

Meeting with the Discalced Carmelite Nuns of the USA

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Fr. Rafal Wilkowski, OCD

AUTONOMY AND COMMUNION IN THE TERESIAN CARMEL IN THE LIGHT OF THE APOSTOLIC CONSTITUTION, *Vultum Dei quaerere*

Autonomy is a very complex term and the apostolic constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere* (VDQ) clearly illustrates this. But how are we to understand it correctly? How are we to interpret it in the teresian context?

In Teresa's time, autonomy wasn't a problem. The communities she founded were full of vitality; they were fruitful, giving life to new communities. It was a time of growth. Likewise, during the years of the Second Vatican Council, even if it was a time of crisis for religious life, Carmel was expanding. Today, however, presents a new situation: in the West especially, there is a steep decline in vocations with a corresponding majority of older religious; generational continuity is lacking: there are many older sisters, but few or no younger ones. It is only natural in these circumstances that vitality in the communities is lessened; and for the same reason, it is also natural that the autonomy of the communities is lessened.

What can we do in this situation? There is need for discernment. We need to look again at the situation using teresian criteria. There is need to recognize the actual situation of persons, the real situation of communities – there is no need to be traumatized, but neither can we pretend that there is nothing wrong when there is a problem (the criterion of true humility). Then it is necessary to take the correct decisions, living in freedom, without becoming slaves either of persons or of material things (the criterion of detachment). And all of this needs to be carried out in a spirit of sisterly love.

Teresa has not said how many nuns need to be in the community for it to be recognized as autonomous (*sui iuris*). Teresa hasn't told us how long we need to continue on and when there is need to close a monastery (by suppression or amalgamation). Teresa did not think in these kind of juridical categories; some of them she didn't even know about. Teresa wanted small but vital communities... Teresa did not found new communities to expand the Order, nor to secure a presence in this or that diocese, but... to live in intimacy with the Lord, to live with sisters in a community.

1. Autonomy

Above all, it is necessary to note that the apostolic constitution does not define the concept of autonomy, but in art. 8, § 1, some of its constitutive elements are indicated. Moreover, n. 28 of the apostolic constitution clarifies the goal of autonomy where it affirms: "Autonomy favours the stability of life and internal unity of each community, ensuring the best conditions for contemplation".

Autonomy is not to be understood only in the perspective of the independence of the monasteries one from another, nor in the perspective of the independence of the monasteries from the male branch of the Order and the bishops. It is to be understood especially in the perspective of their capacity to continue living independently. This means being able to assume responsibly various vital functions in community (governance, formation, administration of goods) and being able to make good decisions. An autonomous person is a mature person (physically, psychologically, juridically), a sane person, a person capable of understanding and willing, in short, a person capable

to making decisions... The same criteria can be applied to the community. An autonomous community is a mature, sane, capable of discernment and of making decisions.

The autonomy of the monastery is a right, but it is legitimate, indeed necessary to understand it also as an obligation. Autonomy is not granted; it is recognized. However, it is recognized in accordance with the actual situation of the community. This means that the community must meet the requirements for both initial recognition (canonical erection), and for subsequent recognition (status quo). The community that does not meet these requirements, does not demonstrate autonomy of life, can lose this recognition.

2. Expressions of autonomy

Art. 8 of VDQ affirms: “Juridical autonomy needs to be matched by a genuine autonomy of life. This entails:

- a certain, even minimal, number of sisters, provided that the majority are not elderly,
- the vitality needed to practice and spread the charism,
- a real capacity to provide for formation and governance,
- dignity and quality of liturgical, fraternal and spiritual life,
- sign value and participation in life of the local Church,
- self-sufficiency,
- a suitably appointed monastery building”.

What is striking in VDQ and is new about this apostolic constitution, is this broader vision of autonomy of life. This had been talked about in recent years, but the emphasis was almost exclusively on two elements: the minimal number of nuns, but without precise specification, and the ability to govern. Sometimes, they are the two basic conditions for autonomy of life indicated. But as VDQ clearly affirms, they are not the only ones. The elements listed in art. 8, § 1 of VDQ “ought to be considered comprehensively and in an overall perspective”.

In reality, the 1991 Constitutions, art. 203, anticipated VDQ some 25 years previously, affirming that, “The juridical autonomy [...] must be accompanied by autonomy of life. Therefore a monastery must have everything it needs to lead an autonomous life, including enough resources and personnel for a faithful teresian carmelite observance and formation and government, so as to give assurances for the vitality of the monastery, its development, and its future needs, according to the norm of the present Constitutions. This must be kept in mind especially when new foundations are being planned”.

It is true that this norm regarding the requirements of vital autonomy is new in carmelite legislation. The idea was first expressed in the 1977 Declarations, art. 161, and in the Constitutions, as just alluded to.

It can be useful and helpful therefore to look more closely at these elements of vital autonomy that VDQ deals with, and are dealt with to a certain extent in the carmelite Constitutions; but especially it can be beneficial to return to the sources and seek light on this material from Teresa herself.

2.1. A certain, even minimal, number of sisters, provided that the majority are not elderly

In order to guarantee a real autonomy of life, one of the necessary requirements is “a certain, even minimal, number of sisters, provided that the majority are not elderly” (VDQ art. 8, § 1). The 1991 Constitutions lay down a minimum number of nuns for the erection of a new foundation: “In order to proceed to erect a new monastery, there must be at least eight religious, not counting the postulants and extern sisters, of whom six must be chapter sisters” (art. 205).

Monastic life, in fact, has many requirements. These are needs tied into the various dimensions of the very life of the community. VDQ speaks of them: governance, formation, house economy, the radiance of the charism. A sufficient number of nuns is necessary to satisfy these requirements. While it is true that numbers alone cannot guarantee the vitality of a community, it is also true that without a certain number of nuns it is impossible to have these strengths.

Teresa did not speak about the number of nuns in the primitive Constitutions. But before the chapter of Alcalá, she herself wrote to Fr. Gracián: “This is what can do us harm and that I always fear – as well as our taking in too large a number of nuns. So I beg you to insist that these two things remain firmly fixed in our Constitutions. Do me this favour” (*Letter to Fr. Jerónimo Gracián*, Feb. 1581, n. 3).

Teresa also spoke about the number of nuns elsewhere: *Letter to Mother María Bautista*, July 16, 1574, n. 2; *Letter to Simón Ruiz*, Oct. 18, 1569, n. 5; *Letter to Don Martín Alonso de Salinas*, Nov. 13, 1581, n. 2.

The thoughts of the Saint are summed up in the Constitutions of Alcalá: “In as much as the Council of Trent has ordained that there should not be more religious in a monastery than they are able conveniently to sustain, taking into account their income and the alms on which they live, in order that the nuns in these convents may live in greater peace and be less solicitous about temporal things, we ordain that in those convents founded in poverty they should not exceed thirteen, or at the most fourteen, for the choir. Those that have income should not exceed twenty; this includes those who are received as lay sisters, and in the monasteries, whether with income or in poverty, there should not be more than three lay sisters” (*Const. 1581*, chap. 2, art. 8).

In Teresa’s time, the maintenance of the monastery was a serious problem as far as autonomy was concerned. A high number of nuns made maintenance very difficult. Out of her concern on this point, Teresa laid down certain rules, or better, she placed certain limits to guarantee the autonomy of the community. Today, alas, these rules can seem somewhat strange. Today, in most cases, the problem is the exact opposite: the lack of nuns. But Teresa’s criterion for guaranteeing the conditions favourable for the contemplative life gives pause for thought: “We also declare that those convents that were founded with the intention of having income, until they actually have the said income, may not have more than fourteen nuns, unless one should receive the habit who can bring with her sufficient to sustain more. The prioress or prelate may not act contrary to this order under penalty of deprivation of office” (*Const. 1581*, chap. 2, art. 10).

For Teresa, however, a reduced number of nuns is essential for the creation of closer relations between the nuns. The experience of the Incarnation strongly influenced Teresa and this also motivated her in limiting the number of nuns.

It is interesting that this strong teresian element is not included in either the primitive Constitutions or in the successive redactions of the Constitutions, but only in the spiritual writings of the Saint. The 1977 Declarations (art. 78) and the 1991 Constitutions (art. 203), are the only legislative texts that it appears in.

In her *Way of perfection* 4, 7, Teresa affirmed: “In this house where there are no more than thirteen – nor must there be any more – all must be friends, all must be loved, all must be held dear, all must be helped”. And in a *Letter to Mother Maria de San José*, Dec. 21, 1579, Teresa wrote: “You would be amazed at the harm that comes to these houses from there being many nuns, even though there may be an income and enough food”. Teresa expressed herself similarly in n. 28 of *On making the visitation*.

Art. 203 of the 1991 Constitutions derives from the foresaid as its source: “So that the teresian community may keep its character as a little ‘college of Christ’ and not lose the aspect that Holy Mother wished for it, no monastery will have more than twenty-one sisters”.

The 1990 Constitutions also mention the numerical element, though it does so in a very interesting way. In art. 14, they mention in parenthesis the relevant text of the Constitutions of Alcalá, as something fallen into disuse, but add a footnote that states: “In all monasteries as many as 21 nuns can be received, without exceeding this number” (footnote 6).

What clearly emerges from an attentive reading of the relevant teresian texts is that the Saint desires that the discalced carmelite communities not be too big, but at the same time, that there be a nucleus that can guarantee stability, vitality, and close communion between the nuns. One may consider that this nucleus needs to be around the same number required for canonical erection in the law as it is at present.

2.2. The vitality needed to practice and spread the charism

It is commonly remarked that the number of nuns considered by itself does not guarantee autonomy. The fact that there are some very small communities that seem to have great vital energy and large communities that lack the strength to continue are examples cited to prove the point. In fact, the apostolic constitution *VDQ* cites the numerical element along with other elements by way of verifying the existence of genuine autonomy. The pontifical document makes clear a very important element of autonomy, that of vitality in living and transmitting of the charism. This element is certainly more difficult to define than the minimal number of nuns. It is dealing in fact with vitality. And how can we easily verify such vitality? In addition, *VDQ* speaks in a manner that links vitality in living and transmitting of the charism.

By speaking in this way, the apostolic constitution certainly highlights the necessity of every community to live daily in coherence with its proper vocation. This means that the charism is not only well understood, but well lived. It is a form of fidelity to one's charism. But more so, it is a living fidelity. This is not merely dealing with clear ideas about our identity (a theoretical deepening), but about living coherently. The charism is not a work of art, beautiful but dead, that needs to be guarded in a museum, in the way precious objects are guarded. It is not by accident Luis de León remarked that one can know Teresa from her writings and from the lives of her daughters. Obviously, this is possible if that life continues to draw without interruption from the spirit of Holy Mother and is accompanied at the same time by development. In fact, continuity and development are two signs of vitality. Continuity without growth would lead to suffocation. Growth without continuity would lead to mutation (the creation of a different reality, perhaps very good, but a different reality). Without the two together, that is, without continuity and development one comes to a presence of those who use the name discalced carmelite, daughters of Teresa, but without living in accord with the spirit of Teresa.

With this expression – vitality in living and transmitting of the charism – the apostolic constitution indicates the necessity of sharing the richness of the lived charism with others. Certainly, there is transmission *ad intra*, within the same community, from generation to generation. But there is also transmission *ad extra*, a radiation of the charism in the universal Church – to use another expression of Pope Francis (cf. *VDQ* art. 5, § 2). It is true that an authentic life is fruitful and generates more life. It cannot be otherwise. An authentic life radiates and attracts. An authentic life shares, and is not afraid of others. It doesn't flee from tiring research, from uncomfortable questions, from wounds that are in need of care... *Ad intra* and *ad extra*...

This vitality in living and transmitting the charism is expressed by Teresa in a phrase that is very simple but also very significant: "It is we who are the beginners now; but let them continually strive to be beginners too, in the sense of growing better and better all the time" (*Foundations* 29, 32 – Peers trans.)¹.

Someone could pose the question: And what is the charism that needs to be lived and handed on? The 1991 Constitutions, referring back to Teresa, give the following response to this type of question: "In virtue of their vocation, [the discalced carmelite nuns] are called to contemplation in prayer and in life" (*Const. 1991*, art. 10; cf. *Life* 8, 5; *Way* 20, 5-6; 28, 2-3). And immediately following, they add: "True to the ideal of their Holy Mother, the discalced carmelite nuns live their contemplative ecclesial life in an atmosphere that integrates on the one hand, solitude and silence, with a sisterly communion of life on the other" (*Const. 1991*, art. 11; cf. *Way* 4, 9; *Primitive Const.* art. 8; *Const. 1581*, chap. 10, art. 3; *On making the visitation* 15, 42). The 1990 Constitutions affirm that, "Contemplation of the divine mysteries and assiduous union with God in prayer is not only the first and foremost duty of the discalced carmelite nuns, but it constitutes the very essence of their vocation" (art. 198).

¹ In original: "Ahora comenzamos y procuren ir comenzando siempre de bien en mejor".

This ideal needs to be lived deeply in every Carmel so that it can establish – in accordance with VDQ, art. 8, § 1 – the autonomy of each community. Obviously this element does not negate the other elements indicated by the apostolic constitution.

VDQ, n. 9 states that, “in your personal and communitarian prayer, you discover the Lord as the treasure of your life (cf. Lk 12, 34), your good, ‘utter goodness, the supreme good’, your ‘wealth and sufficiency’. You come to see, with steadfast faith, that ‘God alone suffices’, and that you have chosen the better part (cf. Lk 10, 42)”. At the same time, art. 5, § 2 indicates mission as an element that cannot be lacking from a fully contemplative life. In the teresian experience, there is also this strict link between contemplative experience and witness. Looking at Teresa, one can see clearly that her “contemplative experience... does not close her in on herself but makes her – like the Samaritan woman – able to go forth and give witness to the mercy of the Lord to others, to give life to others. Teresa thus ‘gives birth’ to sons and daughters who – like their mother – enter into the mystery of a living relationship with God. It creates the teresian Carmel. And it gives to teresian Carmel a specific mission: to seek out the mystery of life and to give life, to give birth to the fullness of life in God, to lead to the source of living water... It is a specific vocation of the disalced carmelite nuns. While they are not called to the transmission of life physically, spiritually they are called to be mothers in the full sense of the word. It is an authentic bestowing of life, a communication of grace, an accompaniment in growth: “The very nature of the teresian charism demands that the prayer of a disalced carmelite and the consecration of all her energies be directed toward the salvation of souls” (*Const. 1991*, art. 10). “And when your prayers, desires, disciplines, and fasts are not directed toward obtaining these things I mentioned, reflect on how you are not accomplishing or fulfilling the purpose for which the Lord brought you here together” (*Way 3*, 10).

The 1991 Constitutions affirm that, “the vocation of the disalced carmelite nun is essentially ecclesial and apostolic” (art. 126). It should be said that there is a deep and strong relationship between contemplation and mission orientated witness. Contemplation not only renders one capable of giving witness, but moves one to share that experience with others. From this perspective, the disalced carmelite nuns, contemplative nuns, are missionaries *par excellence*. They are not sisters of the active life, nor do they assume external duties, but they are missionaries by their manner of life, strong witnesses of God in the world. As John Paul II has said: “It is necessary that the disalced carmelite sisters be in our world, guides and teachers for the people of our day who hunger for communion and the experience of God. This mission of theirs comes from their vocation”. And further on: “Teresa admonishes her sisters that they are to be persons dedicated to prayer, that is, capable of inviting one another to communion with God. In this way, St. Teresa makes prayer and action flow together and generate a life that wells up from contemplation. The more this prayer develops, and the more favours that are received from our Lord, the more attentive will they be to their neighbours, especially to matters of the soul, and they can give their lives one or more times, to save one soul from mortal sin (cf. *Meditations on the Song of Songs 7, 8*)”².

VDQ, n. 36 reiterates: “The world and the Church need you to be beacons of light for the journey of the men and women of our time. This should be your prophetic witness. You have chosen not to flee the world out of fear, as some might think, but to remain in the world, while not being of the world (cf. John 18, 19)”. And in another place, Pope Francis says: “Your vocation is not a refuge; it is going into the field of battle, it is fighting, it is knocking on the heart of the Lord for that city. It is similar to Moses who held up his hands in prayer, while the people fought (cf. Ex 17, 8-13)”³.

To adequately understand the theme of mission, one cannot detach oneself from the historical context in which one lives; it is in this context that one is called to be a prophetic sign. Article 129 of the 1991 Constitutions speaks about offering a place, to be a help in the matter of prayer for the people who ask for it. How does one actually give this help? The ways can vary: by schools of prayer, by means of the written word, by meeting people in the parlour who need to speak, and

² JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to Fr. Felipe Sainz de Baranda on the occasion of the Teresian Year* (Oct. 14, 1981).

³ FRANCIS, *Meeting with the religious of Rome* (May 16, 2015).

other means. It is necessary to have an attentive heart and to be always predisposed to speak from experience about Christ. It is necessary to “go beyond a frontier”, “to go out from one’s self”, to detach one’s self from that which reassures and protects, to go from the familiar to unfamiliar territory so as to reach the other, to make one’s self a neighbour⁴.

2.3. A real capacity to provide for formation and governance

According to VDQ, the minimum number of nuns, and vitality in living and transmitting the charism, are not the only expressions of the autonomy of a monastery. To these is added the capacity to explicitly identify the persons within the community who have the capacity of exercising authority and taking responsibility for the formation. Even when there is a good number of nuns in the community, but a serious difficulty or impossibility of entrusting governance to another (cf. can. 624, § 2), such a monastery is lacking vital autonomy.

The prioress of a *sui iuris* monastery is a major superior in accordance with can. 613, § 2; 620. Her role is very simply described in art. 7 of VDQ: “Those called to carry out the ministry of authority, besides being attentive to their own formation, are to be guided by a true spirit of fraternity and service so as to foster a joy-filled environment of freedom and responsibility, thus promoting personal and community discernment and truthful communication of what each member does, thinks and feels”.

The prioress is entrusted with a very delicate service – to promote an atmosphere of freedom and responsibility, an atmosphere favourable to personal and communal discernment and to communicate the truth. This is saying more than that the prioress must be a good organizer of the activities of the group. Above all, this is saying that the prioress together with all the community ought to be strongly engaged in seeking God’s plan for the community and in its realization. This presupposes community dialogue in a climate of freedom and responsibility.

It is very important to understand again the mind of Teresa on this theme so as to add her spirit to the universal norms.

2.3.1. Functions of authority

For Teresa, the functions of authority are very clear and precise. The Saint indicated four of them: 1) act like a mother; 2) animate; 3) build and maintain unity; 4) promote the purpose of the life⁵.

Above all, Teresa is convinced that the prioress who is called to carry out the role of authority in a community needs to act as a mother. Acting like mother is very different, even at a linguistic level, from acting like a stepmother. And acting like a mother is a far cry from acting like a despot. These latter two are alien to Teresa. She does not want the prioress to be either a stepmother or a despot. Teresa does not want prioresses who only enjoy the honours and privileges and are disinterested in the community. Neither does Teresa want prioresses who want to satisfy the primitive instincts of domination and self-exaltation. Teresa wants prioresses who will proceed “with a mother’s love” in everything (*Primitive Const.*, art. 34).

The love of a mother that should permeate all the actions of the prioresses implies an attitude of respect for persons, an attitude of acceptance without preference, an attitude of attention to the needs of every member of the community.

Every prioress invested with the love of a mother “should strive to guide each nun along the way His Majesty is leading that one” (*Foundations* 18, 9) favouring freedom and personal responsibility. Every prioress invested with the love of a mother must teach by word and even more so by works (*Primitive Const.*, art. 22) but especially she must offer her life for the community.

In fact, mother love seeks to effectively procure the total good of the sisters, supporting, stimulating, correcting and forgiving them⁶. It seeks not to keep the sisters as minors, but helps

⁴ Cfr. S. CANNISTRÀ, *The heart of the carmelite mission* (Marriottsville 2014), pro manuscripto, 2.

⁵ Cfr. E. RENEDO, *Autoridad*, in: T. ALVAREZ (dir.), *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2002, 73-74.

⁶ Cfr. J. MURILLO, *Comunidad*, in: T. ALVAREZ (dir.), *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2002, 155.

them to grow. To treat the sisters in an adult manner means neither manipulating or marginalizing them; on the contrary, it means stimulating them in their thinking, in sisterly communion with the others; it means creating an atmosphere where each one can be themselves, without having to abdicate their own ideas in the search for God's will. Mother love does not accelerate this process, but respects the pace of each one. "If for ourselves something would be harsh", Teresa writes, "we must not order others to do it" (*Foundations* 18, 6).

In all of this, mother love differentiates itself from the approach of a stepmother or of a despot. When one does not truly love, one cannot serve well in the exercise of government. On account of this, for Teresa, the prioress must be "a mother, having the office of prioress" (*Way* 24, 2); and she cannot "guide the nuns with rigor [...] for they are not slaves" (*Letter to Madre María de San José*, Nov. 11, 1576).

It needs to be kept in mind that "the affective component greatly influences the exercise of authority and the interpersonal relationship that ensues; it can create an unstable atmosphere where there is an easy transition from friendship to antipathy, from trust to suspicion. [...] Only if she allows herself to be guided by the gifts proper to a woman, will the person in charge succeed in efficaciously carrying out her mission and creating a climate of understanding, of acceptance and of spontaneous and generous collaboration. She will call forth authentic obedience only if she commands with love in a manner that makes her loveable"⁷. These observations of R. Giordani clearly echo the thoughts of Teresa: "[The prioress] should strive to be loved so that she may be obeyed" (*Primitive Const.*, art. 34).

Teresa is convinced that the prioress, called to exercise the functions of authority, needs to animate the community. E. Renedo explains this function when he writes as follows: "It is sufficient to read the 1567 Constitutions, written for the nuns of St. Joseph's, to realize that Teresa of Jesus thought of the prioress as the animator of the community. She presents her in her multiple occupations, up to giving the impression that nothing happens outside the knowledge and control of authority. But she is not dealing exactly with this. The prioress is the one who animates, in the proper sense of the word. The one in authority keeps in mind the reason and purpose of the community. She is not the one who controls everything, but the one who directs everything so that the community pursues its mission. To understand and interpret precisely the 'permissions' prescribed in the Constitutions, it is necessary to begin with the laws of radicality. This implies the capacity to seriously consider the Gospel, especially those aspects concerning forgetfulness of one self, the death of the ego, being at the service of others. She is not dealing with these well known observances, which we need to look at again in our day, in order to deprive the nuns of freedom of action, of initiative, of responsibility, but in pursuing maturity and inner freedom. This is not obtained first and foremost by asking permissions, but by relying on a principle that is always valid: the radicality that relates to victory over one's own will"⁸.

To animate means exercising government by remaining true to the original inspiration and purpose of the community. It means doing this by setting out from individual persons, their gifts and their freedom, and the religious project that is to be lived by following Christ, fulfilling his mission. To animate means to act, to participate, stimulate, awaken energies, promote, create favourable conditions... so that the dynamism that moves people from the inside can be activated. To animate does not mean to give orders, but rather to transmit a *spirit*: "showing courage", indicating values, preparing the ground for the Spirit to act.

Animation is needed at a *personal level*, helping every individual sister to keep alive the radical option for Jesus Christ and his Kingdom in conformity with their charism, to live it all the time, with all one's heart, risking everything. Animation is also needed at *community level*, by promoting the sense of being "friends of the Lord" who seek together, in discernment and fraternity, the will of

⁷ B. GIORDANI, *La donna nella vita religiosa. Aspetti psicologici*, Milano 1993, 292.

⁸ E. RENEDO, *Autoridad*, in: T. ALVAREZ (dir.), *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2002, 73.

God, sharing their faith, intent on realizing their common project. In fact, as J. M. Guerrero says: “the person in authority ought more to enliven hope than control reality”⁹.

In dealing with governance, Teresa established norms which are full of wisdom: “Discretion is an important aspect of government, and very necessary in these houses” (*Foundations* 18, 6). And following on that: “The prioress must remember that they are not there for the purpose of choosing a path for others according to their own liking” (*Foundations* 18, 10). And again: “The prioress should take heed not to try to make such a one perfect by force” (*Foundations* 18, 10).

Teresa is convinced that the prioress, called to exercise authority in the community, needs to create and maintain the unity of the community. In founding the Carmel of St. Joseph’s in Avila, Teresa founded a family, and this family needs to go forward united by the bonds of charity. Teresa founded a group of friends of the Lord, and this group needs to go forward united by the bonds of charity. Nazareth and Bethany are the teresian icons of unity.

The person placed in authority is the symbol and the guarantee of the unity of the community which is a convergence of possibilities and calls, an integration of lights and personal charisms, in a common service. The person placed in authority ought therefore to see to it that the more important decisions are the fruit of the deliberation of all the sisters, recognizing that all the members of the community, being called together and marked by the same charism, have some light and truth at the time of discerning the plan of God. Whoever holds authority needs, therefore, to be always ready to *listen* and to *dialogue* with people. It is only with these dispositions that she can understand and gather the true aspirations of the sisters. Her role is to maintain the unity of the community in the context of a reasonable pluralism; this can be a source of enriching and creative tensions, not a source of divisions or of reciprocal damage. To create and preserve unity, the one in authority needs to be a “creator of freedom”, to bring to birth and develop areas where life can grow and develop.

Teresa is convinced that the prioress, who is called to exercise the role of authority in the community, has a responsibility to promote the goal of their life together, as she affirms in art. 34 of the Primitive Constitutions: “It is the duty of the mother prioress to take great care in everything about the observance of the Rule and Constitutions”. Teresa sees in the Rule and Constitutions a project worth living for, one freely chosen in virtue of religious profession, a project to be realised. However, as E. Renedo notes, “one can well say that St. Teresa of Jesus, in her presentation of authority in action in the community, does not consider it a safeguarding of laws, but as the promotion of a spirit, coinciding with the Rule and Constitutions. It is in order to continue to realize a divine plan, that Teresa embraced, gave life to, and presented to others well disposed like herself: the path of prayer lived in community under the guidance of a sister entrusted with the continual animation and incarnation of the teresian spirit in the Church”¹⁰.

The teresian ideal of the service of authority is recaptured in art. 210 of the 1991 Constitutions: “The prioress is placed at the head of the teresian community, and she governs the monastery as a major superior. By serving in the sisters the design of love of the Father the prioress is a bond of union and of charity among them; and she leads them, guides them, and accompanies them in the path of their vocation, and ensures that the Rule and Constitutions are faithfully observed”. And again in art. 92: “The task of breathing unity into the community and preserving it is entrusted to the prioress who must guide it in truth and in love”.

2.3.2. The role of the formator

At present there is a more realistic approach to being a formator. The role is not over idealised and allows for human weaknesses. The image of the formator has been humanised. Perhaps it has lost some of the aura of mysticism, but without doubt it is more inviting and less off-putting. Still, being mistress of novices today remains a difficult task.

⁹ J. M. GUERRERO GUERRERO, *Autoridad*, in: A. APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ - J. M. CANALS CASAS (dir.), *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milano 1994, 116.

¹⁰ E. RENEDO, *Autoridad*, in: T. ALVAREZ (dir.), *Diccionario de Santa Teresa*, Burgos 2002, 74.

In thinking of the image of the ideal mistress of novices, what comes to mind is that she should be very human, and able to accept her own imperfections with simplicity.

Then, being a formator requires the presence of certain very heterogeneous qualities which must be well harmonized with each other. Being a spiritual person alone is not sufficient, just as knowledge and certain abilities alone are not sufficient either; the same goes for a certain capacity for the task plus a course in formation. Naturally, mere canonical nomination does one equate with competency for the task. Yes, all of these things are required, it is true, but in right proportion, and sufficiently integrated in the person. It is not necessary that all of these qualities are present to an exceptional degree. When the prioress seeks an exceptional person for the task of formation, she runs the risk of never finding one. Besides, she also runs the risk of choosing someone who is exceptional in some respects, virtue or knowledge for example, but lacking in other ways that are just as necessary for formation.

With these clarifications, it is possible to indicate the essential needs of a formator:

- Personal maturity
- Possession of a genuine spirituality
- A call to the mission of education
- A full identification with the spirit of the institute
- A suitable and specific preparation for the task

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Keeping in mind the teresian vision of governance and formation and keeping in mind the change in the canonical requirements (can. 624, § 2), when it becomes too difficult or even impossible to find suitable people for these tasks, where a real capacity to govern and offer formation is lacking, then it is necessary to recognize the lack of autonomy in the monastery. These are the indications given by VDQ.

2.4. Dignity and quality of liturgical, fraternal and spiritual life

Among the basic elements required by VDQ to guarantee the autonomy of a monastery, there is also the dignity and quality of the liturgical, fraternal and spiritual life. It can be said that this element is very teresian. In fact, Teresa by her life and in her writings teaches about the quality of fraternal life.

In the letter on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, Pope Francis repeatedly stressed a fundamental dimension which should characterize the life of the whole Church, but in a special way, religious life. He addresses the following appeal specifically to religious:

“In a polarized society, where different cultures experience difficulty in living alongside one another, where the powerless encounter oppression, where inequality abounds, we are called to offer a concrete model of community which, by acknowledging the dignity of each person and sharing our respective gifts, makes it possible to live as brothers and sisters. So, be men and women of communion! Have the courage to be present in the midst of conflict and tension, as a credible sign of the presence of the spirit who inspires in human hearts a passion for all to be one. Live the mysticism of encounter”¹¹.

That is the appeal of the Roman Pontiff for the dignity and quality of fraternal life in all its dimensions, and about which he returns to speak in VDQ.

“I would ask you”, Pope Francis continues, “to think about my frequent comments about criticism, gossip, envy, jealousy, hostility and ways of acting which have no place in our houses. This being the case, the path of charity open before us is almost infinite, since it entails mutual acceptance and concern, practicing a communion of goods both material and spiritual, fraternal correction and respect for those who are weak. It is the mystique of living together”¹².

¹¹ FRANCIS, *Apostolic letter to all consecrated people on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life* (Nov. 28, 2014), n. I/2.

¹² *Ibidem*, n. II/3.

In the light of VDQ, without this foundation of quality fraternal relations we cannot speak of the autonomy of a monastery. And this is not a joke!

The life of a carmelite sister, her spiritual progress and especially her relationship with God depends on the manner in which she relates with the other sisters, how she deals with their slights, and how she supports them in their weaknesses. This idea is already present in the Desert Fathers. For example, Doroteo of Gaza writes: “The monastic life, in so far as it is human and Christian, does not allow any shortcut or preferential way of coming to God: It is only by being together with the others that one can not only save, but also grow in one’s own life; prayer and the spiritual life can never be understood as a flight from the neighbour. With much wisdom, the fathers affirm that if it is true that half of the monastic life is about staying in the cell, the other half is about encounter with the brethren”¹³.

2.4.1. Particular times for building sisterly relations

[During the community chapter] the sisters, under the guidance of the prioress, will discuss, as the Rule requires, everything that has to do with safeguarding the spirit of the Order, the salvation of souls, and sisterly correction in charity” – art. 92 of the 1991 Constitutions; and art. 200 adds: “The discalced carmelite nuns, who are governed by these Constitutions, profess an entirely contemplative life. They observe papal enclosure in monasteries *sui iuris* which are governed by and subject to a prioress, who is a major superior, according to the norm of law”. These two articles set in relief the co-ordinates of teresian community life – these elements, however, are common to the monastic life in general: life together in one place (the monastery), subject to a rule (the Constitutions) and to a superior.

The teresian monastery which is referred to as a “coenobium” (colony) indicates a very concrete reality, a life in which everyone is close to each other on a daily basis; it is a life in which each one’s personal journey interacts with everyone else’s day after day and becomes a shared history, with a common goal, in an option for the other which is constantly renewed and refined¹⁴.

In every community, there are four particular events from which the community draws life. They are: prayer together, meals together, discernment together, and the common recreation. In them, the community is formed, grows and finds correction. The importance of these derives from, among other things, the structure of the monastery. There are special places where the community can pray, eat, discern and recreate together: the choir, the chapter room, the recreation room. As stated in art. 64 of the 1991 Constitutions: “Therefore, by celebrating the Eucharist and the sacraments, and by proclaiming the word and singing the divine praises, a community builds and renews itself, expresses its union with the universal Church, and does its part for the coming of the Kingdom”. And again: “The Eucharist is the source and summit of community life and the sign of unity and bond of union in Christ” (*Const. 1991*, art. 89). In common prayer, sisterly relations are intertwined and their quality is revealed: tensions, tiredness, difficulties. In prayer together, relations are healed, transformed, consolidated...

According to art. 93 of the 1991 Constitutions, “The common table is the symbol of family unity”. Mealtime is a time for sharing, an expression of communion with the Lord and with the sisters. At the same time, the meal is an occasion for observing our capacity of interrelating with the sisters because its quality is revealed in how we take our food, how we offer it to another, and how we communicate in word and gesture.

The chapter has great importance in the life of the community. As Teresa writes: “I should like the five of us who at present love each other in Christ to make a kind of pact that since others in these times gather together in secret against His Majesty to prepare wicked deeds and heresies, we might seek to gather together some time to free each other from illusion and to speak about how we

¹³ DOROTEO OF GAZA, *Letter 1*, 180, in: L. D’AYALA VALVA (dir.), *Il cammino del monaco. La vita monastica secondo la tradizione dei padri*, Bose-Magnano 2009, 351.

¹⁴ Cfr. A. PIOVANO, *L’arte delle relazioni fraterne nella tradizione monastica*, in: A. PIOVANO, *La vita monastica tra memoria e progetto. La ricerca di un senso per l’uomo post-moderno*, [s.l.] 2016, 81.

might mend our ways and please God more since we do not know ourselves as well as others who observe us if they do so with love and concern for our progress” (*Life* 16, 7). The chapter is a time of *communication* or of listening and speaking, of discerning together. The prioress has to duly inform the sisters about everything affecting the life of the monastery” (*Const. 1991*, art. 92). All the sisters ought to have the possibility of expressing their point of view. And all need to take responsibility in making decisions on various question about the life of the community.

Of its nature, the teresian style requires and carries with it the participation of all the sisters in a particular manner, which is to be promoted by the prioress using every available means. It would be culpable not to do so. The comfortable position of one who does not collaborate, who does not take a risk, who does not speak in turn and is thus afforded the luxury of criticizing everything, is to be denounced as a form of cowardice¹⁵.

The fourth important moment in the life of a community is recreation. It is a time of *relaxation*. It is a time for more social communication. “The holier they are the more sociable they are with their sisters” (*Way* 41, 7). As the Primitive Constitutions affirm: “When they are through with the meal, the Mother Prioress may dispense from the silence so that all may converse together on whatever topic pleases them most as long as it is not one that is inappropriate for a good religious” (art. 26).

All of these times are to be permeated with the teresian style described in art. 88 of the Constitutions: “St. Teresa taught a community lifestyle which is that of a small family in which all are evangelically equal, relations are openly sincere, joys and sorrows are shared, and the members are committed to one another as sisters for their entire lives”.

We are reminded of this ideal by VDQ. All of these times should develop good quality community relations. Otherwise, the community is lacking, at least partially, in vital autonomy.

2.4.2. The quality of sisterly relations

Above all, the quality of the relations between the sisters comes from the capacity and the courage of meeting together, *one with another*, accepting the risk of the encounter but totally allowing for the difference of another sister, especially difference of character, and her complementarity. The quality of relationships is deepened by sharing, by being *one with another*. This allows for overcoming the risk of living together like little islands without any real sharing. Being one with another means instead, to travel together and especially to live in responsibility for one another. The quality of sisterly relations is strengthened when it is lived and one gives her life *for the other*.

It is zeal that leads to growth in sisterly relations. Zeal creates the tension that saves relations from repetition, from passivity, from the sort of things that are a risk to monastic life, like being so “regulated” that it leads at times to automation: “It was always done like this, it is always done this way, and it will always be done this way”! Zeal is what overcomes the fear of introducing change and innovation.

There are certain attitudes that can destabilise, restrict, or even corrupt relations in a community. When there is a lack of discernment and a correct style of religious life, then *selfishness* will prevail and members will remain *closed in their own sheepfolds*. Even if there are relations within a small group, these relationships are often distorted, artificial. Consequently, such a “community” is marked by fragility, contradictions, the inability to give themselves a form of life: there is no one thing that binds them together, and so they are influenced by everything. In reality, it is only possible to live in authentic communion by leaving their own folds to enter the fold of the Lord.

The quality of sisterly relations also matures thanks to sisterly correction. True charity towards the sisters [...] requires not only to “cover” their sins [that is, not to disclose them, draw the veil of mercy, not to judge them] but also to correct them, freeing the sisters who are prisoners of their faults, and at the same time avoiding complicity through silence. In the communities, there used be so called the “chapter of faults” (cf. *Primitive Const.*, art. 43). For the most part, it has disappeared. But has another place been found where correction is possible? Often enough, the answer is “no”. Yet it remains

¹⁵ Cfr. S. M. ALONSO RODRÍGUEZ, *Capitolo. Dimensione teologica*, in: A. APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ - J. M. CANALS CASAS (dir.), *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milano 1994, 162.

necessary. Certainly, is not easy because the other is not always ready to accept an observation, but a lot also depends on the maturity of the community: it is not enough to say that it is difficult; we must continue to try, to seek ways that make us mature, however limited or difficult¹⁶.

In the end, the quality of the sisterly relations can only grow on a terrain enriched by *agape*, that is, by the love of Christ, which in fact is the foundation stone of the whole edifice of community relations. Christ forms the community, leading it to fulfilment: “There is truly a deep and strict link between the love of Christ and the community. [...] The more a member of the community progresses in the love of Christ, the more s/he becomes ‘one’ with the sisters/brothers. The more a person is distanced from Christ, the more also s/he becomes distanced from the sisters/brothers and vice versa. It is in Christ that all are united and it is in him that they find their centre”¹⁷.

To participate in this gift, which is communion in Christ, means concretely to let Christ be active in sisterly relations, to have the mind of Christ. And then direct these sentiments toward each other. Because of character, training, sensitivity, there can be several ways of understanding or looking at reality: important differences in a community, are never to be annulled, but are to be brought back to the mentality of Christ.

In this way, sisterly relations of quality are formed, a vital prerequisite of the autonomy of a monastery – as affirmed in VDQ.

2.5. Sign value and participation in life of the local Church

Among the requirements for vital autonomy mentioned in the apostolic constitution is the sign value and participation in the life of the local Church. It’s a little difficult to describe precisely this requirement.

The 1991 Constitutions just mention this element in the second part of art. 204: “In promoting new foundations, the needs of the Church and of our Order will be kept in mind. Special consideration will be given to the young Churches and other local Churches which have need for the witness given by the teresian contemplative life”. In the text, it appears to be referring to can. 610. Paragraph 1 of this canon reads: “The erection of houses takes place with consideration for their advantage to the Church and the institute and with suitable safeguards for those things which are required to carry out properly the religious life of the members according to the proper purposes and spirit of the institute”. The Constitutions speak of the ‘necessity’ of the Church, while the Code refers to the ‘benefit’ of Church. With these expressions, the law highlights how new foundations must meet the needs of a particular Church; and the same applies to existing foundations. Contemplative communities are inserted in the local Church and are called to live *pro bono Ecclesiae* in accord with the tenor of can. 610.

But we must recognize that some foundations came into existence, not as a positive response to the needs of a particular Church, or to the needs of the Order, but as a response to personal needs. They came into being because there was a nun (or a small group of nuns) who “needed to found” or, even worse, because there was a nun (or a small group of nuns) who could no longer live in their own monastery (because of conflicts, divisions, etc.). And this nun or this group founded a new monastery, wounded from the outset, and often carrying the wound for a long, long time. Very often it is not rooted in the local Church. Just as there was a lack of discernment in its foundation, that lack continues to exist... The nuns are not known, no one comes to pray with or meet with them... Yes, they themselves are praying, but their inclusion in the local Church is very limited.

We must recognize that many monasteries of discalced carmelite nuns were founded, even in the same diocese or city, at a time where there was an abundance of vocations. These times are past, with the communities that remain getting older and weaker... and precisely because of all this, their significance in the local Church is very limited.

In light of VDQ, the significance and reference to its inclusion in the local Church is one of the basic elements of vital autonomy.

¹⁶ Cfr. A. PIOVANO, *L'arte delle relazioni fraterne nella tradizione monastica*, in: A. PIOVANO, *La vita monastica tra memoria e progetto. La ricerca di un senso per l'uomo post-moderno*, [s.l.] 2016, 88-98.

¹⁷ A. BÖCKMANN, *Apprendre le Christ. A l'écoute de saint Benoît*, Bellefontaine 2002, 238.

2.6. Self-sufficiency

The apostolic constitution also highlights another indispensable prerequisite to ensure the autonomy of a monastery: the possibility of self-sufficiency. As far as one can see, VDQ is referring to the means necessary for survival. In this way, it echoes the aforementioned can. 610 where in § 2 it states: “No house is to be erected unless it can be judged prudently that the needs of the members will be provided for suitably”. It is obvious that a contemplative community can be said to be autonomous when it manages to find these means of livelihood.

The 1991 Constitutions emphasize this element in the final part of art. 204: “They have to ensure at the same time the conditions which allow the community to regularly lead the religious and contemplative life proper to our monasteries, and prudently assess the possibilities of adequately providing for the needs of the nuns” [English translation in the Constitutions is poor]. The 1926 Constitutions express this criterion more strongly: “No monastery is to be established if it is not possible to prudently judge that in the light of its resources, or with the usual alms, or otherwise, it can conveniently provide house and sustenance for the nuns” (art. 223).

Teresa herself said: “Leave this worrying to the One who can move all, for He is the Lord of money and of those who earn money” (*Way 2*, 2). With such confidence in the Lord, Teresa did not however consider herself dispensed from taking good care of the nuns. She founded the Carmel of St. Joseph in Avila in the light of their having sufficient means to survive (*Life 32*, 10; *Way 1*, 1). Then she decided that the monastery should live by alms alone. She founded others again... with income: Malagon (1568, cf. *Foundations 9*), Alba de Tormes (1571, cf. *Foundations 20*), Beas (1575, cf. *Foundations 22*), Caravaca (1576, cf. *Foundations 27*) and Soria (1581, cf. *Foundations 30*). The concern of Teresa was to live in radical poverty, but at the same time have the necessary means. If she saw it appropriate in some cases, Teresa renounced the idea of living by alms alone, and allowed for income.

2.7. A suitably appointed monastery building

The final requisite for autonomy of life listed by VDQ is a suitably appointed monastery building. In speaking of “a suitable structure”, the apostolic constitution is probably referring to a structure that meets the requirements of a contemplative community; and, therefore, above all, having reserved spaces where the community can, with serenity, live its contemplative life. This is repeated both in the Constitutions and in the permission required for the canonical foundation of the monastery when “all the conditions required by the law are fulfilled, especially as regards enclosure, the material support of the nuns and their spiritual assistance”. Obviously the problem is not so much the formal act of closing the enclosure, but the vital act of creating an environment conducive to contemplation. In our own day, certain very delicate and important questions arise: Where and how is the infirmary to be organized? Where and how is the kitchen to be organized? Where and how is the parlour to be organized? Where and how is the guest room to be organized? These are just some of the questions concerning the organization of the monastery. Contact with people from outside is necessary. First of all, a contemplative community needs people, needs their help. On the other hand, a contemplative community is called to share its experience with people, and in that way to help them. At the same time, moreover, a contemplative community needs a suitably appointed monastery building; it has need of those spaces and times where it can have the necessary privacy “to be alone with Him alone” (*Life 36*, 29). Otherwise, it runs the risk of losing its identity.

Teresa wrote: “I would not want anyone to hear me when I speak with God, or hinder me from being alone with him” (*Letter to Fr. Jerónimo Gracián*, Nov. 1576). And again in another place: “No one but those who experience it will believe the joy that is felt in these foundations once we are enclosed where no secular person can enter, for however much we love them it is not enough to take away this great consolation in finding ourselves alone” (*Foundations 31*, 46).

It is in this perspective that the 1991 Constitutions speak of “a material separation that protects the privacy and recollection proper to a teresian community” (*Const. 1991*, art. 110).

We can well consider that it is in this sense too that VDQ indicates a suitably appointed monastery building, as one of the requirements for the vital autonomy of a monastery.

3. Vigilance on the autonomy of monasteries

According to universal law and the Constitutions of the Discalced Carmelites, the autonomy of the monasteries is placed under the vigilance of the competent authority. Such vigilance indicates that there is an external body from such monasteries that watches over the correct use of that autonomy. Such a body should not intervene in the government of a community when that autonomy is being exercised in the correct manner; but it should, in fact, needs to intervene when the autonomy is being misused. In light of VDQ, it can be said that such an external body must intervene whenever an essential element of autonomy diminishes.

The principal means of vigilance – although not limited to – is the pastoral visitation (cfr. can. 628). The regular superior in the case of a monastery associated to the masculine branch of the Order (can. 614); or the diocesan bishop in the case of a monastery not associated to the masculine branch of the Order (can. 615); must regularly, at least once a triennium (cfr. *Const. 1991*, art. 244-245), make this visitation to verify among other matters:

- The juridical-spiritual condition of the community (contemplative dimension of the community, exercise of government, formation program, etc.)
- Administration of goods (“The visitor should examine very carefully and attentively the financial records and not pass over them lightly” [*On making the visitation*, art. 10]),
- Observance of the cloister (cfr. *Const. 1991*, art. 122; *Const. 1990*, art. 156)¹⁸.

According to can. 628 § 2, n. 1, the pastoral visitation is “the right and duty” of the competent authority. It is probably exaggerated to expect the pastoral visitation may resolve all the problems of the community. But the scope of the visitation is not merely to resolve all the problems. The scope, above all, is to verify the journey of the community. The visitation should not be carried out only when the community finds itself in a critical situation, but regularly. In order to be able to assure the correct progress and intervene at the correct moment, if in the case that problems would arise in the exercise of autonomy.

It is true that regarding the practice of pastoral visitations, at times, there weighs certain negative experiences from the past. Some visitations were done badly. Some even left many wounds, not even helping in any way. However, these experiences cannot justify abandoning visitations for many years nor the formalism right before elections. Teresa not only holds the visitations necessary, she even recommends them frequently, even giving a concrete explanation: “The official visitation should take place once a year so that with love faults may be gradually corrected and removed” (*On making the visitation*, art. 5).

Besides the pastoral visitation, another means of vigilance is the regular examination of some aspects of life. For example, the ordinary of the monastery must examine each year the economic report of the monastery (cfr. can. 637; *Const. 1991*, art. 255; *Const. 1990*, art. 49) and even give consent to the extraordinary administration within the authority’s area of competence (cfr. can. 638, § 4; *Const. 1991*, art. 252; *Const. 1990*, art. 162; list of extraordinary expenses).

In reality, only in this context, of the authority endowed with the task of a distinctive vigilance, accompanying the community, does the institution of the commission *ad hoc* make sense, which VDQ speaks of in art. 8 § 2. It would be very strange, in fact, absurd, to abandon the community for years and to only take interest in the community in a difficult moment, “whenever the requirements for a monastery’s genuine autonomy are lacking” (VDQ, art. 8, § 2). At that point, it can be already too late.

¹⁸ Cfr. D. J. ANDRÉS, *Comentario al can. 615*, in: A. MARZOA - J. MIRAS - R. RODRÍGUEZ-OCAÑA (dir.), *Comentario exegético al Código de Derecho Canónico*, vol. 2/2, Pamplona 2002³, 1539.

4. Critical situations of autonomy and possible solutions

According to art. 8, § 1 of VDQ, one can speak of the vital autonomy of a monastery when all the indicated requirements are fulfilled. However, one must speak of a limited vital autonomy when some elements are diminished or unfulfilled. One must also speak of an absent vital autonomy when the majority of the requirements are not fulfilled. This distinction, almost scholastic, is important in making correct decisions regarding difficult situations. In the case of limited autonomy, one can seek to restore the elements that are lacking. In the case of an absent autonomy, there is a need to proceed in a way that is more radical.

4.1. Personal help

In the cases of limited autonomy, it is possible to consider some type of personal help. Nevertheless, the intention and the manner of such help needs to be clear. There needs to be a real possibility of revitalizing the community and not solely to prolong the agony.

What does “revitalize” mean? It means to give life once again... It means to give impetus once again saying openly what is not going well in the community, what causes suffering and what destroys fraternity.

And what needs to be the way of doing so? The theme of help is, in fact, rather quite complicated and has various aspects to consider. When it deals with temporary help, it does not make much sense to send nuns to another monastery for just a month, two months, or three months. One would not have sufficient time to settle in and consequently it would not be a great help to the community: one would only be a guest. Naturally, this brief presence could be helpful to curb an emergency situation or as a first step in view of a much longer transfer (from one to three years – cfr. *Const. 1991*, art. 178). And a temporary transfer that is much longer needs to change into a definitive transfer, unless it is a short-lived emergency. Without these steps, the community’s situation does not change. True, any personal help gives some relief to the community that receives it; but if the help is only temporary, the change of conditions of the community is also only temporary. Unfortunately, there are too many illusions in this matter.

When one is dealing with definitive help, one needs to keep in mind the possibility of truly recovering autonomy. One cannot reduce the whole matter to simply guaranteeing the resources for material services. One must think of “qualified help”. But to do so, one must move beyond the mentality of a continual traffic of nuns from other communities and even from other regions of the world. This is a form of an artificial maintenance of life.

Seeking the light of Teresa herself, the ideas expressed in *On making the visitation* come to mind. Without a doubt, Teresa deals with extreme and exceptional cases, nonetheless, her “determinada determinación” [“determined determination”] is striking. Whenever a community habitually lacks in fidelity to the Carmelite style of life, Holy Mother opts for radical changes, even a refoundation. “The only remedy for it – writes Teresa – would be a change of prioress, perhaps even a transference of the whole community and the bringing into the convent of other nuns who are perfect in the observance of their Rule. This would amount to nothing more nor less than a refounding of the convent, and the dispersal of the present members of the community among other houses” (*On making the visitation*, art. 23 – Peers transl.).

These are difficult topics – not only because, objectively speaking, in Carmel around the world, there are not many human resources to assure help for all the communities that find themselves in crisis; but also because in many cases it has become a matter of survival. And when people desire to survive they do not think to anything else. In such circumstances, people do not reason, they do not discern, but rather allow themselves to be carried away by emotions. Furthermore, it activates the mechanisms of self-defense. For this reason, VDQ indicates as a means of help a shared discernment – a commission *ad hoc* composed of the ordinary, the president of the federation, the religious assistant and the prioress of the monastery – in order to evaluate the possibility of revitalizing the community (cfr. *VDQ*, art. 8, § 2).

Dealing with personal help, one needs to recall the norm that VDQ introduces: “The recruitment of candidates from other countries solely for the sake of ensuring the survival of a monastery is to be absolutely avoided” (VDQ, art. 6). The apostolic constitution insists on the need of genuine initial formation that is offered to the candidate. The recruitment of candidates from other countries solely to ensure the number of members of a community does not resolve the problems of autonomy for the monastery. In addition, such recruitment puts at risk the same formation of candidates. How can a community train in a significant way while it does not enjoy autonomy? Regarding this topic, one needs to recall the indications of the decree *Perfectae caritatis* (n. 21): “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”.

4.2. Affiliation to another monastery or entrustment to the federation president and her council

Art. 8, § 3 of VDQ introduces alternative solutions to transfers in order to assist monasteries in crisis. These solutions are affiliation to another monastery or entrustment, if the monastery belongs to a federation, to the federation president and her council. Both of the juridical figures are not known in the Teresian tradition, but now, by legislative intervention of the Roman Pontiff, they present themselves as possibilities. Indeed, the first aspect that needs to be emphasized is that such figures are not obligatory, they are possibilities in the case that they are appropriate. “This process [i.e. the process of guidance for the revitalization of the monastery] may also envisage” – says VDQ, art. 8, § 3.

“If the monastery is in a structurally difficult situation, its autonomy needs to be definitively suspended, having recourse to a form of *tutela* [guardianship] that precludes amalgamation or that accompanies extinction. In the case of *tutela*, the community of the monastery *sui iuris*, that is reduced to a dependent community, can continue to live in its own monastery” – explains S. Paciolla¹⁹. However, the same canonist, when speaking elsewhere about affiliation, does not speak only in view of the closure of the monastery in crisis, but also in view of the possible overcoming of the crisis and of the restoring of the complete juridical autonomy of the monastery.

Choosing affiliation, one needs to keep in mind that by virtue of that choice, the prioress of the affiliating monastery then becomes the major superior of the affiliated monastery. In this way, the juridical autonomy of the affiliated monastery becomes limited, its major superior becomes a local superior (vicar); the chapter is suspended; the legal representation and the administration pass to the new major superior. The juridical condition of such an affiliated monastery becomes similar to the conditions of a new foundation not yet canonically erected.

When, for whatever reason, affiliation to another monastery is not possible, the Congregation can directly entrust a monastery in crisis to the president of a federation and her council.

4.3. Suppression / amalgamation

Suppression is the most radical solution that is applied in the case of a monastery that lacks vital autonomy. “To suppress an autonomous monastery of nuns belongs to the Apostolic See, with due regard to the precepts of the constitutions concerning its goods” – affirms can. 616, § 4. This is the canonical foundation for suppression. The Constitutions refer to it (cfr. *Const. 1991*, art. 208; *Const. 1990*, art. 140). In this way, be it universal law or the Constitutions, they confirm that suppression belongs to the competence of the Holy See; however, they do not give any criteria regarding the suppression.

It is not that way in the 1977 Declarations. Art. 165 affirms: “The suppression of a monastery or the amalgamation of more monasteries will take place whenever there are lacking the necessary conditions for an adequate community life and the hope of further vitality”. The Declarations are very clear in giving criteria for a suppression. Regrettably, these criteria are not taken up in subsequent

¹⁹ Cfr. S. PACIOLLA, *La vita monastica. Terminologia, strutture, problemi, prospettive* (Sacrofano 2013), pro manuscripto, 10.

legislation. Currently, it is first of all the practice of the dicastery to determine the rules regarding suppression.

Neither the president of a federation, nor the provincial or bishop, can impose suppression upon an autonomous monastery. Nevertheless, when the situation is very grave and the community is not aware or does not want to do anything, the president of the federation can present the case to the Holy See, asking for an intervention.

The decision of the suppression of a community normally needs to arise from the same community. At times, this decision needs to be prepared for by accompanying the community for some time. The greatest difficulty is not a juridical aspect, but rather the human element. It is a painful and difficult decision and for this reason sometimes this decision is rejected.

Formally, it is the chapter of the monastery that needs to vote in favor of the suppression (chapter acts are necessary). In addition, each sister with the permission of the two chapters needs to find a new community and needs to make the definitive transfer. There can be a trial experience for some time prior to the transfer; however, before the closure of the monastery all need to be definitively transferred to new communities. All together to a new community (this is amalgamation) or some to different monasteries. The opinion of the bishop is also necessary (not the permission but the opinion) according to can. 616, § 1.

And the destination, at least in general, of goods. Immediate alienation is not necessary but a decision needs to be made, with another chapter act, regarding what to do: sell, donate... to the Order, to the Diocese, or to a social institution, etc.

4.4. Difficult choices

One needs to admit that many nuns are now very tired, tired of feeling tired, and they do not have the time or the courage to stop and ask themselves what is the cause. They are tired of hearing that the consecrated life is in crisis and it does not have the strength and resources... And consequently, these nuns desiring to defend themselves make their programs of restructuring... but honestly, they are too weak to implement them. Because, evidently, to close one presence implies a quantity of incalculable energy. And it follows, that these nuns enter into a vicious cycle...

And what is the way out? First of all, the real problem needs to be recognized. The real problem can be the fear of letting go of what these nuns hold as more secure, that which over the course of many years they have built with so many efforts. This is how it was for the people of Israel in exile; that far from the land that God had promised them, they adapted and renounced the search. The situation that many monasteries *sui iuris* are living requires the courage to go out from exile even if this means beginning again and starting over.

To leave a presence, certainly, means to leave a proven in time way of being visible and recognizable; it means renouncing self-sufficiency; it means asking to be gathered in the intimacy of human life, the only place where joy and pain can exist, fraternally and without shame, shared. Perhaps, with this awareness, the pain of loss that inevitably accompanies the decision to close a presence, can slowly create the space which allows for the delicate feeling of a return to the lightness of the beginnings...²⁰

5. Autonomy and communion

The autonomy that is well-lived helps the whole community to understand more profoundly one's own vocation and to live it in a mature way, sharing such an experience without fear with other persons and even other communities. In fact, the autonomy that is well-lived opens itself up to relationships. The autonomy that is poorly-lived transforms itself into closure, into isolation.

It is very significant, that in VDQ nn. 28-29, autonomy is considered above all under the subject of relationships with other monasteries. The Holy Father says that autonomy "ought not to mean [...] isolation, especially from the other monasteries of the same Order or the same charismatic family" (VDQ n. 28). Further ahead, he recalls, "No one contributes to the future in isolation, by his

²⁰ Cfr. F. BALOCCO, *Dallo stile dell'uomo allo stile di Dio*, in: *Testimoni* 3 (2013).

or her efforts alone, but by seeing himself or herself as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance. For this reason, take care to avoid the disease of self-absorption and to preserve the value of communion between different monasteries as a path of openness towards the future” (VDQ n. 29). In such a way, autonomy is placed in the context of the theology of communion and draws from it its authentic interpretation.

As the Second Vatican Council observes that the life of the Church needs to be formed by communion (cfr. LG 1; GS 32), which is not optional, but is the *forma Ecclesiae*. This communion is an art of uniting diversities, an art of opening oneself to others. “Such *koinonia* is not simply the result of a system of homogeneous and convergent choices” – notes M. Díez Presa²¹. It is rather the fruit of a search of what unites rather than what divides. It is the fruit of a discernment among that which is essential and that which is secondary. It is the fruit of dialogue... It is the fruit of welcoming the other. Thus falls the prejudices, the fear of the other is defeated, the temptation to identify differences and divisions!

Speaking of the teresian Carmel, it is necessary to be aware that the charism is not the property of neither a person nor a monastery, but is a gift of the Spirit, given to the Church by means of an institute. This spiritual-juridical element brings to the establishment of the religious family recognized as such by the supreme authority in the Church: the Holy See. In fact, the 1991 Constitutions affirm: “The Discalced Nuns of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel belong to a religious family, endowed with its own proper charism for the purpose of fulfilling a special mission in the Mystical Body of Christ” (Const. 1991, art. 1). In a similar way, the 1990 Constitutions affirm: “The Order of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel constitutes in the Church a spiritual family to which belong equally the Carmelite Fathers and the Discalced Carmelite Nuns. Between them there ought to exist a unity of spirit and of doctrine, but not necessarily a dependence of government and jurisdiction” (Const. 1990, art. 133). The affiliation to the same family is principally expressed by the sharing of the same charism. The affiliation to the same family, furthermore, is emphasized by common reference to the same Superior General (Const. 1991, art. 200-201a; 241-246; missing element in the 1990 Constitutions, restored by the so-called monasteries of the “third way”). Although, the Superior General does not carry out a juridical task (not even in the 1991 Constitutions), the Church, by means of proper law, recognizes a role of spiritual paternity, and therefore, he is a principal of unity in the one family.

The exact problem that arose in the years 1990-1991 was not the approval of two texts of Constitutions, that still remained teresian and depositories of the same charism. The problem has been the decision of the monasteries that have chosen the 1990 Constitutions and have broken the teresian tradition by eliminating the relationship with the Superior General at the juridical level. From distant times, there has been a group of monasteries associated with the masculine branch of the Order and a group of monasteries entrusted to the particular vigilance of the diocesan bishop, by special concession of the Holy See, due to particular historical circumstances. Both shared the sense of belonging to one family. In 1990, a group of monasteries made this element diminish. That experience caused tensions among various monasteries. However, with the passing of some years, life has begun to correct the positions that were taken. Some monasteries have sought to overcome the rupture that occurred. A good path has been made, but it is not finished. It is the tiring journey towards the communion of the entire teresian Carmel – the communion that not only recognizes the Superior General with the role of spiritual paternity in the whole Order, but that also builds close bonds among all the nuns following the indications from the letter of John Paul II, “I desire that the approbation of the two texts of the Constitutions, by which I have tried to respond to the express desires of the different monasteries, keeps alive the spiritual unity of all the teresian Carmel, in the midst of its legitimate historical traditions, and the new circumstances, places and cultures, in which it embodies its charism. All of the Discalced Carmelite Nuns joined with the Discalced Carmelite

²¹ M. Díez PRESA, *Comunione*, in: A. APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ - J. M. CANALS CASAS (dir.), *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milano 1994, 310.

Friars, form in the Church the one and same Order of the Discalced Brothers and Sisters of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Mount Carmel. [...] Because of this, an intense mutual love must unite you in your vocation”²².

Obviously, the question of communion in the teresian Carmel does not exhaust itself with the theme of building good relationships between the '90 and '91 nuns. The question is much more complex. It is the question of building better relationships between the '91 and '91 nuns, as well as between the '90 and '90 nuns.

One cannot think of the Order as a unity, more or less organized, of isolated communities. Juridical autonomy, cannot transform itself in a deformation, in which one reasons only from the prospective of individual communities; in which one creates a form of individual collectivism; in which one closes the horizon there where the cloister of the monastery closes. The Order is a family, a community of communities and it cannot be permitted that this typical teresian characteristic disappears, defeated by juridical regulations imposed without respecting one's own juridical-charismatic physiognomy by foreign ways of thinking... In every way, the fundamental question is the change of mentality: from self-reference to the reciprocity and the walking together!

The communion in Carmel does not absolutely indicate uniformity. The communion in Carmel signifies the unity in diversity. As C. Maccise recalls, “It is about a diversity not made of fundamentally opposing positions that lead to dissolution, destruction or loss of identity, but rather of a diversity faithful to the essence of the charism and that is enriched with the diversity of everything that is secondary and cultural. With the exception of the essential elements of the charism, that are expressed in the Constitutions that emerge from the life and experience of our Mother Saint Teresa, and in which all have to coincide, the other aspects of the life, fruit of a culture or era, are relative and can be lived with a diversity that is enriching”²³.

The present reality of the Order that reflects the present reality of the universal Church makes it very clear to see: it is not time to remain isolated; it is not time to walk alone. *Ya es tiempo de caminar – caminar juntos!* (It is time to walk! To walk together!). And it doesn't mean only giving a hand in emergency situations. It means indeed walking together sharing all experiences.

Diversity cannot dominate over communion. The autonomy cannot dominate over communion.

6. Structures of communion

In the apostolic constitution, the Holy Father clearly reasserts that the autonomy of monasteries should not be a motive to isolate oneself from others. As it appears, just the negative experiences of isolation of many monasteries have urged the Pope to update the legislation on this topic. The proposal is very clear: the federations (cfr. *VDQ*, n. 30). By means of *VDQ*, the Holy Father makes it obligatory for all monasteries to belong to federations: “Initially, all monasteries are to be part of a federation” (*VDQ*, art. 9, § 1). And although, the adverb “initially” can cause some perplexity, the interpretation given to this norm is very clear: all monasteries need to belong to a federation, unless they obtain a dispensation from the Congregation. As an example, the explanation given by the former head of office at CICALSAL, O. Pepe, can be cited: “In the ninth article, first paragraph, we find an absolute novelty that establishes that initially (from the outset, from the beginning, in the first moment) it is obligatory that all monasteries need to be federated. Continuing, in a second moment, special reasons can be manifested, not those [issues] that are common or those problems that can be resolved by the ordinary, that would bring the monastery to solicit the Congregation (CICALSAL) to leave the federation. The Congregation (CICALSAL), after a profound discernment can deny the exit, or in some circumstances, suggest the transfer to another federation of the same Order”²⁴.

²² JOHN PAUL II, *Letter to the Discalced Carmelite Nuns upon the approval of their fundamental legislation* (Oct. 1, 1991), n. 3.

²³ C. MACCISE, *La relación entre frailes – monjas en el Carmelo teresiano*, in: AA. VV., *V Encuentro de frailes y monjas de la CICLA NORTE*, México 2011, 13.

²⁴ O. PEPE, *Aspectos jurídicos de la constitución apost. del Papa Francisco sobre la vida contemplativa femenina “Vultum Dei quaerere”* (Roma, Oct. 28-30, 2016), pro manuscrito, 8.

At this point, the questions of Father General ring out, the questions put forth well before VDQ, when in the “sacred palaces” they were already thinking of imposing federations on all monasteries: “Is it to favor communion among the monasteries, to increase communication and information among them, to improve formation and the organization in view of their ‘opportune renewal’ (VC 59)? Or rather is the intention only to create a network among the monasteries, so that they are more connected to the Holy See and directly approachable through the figure of the assistant?”²⁵.

The reason for affiliation to federations is explicitly stated in the exposition part of the apostolic constitution. N. 30 affirms: “The principal aim of a federation is to promote the contemplative life in the member monasteries, in accordance with the demands of their proper charism, and to ensure assistance in initial and continuous formation as well as in practical needs, through the exchange of nuns and the sharing of material goods”.

Federations need to prevent the isolation of monasteries and to favor the communion among them. This proposal situates itself in the vision of a religious family, as well as that of the whole Church seen as a community of communities. Such a meaning of federations is indispensable. Otherwise, there is the risk of the erroneous concept of them.

However, it needs to be kept in mind that the federations can favor communion when this arises from communion. Communion is the purpose. But communion is also the requirement *sine qua non*. No juridical form can have success when there is lacking a fundamental vitality. For example, “the exchange of nuns and the sharing of material goods” (VDQ, n. 30; art. 9, § 3) in view of the fulfillment of the proper aims of the federations is impossible when there is lacking communion among the communities, when there is lacking a sense of being one single family. Of course, one needs to commit oneself in the particular manner of being in one’s own community; but also one needs to pay attention to the situation of the other communities and to help them within the limits of the possible.

Be it the communities that already belong to a federation, be it the communities that need to adhere to these or to create new structures, they need to ask themselves: what does it mean to belong to a federation? To belong to a federation needs to signify walking together, to assume co-responsibility. If there is a problem in a community, this problem is not hidden, but is shared. And the federation accompanies the journey of the community, helps it. But not merely by just sending some nuns where they are lacking. It does it by assisting in the process of discernment and seeking to understand where lies the true problem of the community. It does it by encouraging the making of correct decisions. This supposes, however, that the community opens itself to the federation and places itself with trust in the hands of other sisters, without needing to immediately renounce one’s proper juridical autonomy. The federation can do a lot, but only according to the degree that the community opens itself. The federation can do a lot, but only according to the degree of communion among the communities.

Juridically speaking, by means of the federations, and without detriment to the canonical autonomy of each monastery *sui iuris*, a greater coordination is sought, along with mutual help among the various monasteries²⁶. Nevertheless, the federations are not just operative structures in order to organize some common course, or to transfer some nun, etc. They are structures of communion. Explaining the nature of federations, Michel Dortel-Claudot defines them as “*aliqua moralis coadunatio*”²⁷, which is to say, a moral union among the monasteries. Federations are juridical, institutional realities, where the fundamental element is communion.

According to VDQ, federations remain structures of communion (cfr. VDQ, n. 30) and therefore are not endowed with any juridical power. The presidents continue to carry out the role of coordinator, without any power of governance over the single communities, unless such authority is recognized according to statutes.

²⁵ S. CANNISTRÀ, *The relationship between the discalced carmelite monasteries and the Holy See* (Dublin 2013), pro manuscripto, 6.

²⁶ Cfr. T. RINCON-PÉREZ, *Comentario al can. 582*, in: A. MARZOJA - J. MIRAS - R. RODRÍGUEZ-OCAÑA (dir.), *Comentario exegético al Código de Derecho Canónico*, Pamplona 2002³, vol. 2/2, 1426.

²⁷ M. DORTÉL-CLAUDOT, *Quaestiones hodiernae de fusionibus, unionibus ac foederationibus institutorum vitae consecratae*, in: *Periodica* 79 (1990), 666.

Considering that among the various monasteries there are so many differences regarding the style of life, among others, instead, there is affinity of spirit and of traditions, “federations can be established not only on a geographical basis” (VDQ, art. 9, § 2). It is a derogation from the previous norm. The instruction *Inter praeclara* in art. XXIII, § 2, explicitly affirms: “Federations, unless not demanding differently, due to the scarcity of the number of monasteries or another just reason and proportionate cause, need to be organized rather according to region, making it much easier to govern”.

The number of federations in the teresian Carmel has notably grown in the years 1991-2003. While in 1991 there were 19 federations, in 2003 – 49²⁸. After 2003, there were created only two: the Association of Portugal (2007) and the Association of Paraguay-Uruguay (2015). In addition, the union was made between the Federation of Lisieux and the Federation of Paris into North France (2007). It should be noted that after the enthusiasm of the postconciliar years and of the 90s – after the creation of so many federations – recently there has been a certain slowing down, perhaps due to the lack of new perspectives... The federations exist and for the most part function very well, but in different cases a paradox is seen: there are the federations, but not the mentality of belonging... there is not the mentality of communion... The existence of the federation, the formal being a member of the federation do not influence much in concrete life. Now, fulfilling the norm of the apostolic constitution VDQ, “all monasteries are to be part of a federation” (VDQ, art. 9, § 1). In reality, however, it is not enough to adhere to a federation or to create a new one, but it is necessary to form a mentality of walking together, sharing the joys and the sorrows of such a journey, thinking with the categories of a family, overcoming all forms of individualism and closure.

In the teresian Carmel, even if it is true that Teresa did not plan a federation of monasteries, “an idea that did not fit into the juridical structures of her time, she began and set in motion a style of inter-community fraternization that was original and extremely flexible, that ruled out each community being secluded in itself, and which developed in each Carmel the awareness of forming part of a spiritual and social organization with need for wider mutual communion: mutual knowledge, sharing concerns, mutual help in personnel and finance, not codified juridically as such but felt and practiced in communities living closely together. This style, more practical than juridical, Teresa began and encouraged a long time before the Carmels formed part of the new religious province”²⁹.

The life and the writings of Teresa are of great importance in order to have a adequate understanding of the federations.

From the beginning of the foundation of Saint Joseph Teresa has maintained open the relationship with the community of origin, the Incarnation. The new Carmel did not close in upon itself. In Saint Joseph and the Incarnation, there has arisen an intense exchange of persons and help throughout the years. Beforehand “relations between monasteries and the nuns among themselves were extremely precarious to say the least. It is sufficient to remember that the three nuns’ communities in the Avila diocese had large numbers: nearly 200 in the Incarnation, around 100 in Piedrahíta, and about 50 in Fontiveros. There was only a short distance between them. Yet it is impossible to find documentary evidence of one single instance of community exchange, neither of persons nor of funds. Not even the slenderest of evidence can be found of an exchange of letters between them, not a single letter”³⁰.

In founding the other Carmels, Teresa established a network of communication between them. Communication through letters has helped for an authentic communion of life to grow in the “community of communities”, allowing for an exchange of sorrows and joys. This authentic communion of life was much more distinct by daily practice rather than by the juridical structure³¹.

²⁸ Cfr. C. MACCISE, *Asociaciones y federaciones* (Baní, March 6-11, 2006), pro manuscrito, 4.

²⁹ T. ALVAREZ, *Federation of Carmels considered according to the thought of St Teresa*, Roma 2000, 21.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, 9.

³¹ Cfr. *Ibidem*, 10.

Nevertheless, with the passing of time, the teresian family has also received a juridical structure. In the Chapter of Alcalá (1581), a single province was established, integrated by discalced friars and discalced nuns, with their own Constitutions, different for the friars and for the nuns, under one same mayor superior.

Growing, the teresian Carmel has conserved this charismatic-juridical model of province. It has been the historic ups and downs of the 19th century to weaken this structure of communion (in different places the expulsions of the friars, the passing of the nuns to the jurisdiction of bishops, isolation of monasteries). In this context in the 20th century there has been proposed alternate structures of communion – especially among the same monasteries of nuns – the federations³².

7. Novelties and silence

Concluding the section dedicated to the structures of communion, VDQ art. 9, § 4 affirms: “The association, even juridical, of monasteries to the corresponding Order of men is to be encouraged. Confederations and the establishment of international commissions made up of different Orders, with statutes approved by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, are likewise to be encouraged”. The apostolic constitution, therefore, explicitly encourages two types of relationships that go beyond the structures of federations, but that can be helpful for the monasteries *sui iuris* in order to not remain isolated. It deals with relationships between the nuns and the friars of the same Order and relationships between the same nuns at the ultra-federal level (creating confederations³³ and/or international commissions). And where is the novelty? In the second case, the novelty lies in the fact that until now it has not been properly spoken of (VS 27 made only a mention of the confederations, but nothing on commissions), in the first case – in the fact that the recent practice of the Congregation was going in the exact opposite direction, excluding the friars from any dealings with the nuns.

In light of VDQ, it can be observed that the reciprocal openness of the communities of nuns generates a familiar environment based upon the charismatic-juridical foundation. And it is exactly in this context that the relationship between the nuns and the friars is placed. The apostolic constitution uses the same term of “the association” as can. 614: “Monasteries of nuns associated to an institute of men maintain their own way of life and governance according to the Constitutions. Mutual rights and obligations are to be defined in such a way that spiritual good can come from the association”. Seeing that between the association to the masculine branch according to can. 614 and the vigilance of the bishop according to can. 615 *tertia non datur*, one can then hold that VDQ truly favors that association, “even juridical”, to the friars of the same Order. This association would include the vigilance of the regular superiors of the friars. It is true that such a relationship is expected in the 1991 Constitutions of the nuns, art. 201a (but not in the 1990 Constitutions). However, it is at the same time true, that in the whole world there are only 217 monasteries under the vigilance of the Order (associated to the masculine branch) according to can. 614. It is less than 30% of all 1991 monasteries. Obviously, the VDQ does not oblige monasteries to associate themselves to the masculine branch, but – literally – it does favor it. However, on the other hand, the apostolic constitution does not attribute any authority regarding the nuns to the masculine branch of the Order.

And where is the silence? In this section on autonomy and on the structures of communion a topic covered in silence is certainly the topic of the religious assistant. It has been spoken of enough before VDQ, above all due to attempts of the dicastery to impose this figure to all the federations. The apostolic constitution *Sponsa Christi* introducing the figure of the religious assistant, left it

³² Cfr. J. M. MESA DELGADO, *Federazione di monasteri*, in: A. APARICIO RODRÍGUEZ - J. M. CANALS CASAS (dir.), *Dizionario teologico della vita consacrata*, Milano 1994, 755-756.

³³ R. M. McDermott explains: “Confederations are groupings of federations into a still larger structure. Examples of this phenomenon are the Confederation of Benedictine Monasteries and the Confederation of Canonries of St. Augustine. The confederation is composed of monastic or canonical congregations presided over by a major superior with limited powers determined in the statutes of the confederation. Again, there is no loss of the autonomy of the individual monastery” [ID., *Comment on can. 582*, in: J. P. BEAL - J. A. CORIDEN – T. J. GREEN [dir.], *New commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, New York/Mahwah 2000, 750-751].

optional³⁴. According to this norm, various federations have instituted it. But other have not³⁵. With the decree Prot. n. 24823/2012, dated Sept. 8, 2012, and above all with the subsequent practice, the CICLSAL has sought to make this figure obligatory. But in reality, it could not do so with *Sponsa Christi* still in effect. The norm could be changed only with a new disposition from a document with the same juridical value, that is, with a new apostolic constitution. Yet, the new apostolic constitution practically makes no mention of the religious assistant. It only makes mention of him as a member of the commission *ad hoc* from art. 8, § 2. Is this the form of making obligatory the figure of the religious assistant? No. Consequently, the religious assistant would remain optional. Unless, different norms are given in a practical instruction.

* * * * *

Autonomy is a right recognized according to the real situation of the community, keeping in mind the required indications from VDQ. The community that does not complete these requirements, does not have autonomy of life, and in fact, can lose that recognition.

The recognition of the autonomy evokes *ex natura rei* the question of the correct administration of the same. This administration should not contradict neither the beginning nor the end of autonomy. In a circular letter written to the Discalced Carmelite Nuns, C. Maccise spoke of “the problem of excessive autonomy of monasteries”³⁶. Studying more deeply the question, it can be affirmed that the true problem is not excessive autonomy, but the erroneous way of living it. Comparing the autonomy of one monastery *sui iuris* to the maturity of a person, one can see that there cannot be an excess of maturity, but there can be deformations of the same.

Of all the ways, it can be observed that one monastery that knows how to manage its autonomy, that knows how to live it in a mature way, does not fear to enter into relationships with others. The relationship means to create family bonds, to share ideas, to work together...

Questions:

- 1) With what concrete criteria does one reflect with or decide the continuity, the help (requested/offered), the suppression of a community?
- 2) What are the current challenges to live the teresian concept of authority in community?
- 3) With what concrete means can each community create or reinforce the family bonds between the autonomous teresian communities of the whole Order?

³⁴ In fact, *Sponsa Christi* affirms: “The Holy See may, in a given situation, monitor the federation directly and with immediate authority, by means of a religious assistant. The assistant’s role will be not only to represent the Holy See but also to foster the preservation of the genuine spirit of the Order and, by deed and through counsel, to help the superiors in the correct and prudent government of the federation” [art. 7, § 7].

³⁵ Currently 34 of 51 federations in the teresian Carmel have the religious assistant, others 17 – no.

³⁶ C. MACCISE, *Con lo sguardo al futuro*, Roma 1997, 23.