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Summary of the Apostolic Constitution *Vultum Dei quaerere*

Preamble

The promotion of adequate formation, the centrality of the *lectio divina*, specific criteria for the autonomy of contemplative communities, and the membership of monasteries in a federation are some of the key points of the Apostolic Constitution "*Vultum Dei quaerere* – Seeking the face of God" (VDQ), signed by Pope Francis on 29 June and dedicated to women's contemplative life. The document was motivated, the Pontiff explains, by the journey taken by the Church and "rapid historical changes" in the fifty years since Vatican Council II. Hence, the need to engage in dialogue with contemporary society, safeguarding however "the foundational values of contemplative life", whose characteristics – silence, listening, stability – "can and must challenge the contemporary mindset". Introduced by an extensive reflection on the importance of women religious and nuns for the Church and for the world, the document indicates twelve themes for reflection and discernment for consecrated life in general, and concludes with fourteen regulatory articles.

The importance of contemplative life

In a world in search of God, even unknowingly, the Pope writes, consecrated persons must "wisely discern the questions posed to us by God and the men and women of our time". Therefore, their search for God must never cease. Francis expresses his appreciation for "contemplative sisters", emphasising that "the Church needs" them "to bring today's men and women to the good news of the Gospel". This is not an easy mission, in view of the current situation in the world, "dominated by the mindset of power, wealth and consumerism". However, this is the challenge indicated by the Pope to contemplative sisters: to be "beacons and torches" that guide and accompany humanity on its journey, "sentinels of the morning" showing Christ to the world, "the way, and the truth and the life". A "priceless and indispensable gift" for the Church, "consecrated life is a history of passionate love for the Lord and for humanity", which unfolds through the "passionate quest to see the face of God", before which "all else is seen from a different perspective" as it is seen with "spiritual eyes" which enable one "to see the world and other persons as God does". When faced with temptation, the Pope exhorts "spiritual combat to be fought courageously", tenaciously resisting, in particular, "the temptation to listlessness, mere routine, lack of enthusiasm and paralysing lethargy".

The Twelve themes for reflection and discernment

Formation and prayer: The Pope goes on to invite “reflection and discernment on twelve aspects of consecrated life in general and the monastic tradition in particular”, so as to “attain the goal of their specific vocation”. The first theme is that of formation: “a process aimed at configuration to the Lord Jesus”, it represents a never-ending journey, which “demands a constant conversion to God”. Here, the Pope urges monasteries to “pay great attention to vocational and spiritual discernment, without yielding to the temptation to think in terms of numbers and efficiency”. Furthermore, the Pope recalls that formation requires ample time, between nine and twelve years. The second theme indicated is prayer, “the ‘core’ of consecrated life”; this must not be lived as a form of “self-absorption”, but must instead “enlarge your heart to embrace all humanity, especially those who suffer”, such as “prisoners, migrants, refugees and victims of persecution ... families experiencing difficulties, the unemployed, the poor, the sick, and those struggling with addiction”. The Pope urges intercessory prayer “on behalf of all humanity”; in this way, communities “will become true schools of prayer”, “nourished by the ‘scandalous beauty’ of the Cross”.

Word of God, Eucharist and Reconciliation: As a third theme for reflection, Francis indicates the centrality of the Word of God: the “first source of all spirituality” and “principle of communion for your communities”, this is explicit in the *lectio divina* which helps pass “from the biblical text to life”, to “bridge the gap between spirituality and daily life”, guiding “from hearing to knowledge, and from knowledge to love”. Therefore, the Pope recommends that the “entire day, both personal and in community, ought to be organised around the word of God”, helping contemplative sisters, through a sort of “supernatural intuition”, to “discern what God’s will is”. Finally, Francis notes that the *lectio divina* must be transformed into *actio*, which “moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity”. Then, as a fourth point, the VDQ highlights the importance of the sacraments of the Eucharist and of Reconciliation, suggesting in particular “prolonging the celebration of Mass with Eucharistic adoration” and allowing Penance to “become a privileged means” to contemplate “the face of the Father’s mercy”. Indeed, by experiencing God’s forgiveness, one may receive “the grace to become prophets and ministers of his mercy, and instruments of reconciliation, forgiveness and peace”, which the world “greatly needs”.

Fraternal life and the autonomy of monasteries: The fifth theme indicated by the Apostolic Constitution is that of fraternal life in community, understood as a “reflection of God’s own way of being and bestowing himself”, and the “primary form of evangelisation”. For this, the Pope underlines the need for “a growing community life”, leading to “an authentic fraternal communion”. “A community exists inasmuch as it comes about and is built up by the contribution of all”, writes the Pope, “through the development of a strong spirituality of communion whereby all experience a sense of belonging”. “In a society marked by divisions and inequality”, it is necessary more than ever before to demonstrate that “life in common is both possible and fulfilling despite differences of age, education and even culture”. These differences are not an obstacle to fraternal life but instead “enrich it”, as “unity and communion are not the same as uniformity”. At the same time, he emphasises that it is important to “honour the elderly and to show affection to the young” so as to reconcile “remembrance of the past with the promise of the future” within the communities themselves. The sixth theme instead concerns the autonomy of monasteries: in this regard, Francis underlines that while autonomy promotes the stability, unity and contemplation of a community, it “ought not to mean independence or isolation”. In this respect, contemplative sisters are urged “to avoid the disease of self-absorption”.

Federations and the cloister: This latter is closely linked to the seventh theme, in which the Pope recalls the importance of the Federation as a “structure of communion between monasteries sharing the same charism”. Aimed at the promotion of contemplative life in the member monasteries and in their practical needs, the Federations, says the Pope, “ought to be encouraged and increase in number”. The eighth theme instead relates to the cloister. A “sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord”, it may take various forms, from the “papal” cloister which “excludes any external ministry”, to the “common” cloister which is instead the “least restrictive”. However, this range, within the same Order, must be considered “an enrichment and not an obstacle to communion”.

Work and silence: The ninth point indicated by Pope Francis is work: bearing in mind the Benedictine motto “*ora et labora*”, contemplative sisters are exhorted to carry out their work “carefully and faithfully, without yielding to the present-day culture and its mindset of efficiency and constant activity”, which “must never stifle the spirit of contemplation”. Work, therefore, should be interpreted as a contribution to “the work of creation and the service

of humanity” and “solidarity with the poor”, helping to “find the right balance between seeking the Absolute and commitment to daily chores”. The tenth theme of the VDQ is silence, to be understood as “hearing and pondering (*ruminatio*) His Word”, “self-emptying in order to grow in receptivity”, a silence that listens “to God and the plea of humanity”. Mary Most Holy provides an example of this, the Pope writes: she “was able to receive the Word because she was a woman of silence”, a silence “full of love”.

The communications media and asceticism: Aware of changes in society and of the “digital culture” that “has a decisive influence in shaping our thoughts and the way we relate to the world”, Francis presents the communications media as the eleventh theme. Although they are “helpful for formation and communication”, the Pope nevertheless urges “prudent discernment” so that they “do not become occasions for wasting time or escaping from the demands of fraternal life ... or become an obstacle to your life wholly dedicated to contemplation”. Finally, the twelfth theme is asceticism, which may be defined as “moderation, detachment from material things, self-surrender in obedience, transparent relationships” typical of community life. As the choice of a life of stability, asceticism also becomes “an eloquent sign of fidelity” for our globalised and rootless world and for the people of God, “so often rent by conflict and division”, and of how to remain close to brothers and sisters despite disagreements, tensions, conflicts and weaknesses. Francis underlines that asceticism is not flight from the world out of fear, as women religious “remain in the world, while not being of the world”. Their prophecy, then, will be that of tirelessly interceding for mankind before the Lord, hearing the cry of those who are “victims of the throwaway culture”. In this way, “in profound communion with the Church”, contemplative sisters will be the “stairway by which God descends to encounter humanity, and humanity ascends to encounter God”.

The fourteen regulatory articles

The regulatory Conclusion of the VDQ is divided into fourteen articles which express the Pope’s previous comments in juridical terms. In particular:

- Article 3, dedicated to ongoing formation and vocational discernment, stipulates that contemplative sisters may attend courses “outside their monastery, always conducting themselves in a way fitting and consistent with their own charism”, and that “the recruitment of candidates from other countries solely for the sake of ensuring the survival of a monastery is to be absolutely avoided”.
 - Article 7 urges the contemplative sisters who exercise “ministry of authority” to “foster a joy-filled environment of freedom and responsibility”, so as to promote “truthful communication”.
 - Article 8 lists the necessary requisites for the juridical autonomy of a community, including the capacity to provide for formation and governance, participation in the life of the local Church, and self-sufficiency. Should these requirements be lacking, the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life “will study the possibility of establishing an *ad hoc* commission” for “the revitalisation of the monastery, or to effect its closure”.
 - Article 9 underlines that “initially, all monasteries are to be part of a federation”, which may be established according to geographical criteria or according to an affinity of spirit and traditions. If a monastery does not wish join a federation, the VDQ reiterates that permission to remain outside a federation is to be sought from the Holy See, which is competent to study and decide the question”.
 - Finally, Article 14 stipulates that the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrated Life may issue a further Instruction regarding the implementation of the twelve themes indicated previously, in accordance with the charisms of the various monastic families. Such instructions shall be submitted for approval by the Holy See.
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