able to do, but that you have to do.

Again, I understand many Institutes are not ready to take on a formal revision of the Constitutions; to do so impulsively could even lead to a division within the Institute. This is something which concerns me very much and which I will not permit. As a Church, we are in a time in which we are living a spirituality of communion. Therefore, you should begin with the Statutes of the Federations, which as you know, must be approved by the Congregation in accordance with the new documents. As for the revision of the Constitutions, we will leave that for another time.

I want to refer to a letter written by the Superior General of the Discalced Carmelite Order, Fr. Saverio Cannistra. In my opinion it is a very good study that he has done. And at the end of the letter, he includes a table of the Articles of their present Constitution which will be conflictive with the new norms and which therefore will have to be adapted. This is very good. However, for now, it is important to begin with the Statutes of the Federations.

In those areas where there are many Federations, I would also like to see (but this is my own opinion) them come together and form a Confederation with common statutes. However, I realize that this is not so easy as I am familiar with the great differences between one Federation and the next. So again, the important thing now is that each Federation revise their Statutes as soon as possible.

*There seems to be fear in some communities as they feel that in uniting themselves to a Federation, they may lose some of the unique fervor they live as a community. But there is also the difficulty of communities in which the nuns are strongly opposed to the closing of their monasteries, even though, according to the document, they should be closed.*

AC: First of all, I want to repeat once again: it is not the Federation which brings about the loss of autonomy; there has been a loss of autonomy, but it is the result of other factors. It is not the Federation that causes a monastery to lose autonomy, rather, it is the lived experienced, the concrete situation of the community.

The Federation comes forward to address a negative aspect that exists: **isolation**. It wants to revitalize the monastery as much as possible through a charismatic communion with other monasteries of the same Order. Certainly, this is a novelty. And to respond to the complaint that there are no Federations in which a community feels identified with, *Cor Orans* makes it now possible to form a Federation beyond geographic regions. Right now, this is how things are anyway.

Don't be afraid of Federations. I repeat it again, do not be afraid of Federations. Whether you want them or not, you are going to be in need of them; you need to have other Nuns whom you can turn to. This is what I ask of the Federal Presidents as well. Remember well what I said before: you are not Provincials or Generals. Rather, you are Sisters who are at the service of communion among monasteries. And it is equally important for you to be delegates to the Holy See. You must inform the Holy See of what is going on. This, too, is a novelty which we must also accustom ourselves.

*In view of so much difficulty in applying these novelties, there is the question of whether it will be possible to prolong the time frame of a year that was given to put it all into practice?*

AC: A problem we sometimes have in the Church is that decisions are taken and yet nothing comes from it. For example, some years ago, the Synod on the Consecrated Life made a proposition to Pope John Paul II to do a revision of *Mutuae Relationes*. The Holy Father approved it. However, this was not formally addressed until Francis became pope!

So, even though there may be *some* exceptions, it will not be the ordinary path. I ask you to move quickly, but please, without any super-spirituality. Not too long ago, I received a letter from a community saying that they were so good, so good and so holy, holy, that they could not find another monastery to unite themselves with. My response was quite direct. I told them flatly to enter into a Federation and perhaps by doing this they could convert the other Sisters to become as good and as holy as they are! To make such claims is spiritual pride, my Sisters and I cannot accept it.

*Could you speak about the process of affiliation? And also, can a sister of an affiliated monastery take part in the Federal Assembly?*

Affiliation is to come forward in a moment of need; almost like a rescue team. Our desire, of course, is that all monasteries be autonomous. But the reality at this time is that are monasteries in which autonomy will never be possible anymore! There are monasteries now which have 2 or 3 Sisters and these are often elderly. I am speaking of concrete cases not made-up situations. And often the Abbess of the monastery is no longer capable of carrying such a responsibility.

And then there are the legal representatives of these monasteries who are doing all kinds of senseless things. For example, the objects of sacred art in a monastery cannot be disposed of so freely. These objects belong to the Church! Yet, today, if you go to different antique stores, you can find there sacred objects that have been sold, and almost for nothing. A chalice is a chalice. A religious painting is a religious painting. And let's not even mention the actual sanctuary. This cannot be sold without the consent of the bishop! Nor can a monastery be used as a storage place for a Federation.

It is proper procedure for each monastery to have an inventory of assets. The community cannot then dispose of these items listed freely. This is scandalous and could possibly end up in a tribunal court. A monastery has to be very transparent with anything they have which is of their economy or of their patrimony. A monastery and all religious houses are ecclesiastical goods. I would ask you to read the document of...\*, which I would also recommend to bishops in their relationship with religious houses. It is a document on the administration of ecclesiastical goods by religious. It was done with the help of specialists in economy. (\*The title of the document was indistinct in the recording. He may have referred to "The Management of the Ecclesiastical Goods of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life", which was put out by CICLSAL in 2014.)

This is what an affiliation is all about. It is an effort to assist in a situation that has become grave. It is done for one of two reasons: either to revitalize the monastery or to assist in the process of suppression. There are situations in which it is obviously clear that, unless God makes sons and daughters of Abraham from stones(!), it will be almost impossible to continue forward as a monastery. The affiliation will be a help so that the closure is not abrupt but is done gradually, with attention towards the dignity of the Nuns who live there. It is always painful for all of us to close a monastery. But our mentalities have to change. I have been told by some nuns that they entered into a particular monastery with the idea they would live *in that monastery*, die *in that monastery*, and if civil law permits it, to be interred *in that monastery* (and they say they are even waiting for the Resurrection *in that monastery!*). This shows that, for some nuns, the monastery is everything. This cannot be.

However, before a monastery is closed, there is the process of affiliation, and the possibility that the Congregation name an *ad hoc commission*. If it is the Congregation that calls for this commission, they will request the presence of: the Ordinary (or his delegate), the Federal President, the Superior of the monastery and the Religious Assistant. In this way, there is a whole team of persons who come together to make the discernment.

*On the second question:*

As for the participation of a Sister of an affiliating monastery in the Federal Assembly, I do not think this will be possible. Because to do so would be give the impression there we are still dealing with a viable community: "We are affiliated, yes, but we have the same rights as other monasteries." This cannot be. At the time of an affiliation, the representative of the affiliating monastery is the Major Superior of the monastery that has received them.

This, however, does not apply to informal gatherings or gatherings of another nature. I understand that this is painful but the fact is, when a monastery becomes affiliated, it is because it is in a debilitated state.

*Is it possible to enter into a Federation that is not geographically near or are there other criteria's can we use? Is this really going to be an effective means to belong to a Federation?*

AC: It is possible to federate with monasteries at a distance. There are many different means of communication today that can make it possible. It is not an ideal situation, but it is possible. We, as a Church, have to be aware of the many different situations that exist in the world and not see things only from our own point of view. For example, in Latin America, where the countries are large..., imagine a federation among monasteries, where one is in the North and the other in the South. Though there is a huge distance between them, this does not have to be an obstacle. What I believe is more necessary is that we avoid the isolation of a monastery and also to strengthen the mutual communion among them in accordance to their charism.

There has been, however, some mention of "virtual federations". But this is like "cheating" in order to get away with what we want. This kind of a situation will not be accepted in the Congregation. The only difference would be if there were an Institute that was too small (some Orders have only a handful of monasteries). Here it may be necessary to make exceptions. But on a whole, this is not the case.

*Can we accept into a Federation a monastery in which there are only, for example, two elderly nuns and three nuns who are from a foreign country, as, strictly speaking, this really a monastery that is in need of attention?*

AC: First of all, we have to be clear that we cannot be open to "recruiting vocations" for survival. The Holy Father has a very strong expression about this. He calls it "artificial insemination". To do this is not a solution at all. Afterward, there are obvious problems of integration among the members. And so we find communities in which there are two or three "communities" living together in one, and where the Sisters practically do not speak to each other. The latest thing now is to have separate kitchens because in one country the Sisters eat one thing and in the other, something else.

These are real problems which many times, we are simply not aware of. The only reason we come to know of them is because we have received some formal complaints about it, otherwise we would not know about it at all. But since cases such as these exist, it shows all the more why Federations are necessary. Whether it is due to a lack of numbers or for some other reason, it is necessary that someone determine when a situation can no longer continue.

*A question about enclosure. How can a monastery choose constitutional enclosure when the Order's Constitution says they embrace papal enclosure?*

AC: I have said before and repeat now, that it is necessary to always keep two criteria in mind: the discernment necessary and the tradition or rule of the Institute. We have to admit that it was impossible for a founder or foundress to have visualized how life was going to be in the future. This is why it is necessary to discern: what would the founder or foundress want in this particular situation?

Now, in my opinion, this discernment must be made in the light of three principles. First, the Gospel, which, as Pope Francis states in his Apostolic letter to Consecrated people, is the absolute rule. The Second Vatican Council also refers to it as the supreme rule. And Pope Benedict XVI, in *Verbo Domini* n. 83, also states that it is the supreme rule and that fundamentally, our mission is being a living exegesis of the Gospel. Thus, we must ask what the Gospel is calling us to do.

The second principle is in light of our own charism. And the third is in light of the sign of the times. Thus, among these three principles we can find the creative fidelity that *Vita Consecrata* n. 37 asks of us. We cannot have as our criteria "This is what I like the most" because this is not a basis for judgement. Whenever I speak of the enclosure, I give the following as a norm: if you have to go out, go out. If you do not have to go out, then stay put. It is a matter of looking at the enclosure as adults (and not as fickle children). I believe that the future of consecrated life is found precisely in this one little word: *discernment*.

*Can we have constitutional enclosure and papal enclosure in the same Order? In the same Federation?*

AC: It is important to know what Constitutions include. The Constitutions of an Order should contain *the general principles*. I am not a canonist, but it seems appropriate that in the Constitutions we find *the essential elements of the charism* and nothing more. We should not include in the Constitutions distinct customs or rules, or things like the schedule of the day; nor, for example, what we eat or drink. Because if the Constitutions says we drink coffee with milk, and I go to another country and there is no coffee or milk available because in that region the people drink tea, it then becomes necessary to go through the entire process of requesting a dispensation *just to drink tea!* This should not be.

It would almost seem there is the desire to write in the Constitutions what would amount to a whole new Gospel! But the Gospel is already written! We need instead to concentrate on what is essential in the charism. Then in the resulting Statutes, one can put what is proper and in accordance to each Monastery. But in the Constitutions only the essential. And in reference to the enclosure, it is sufficient to put into the Constitutions: *in this Order, we foresee that, in accordance to the current norms of the Church, it is possible to observe either constitutional or papal enclosure*. This is sufficient.

And as for the inclusion of the two types of enclosure in a Federation, this is also something that can be referenced to in the Statutes. So, if when we ask: can these two enclosures be found in the same Order? We answer, it can. And not only that, it is already happening. There are some

Institutes that have it already legislated and is done according to law, but with many others, it is a reality even though it is not yet a point of law. There are in the same Federation, monasteries which are very faithful to papal enclosure, and others who live it with a different expression.

We are talking here about coherency, not just legally, but of life. In *VDq* there is a point which should be kept in mind: the option made for enclosure should not become a reason for division. Wherever we find division you can be sure that the enemy of our souls is present, even when it has to do with the enclosure. Communion and unity among the members of an Order must be above all of this! As well as a sincere respect for diversity. Otherwise, how are we going to speak of fraternal life or of communion when we foster these divisions? You can be sure that when these divisions take place it is the result of ideologies. And I do not bend before ideologies! Because wherever there is an ideology it is very difficult for true values to grow.

*In reference to the Religious Assistant: Can the Monasteries give their opinion about the names to submit to the Holy See? When a Federation does not have an Assistant and an ad hoc committee is convened, can the Federation substitute the Religious Assistant with someone from their corresponding Order, like their Father General or a delegate appointed by him?*

AC: To me it seems quite logical that the Monasteries of a Federation participate in suggesting persons to act as a Religious Assistant of the Federation. It is the responsibility of the Federal President to consult with the Monasteries about this. She can not and should not, on her own, propose one or another name. This would connote an authority that goes beyond what is legislated to her. And since the Religious Assistant is someone who is going to represent the Federation within which there are certain Monasteries, it is logical that these Monasteries be consulted.

Now, unless I am mistaken, none of the documents speak of the obligation of having a Religious Assistant. However, not everything that should be done is written down. That is like saying: *well it is not stated explicitly in the Gospel therefore it is not necessary*. It is normal praxis that every Federation have a Religious Assistant. Therefore, I would ask those Federations that do not have a Religious Assistant to get one. If there is a situation of urgency for some reasons, then in that case it will be possible for a member of the male branch of the same Order to participate in an *ad hoc committee*.

Once again, I want to leave it quite clear. We are of the opinion that even though it may not be explicitly legislated in a document, every Federation should have a Religious Assistant. He becomes the link with the Holy See, more than with the Order. It is similar to how the Vicar of Religious in a diocese is the link between the Bishop and a religious house. And in response to those who question why it has to be a priest, it is because (as it states in *Cor Orans*) the Religious Assistant participates in the jurisdiction the Church.

*About the Visitation of the Federations. It states that the Co-Visitor is to accompany the Regular Ordinary. However, there are those who are saying this does not mean that they have to go together. Could you explain about this? And does the Federal President have to go accompanied by the Secretary or can she go with a Councilor?*

AC: This is another example in which we see that not everything has been legislated. Number 111 of *Cor Orans*, speaks of "accompanying". Now, this depends on how one interprets the word "accompanying." This does not mean they have to go "hand in hand"! It means that at the time the visit of the Ordinary takes place, the visit of the Federal President should also take place. If they can go together, this is fine. If they cannot go together, this is also fine. And it is alright because, in the end, they should, as far as is possible, make separate reports to the Holy See. This does not mean they cannot make a report together if they desire. However, they can also make separate ones because one Visitor may see something the other does not. Do not interpret the word "accompanying" in a physical sense or to mean "at the same time." One should use common sense in this. But this does not mean that one Visitor goes at the beginning of the year and the other at the end. No. This would not be fair to the Community who would always be in a mode of visitation.

As to whom accompanies the Federal President is not so important, as long as it is with another Sister.

*The Instruction states that the Federal President is in term for a six-year period. Some Communities are used to having someone in Office for a three-year term and with the possibility of one re-election. Can we continue with this format?*

AC: You can continue with the usual format you have had. This is what we see also in those Institutes of Apostolic life; often each is different. The important thing is that each one follows the proper legislation that has been approved by the Holy See. *Cor Orans* puts down what can be considered as a maximum amount of years. Thus, a Federal President should not be elected for a term of nine years, for example.

*What would happen if a Community does not inform of an upcoming election and thus a Federal President does not assist? Would that Chapter be valid?*

AC: Yes, it would be valid. This is because, even though often the Canonical Visit is united to an election, this is not always so. There are various institutes who receive their Canonical Visit either before or after, and some during an election. However, there is nothing that requires that a Canonical Visit be done together with an election. But it should be done at a properly appointed time. The presence of the Ordinary is something altogether different because he has the obligation of presiding at an election and must therefore be informed. However, I find it so strange that a Federal President would not be informed about an up-coming election as well.

Please keep in mind there are things which are not legislated but must be done; and there are things which are legislated and yet must be interpreted conscientiously.

*The Abbess/Prioress is the one who receives an Aspirant into the Monastery, often with discernment but at times it is done without discernment. Who should discern so as not to receive into the Monastery an Aspirant that does not have a true vocation? How should we proceed in this?*

AC: This refers to one of the responsibilities of the Federal President. She is to report to

the Holy See how a Monastery receives their candidates. Juridically, it is always the Superior who receives a candidate or who admits to profession. However, in certain cases, it is obligatory for the Superior to seek the opinion of others. Nonetheless, this should be the praxis in a Community even when it is not obligatory. These things need to be treated in Community. How can it be possible that the Superior is the only one who sees what is going on and that no one else does? (If it is true that the Superior is the only one who can see what is going on, then she should be the only one who does everything else as well, *including sweeping all the cloisters!*) This is an attitude that must change! This would be like having a Provincial admit to profession someone whom his entire Council is opposed to. This cannot be. And what should happen in that situation is that the entire Council should renounce their offices; for what are they doing there if the Provincial does not take them into account? This idea or concept of the role of a Superior or Provincial brings many problems. And leads to many errors.

And though the Superior listens to and takes seriously the participation of the Council, the decision made continues to be the Superior's. Otherwise, there will also be a problem. The consultation made by the Superior to the Council members should be a help, but the decision is always left to the Superior.

*On the sale of Monastery: When a Monastery is suppressed and the nuns go to other Monasteries, does the sale of that Monastery go to the Federation? And if the Monastery has been affiliated, does the sale go to the affiliating Monastery or to the Federation?*

AC: First of all, it is important to point that the Federation can affiliate a Monastery. And, seeing the fragility of many Monasteries, I would doubt if at this point, there are many Monasteries which could take on the affiliation of another one. Perhaps it may still be possible in certain circumstances but even these would be done with difficulty. But within a few years, there will be very few monasteries that would want or be able to do this.

To take an affiliated Monastery does not mean that the affiliating Monastery will now be enriched with new Sisters. Rather, it entails confronting many difficulties. This is why it may be the Federation who takes on the affiliation of the Monastery, in which case, it would be the Federal President with the Council who would take care of everything, and who would be the Major Superior.

Now, it is important to keep in mind, that when it comes to the sale of a Monastery it is always necessary (with rare exceptions) to have recourse to the Holy See for this. It is also necessary to have recourse to the Holy See for the sale of works of art or liturgical articles. For us, it is always a source of pain and suffering to find in local shops the sale of liturgical and sacred articles.

*Keeping in mind the variable character of the initial stages, how can one define the formation that takes place during the year of Aspirancy?*

AC: It is the Federation which should, first of all, give outlines of what is going to be asked of an Aspirant. Then it is the Conventual Chapter that decides how this will play out: how much time spent inside the Monastery and how much outside. What is necessary, however, is to avoid letting



a young woman inside the Monastery immediately after having had contact with her. There should be more prudence and discernment involved, as well as respect for the interior life of the Monastery. In a meeting that I once had with the Holy Father, I asked him what was his greatest concern about religious life and he answered that there are many who enter into religious life who should not be there.

The Aspirancy is a first contact with a possible candidate. It is also helpful to use this time for additional formation in the Catholic faith if it is missing. It is also a good time to help them to grow in prayer.

I take advantage to speak of another problem that is found during the formation period and must be avoided. It is when there is created among the novice and the Novice mistress an inadequate relationship of dependence. This must be prevented at all cost. It is necessary to form the Formator to be an independent person, and not one who sees everything through the eyes of the novice and vice versa. It is also important to be aware of those young people who go from one Monastery to another. If a young person has gone around to more than three Monasteries, it seems to me that is enough to discern that there is not a vocation there.

*In the documents there is mention of the personal and community plan of life. There is not much experience of this in the contemplative life. We are wondering if the Congregation could publish some guidelines or suggestions.*

AC: I understand that for the Monastic life this something of a novelty. It may, at first be confused with the Rule of life. But it is not that. The Rule can fit into the plan, but the plan of life is not the Rule. There seems to be a general lack of formation and understanding about this so we will see if we can develop, from the Congregation, some guidelines and orientations to follow. Now, even more important the actual plan of life is the elaboration of it. In other words, it is something that may require much time and careful dedication, prayer and reflection. This way it will not end up being a mere human invention or regulation.

I also take advantage here to mention that there are some who are afraid because there has been mention that the Congregation will be developing a *Ratio* for formation in the future. The publication of the *Ratio* will be like an open door that each Monastery can use to form their own Formation Plan. Right now, the completion of this *Ratio* has moved forward, but I personally, as yet, do not feel too secure about it. It is necessary to continue to consult more about it; especially with the contemplatives themselves. Not many, but some.

*The two documents are directed to the feminine contemplative life. Why does there seem to be a need to legislate the feminine contemplative life in a manner distinct from the masculine?*

AC: In this, we are simply following tradition. I understand that there are some women contemplatives who are offended by this. I respect this. But I can say that, right now, I am convinced that to leave the feminine contemplative life without concrete guidance, may leave the majority in a very fragile condition.

I once wrote in a magazine that I have hopes that in about 20 years or so from now, it may

be possible to arrive at an Apostolic Constitution which includes both the masculine and feminine together. We have a good example in the Cistercian tradition. Pope Benedict XVI (thus not so long ago) has recognized that the feminine and masculine branches constitute together a single Order. And so, they have their General Chapters together. I was once invited to be with them, and as it was not my religious tradition, I was quite surprised at first to see the nuns and friars together. And even more, they now even vote together for the new Abbot General, who, because of his jurisdiction, is always an Abbot (cannot be an Abbess). But their government is shared. There are some Councilors who are men, and some who are women. I have spoken often about this experience, because I see that it can work well.

I am convinced that many founders and foundress thought of founding *a single Order*. For example, I truly believe that St. Clare never thought of herself as a foundress. She stated plainly that after God, the only Founder was St. Francis. However, history consequently separated the Order into two branches. And now we continue as such.

This is why I am convinced that it is very important, as an Order, to reflect on and review the charismatic relationship among the masculine and feminine branches. Not to impose authority or to take away the just autonomy, but to understand the intention of the founder or foundress.

I finish thanking all of you for your kind attention and for receiving us here. In the name of the Holy Father and the Congregation for Religious, I thank all contemplatives. The Holy Father loves and esteems you very much. And I have to publicly recognize that he has a special love and a particular "soft spot" for the Discalced Carmelite Nuns. He loves you very much. Let us pray much for him.