

# FORMATION FOR CONTEMPLATIVES

Reflections on Section IV  
(Formation in Institutes Ordered towards  
Contemplation)

By FRANCES TERESA

*The document in general*

THE FIRST THING WHICH SHOULD be said of this document is that it is practical and realistic and probably the best so far. It may not have the wide repercussions of *Perfectae caritatis* but it does offer guidelines which relate to what many of us are trying to do in our formation work. Although the style is sometimes heavy and the phraseology quaint, it says a number of good things. This is especially true in the section on instruction for the vows. It is not often, too, that such documents talk about women, or sexuality (at least, not without linking the two), and the suggested areas for instruction are central and necessary even if not visionary. There are shafts of real wisdom and humanity which sound as if they arise out of experience: [51] pedagogy, [63] spiritual direction and [67] ongoing formation give a few examples of this.

Conversely, there are some subjects which consistently seem to show no awareness of cultural shifts, in spite of the stress on culture within the document itself. Again there is the male language about sexuality, even though there are many more women than men religious. Words like domination and possessiveness abound, sexual impulses are to be mastered and so on. This is not simply a grumble about language but a comment that the whole Roman thinking about sexuality still sees it from what one presumes to be a male viewpoint. It is certainly not a woman's approach. It is a pity, too, that it should be in the section on chastity that we are encouraged to go often to the sacrament of reconciliation!

There is a tendency to make broad statements yielding no precise meaning, for instance: 'religious life is a special way of participating in the sacramental nature of the People of God' [21]. Some develop-

ment of this would have been helpful as one of the interesting aspects of religious life is the lack of a characteristic Sacrament comparable with marriage. Undoubtedly there are reasons for this, one of which might well be that a prophetic stance does not find a comfortable niche in structures. If religious life is called to be a locus of prophecy in today's Church then it must learn to sit lightly to the institutional aspects of that Church. This is an area where the *Directives* do not tread, even though it is arguably one of the strongest points in the growing self-awareness of the post-Vatican II religious life, at least in Western Europe. If the role of Christian prophecy is, like Simeon and John the Baptist, to point out the presence of Christ in the world, then a genuinely affirmative attitude to the world is essential. We must have eyes to see our world as God's world, as Christ's 'own' into which he has come and that any 'witness of separation' [10] needs to be clearly defined as separation from sin and not separation from this world. It would have been highly helpful if the Congregation had addressed this issue in a positive way since it is the next generation of religious who must find the way to live all this in a rapidly changing society. They will need a great commitment to 'the world' as well as deep roots in the spiritual life. For many, this will be doubly difficult in view of the breakdown of marriage and family life, for these are far more likely to have damaging repercussions on religious life than technology or even materialism. The document's only reference to the conditions in which many today grow up is in a passage which seems to have suffered a sea-change in the word processor, for as it stands it makes no sense [39a]. This is probably the moment to mention the translating which sometimes offers a fine derangement of relative clauses: 'They need witnesses who renounce what St John has called "the world" and "its lusts" and also this world created and preserved by the love of its Creator' [36b]. As well as a few strange phrases such as: 'the numerous experiences which have been made since Vatican II'; or: 'the concrete exigencies of the three vows'. It would be a great service to the Church if documents could be translated into clear and limpid English which was a pleasure to read.

#### *Section IV in particular*

It would appear that the authors of this document see the end of all formation, apostolic or contemplative, as permitting candidates 'to assimilate and deepen that in which their religious identity consists' [6] in order to be 'inserted into the world as a significant, effective and faithful witness' [6].

In the section on contemplatives, nothing is added to this definition nor are any qualifications made. This definition is less inspiring than Vatican II's 'the abiding re-enactment in the Church of the form of life which the Son of God made his own' (LG44), and as they stand, these words must leave the contemplative (if no one else) with an increased awareness of the paradoxes inherent in religious life, some of which can be crystallized into questions such as: what is the meaning of the word 'witness' in a life which necessitates some degree of hiddenness? What guidelines are there for maintaining witness and hiddenness in a creative tension? What is the sign-value of the contemplative life and to whom is it a sign and what does it signify? What is the place of 'achievement' in the religious life? What is the meaning of being effective, here? Most people who enter contemplative life today are keenly aware of the search for spiritual values which is a marked feature of our societies. They are anxious to address these issues and anxious that their vocation be in no sense an evasion of them. This aspect is adumbrated in the *Directives* but could profitably have been developed further (cf [73] and [80]).

There are some grandiose statements about the contemplative life too: 'the liturgy, where earth is united to heaven and which therefore provides a kind of foretaste of the celestial liturgy, is the summit to which the entire Church is tending' [77]. Apart from the 'flight from the world' note which appears more than once, this is also highly unrealistic. Because it is so important, liturgy seems to be the area where human feelings run the strongest and it is often much easier to slip into an easy conformity with the letter but not the spirit of the law liturgical, rather than to struggle with the community's incompatibilities of taste and intractabilities of temperament. Yet it is the struggle, not the achievement, which is the 'primary and fundamental apostolate' of the contemplative [73]. It is in areas like liturgy that the contemplatives' asceticism must operate. For me, personally, one remark which I took from the *Directives* to carry with me is 'the charity . . . which they strive to perfect, at the same time quickens the whole mystical body of Christ' [80]. This is the focus of the struggle, of discipline, asceticism and faith.

One point which the *Directives* stress throughout is the role of the community in formation. Again, this is so in all forms of religious life, but often in the apostolic life the community is especially set up in order to be a formation community. For a contemplative community, this greatness is thrust upon us. This fact alone makes a radical difference to the instructions given during formation as the

community is constantly there to be looked at and assessed. It can put a considerable strain on the formation personnel, too, when the community, reasonably, seeks to understand candidates in crisis and yet no explanation can be offered without infringing confidentiality. It also poses difficulties for the candidates who must early come to terms with the fallen condition of their sisters without in the process shedding their ideals or losing their vision that the community like the Church is also 'holy'.

Until fairly recently, many of these problems were postponed by the simple expedient of keeping the novitiate very separate from the community. Once the community had been brought into discernment discussions, it became apparent that candidates could no longer live in a ghetto and that the community required enough information for an informed judgement. The *Directives* only deal with the role of the community in formation with, apparently, a fairly perfect community in mind and Section IV adds nothing specific in spite of the differences in the degree of training which the formation team will have had for their task. Here too, Section IV reads like the counsel of a friendly outsider, not as the script of someone who has lived the life and struggled with it over the years. Much more could profitably and helpfully have been said about novitiate-community interactions.

There is a short but important section [79] on Work. It is not clear why this is in Section IV unless it be that many contemplatives need to earn a living and so have a slightly different approach to work. Which said, contemplatives do not, or should not, work only to make ends meet. As the document says: '(work has) an element of solidarity with all the workers of the world . . . it also responds to an evangelical demand' [79]. This is good stuff and there could have been more of it. A theology of work is one of our biggest needs and one hopes that this small section is only the first swallow of the summer. Why do we work? What is the place of work in human life? A number of reasons are offered in answer but nothing is said (while much could and should have been said) about work as sharing in creation and redemption; similarly much could have been said about the witness of agricultural work which is so appropriate to contemplative life precisely because it expresses the gospel physically and dramatically—the pruning, ploughing and weeding, the nurturing, watering and feeding, and finally the harvest. All this is extremely relevant to formation because for most contemplatives their day is full of humdrum and unglamorous labours and when the gilt has worn off, the gingerbread can seem very ordinary indeed. This is not

simply something unfortunate to be grappled with but rather a deliberate choice to help us on the journey of discovering the unfolding consequences of the Incarnation in the life of the world, in the revelation of the ordinary as a sacrament of the presence of God: the bush is on fire; it is the contemplatives' privilege to look closely at it as Moses did.

With regard to the input of formation, the *Directives* suggest that contemplatives study scripture, patristics, ecclesiology and some systematic theology [74]. They then go on to warn against the acquisition of knowledge and the gaining of degrees although these surely cannot be the only dangers on the way. In general the contemplative life would be enriched by the presence of more scripture scholars, more theologians, more original thinkers. Equally important is the maturing and broadening effect of wide reading and of contact with great thinkers of the Church and civilization. Out of this maturity come wise and balanced judgements, a long, visionary perspective, and these too are among the human hopes which we cherish for those in formation. In that light, this section is rather reductive and the statement that legislation on enclosure must take precedence if it clashes with the demands of formation [82b] is incomprehensible. It could also have the unfortunate result that communities least able to offer a rich formation to their candidates are almost obliged to remain so—a sort of cultural or spiritual poverty trap. One wonders why it was felt necessary to say this? Contemplatives are keenly aware that much of the grace of our vocation is only revealed after patient waiting, something which is legislatively embodied in enclosure, but it is important that enclosure be presented as the means it is, rather than as an end, which it is not. People today need to see their religious life as a coherent entity and have little tolerance for legislation from 'on high' by those who have not lived the life. As women move into greater and greater autonomy and equality in society this intolerance will become more and more acute and it would be good to see the Church giving the lead in acknowledging the commitment of this group of women religious—so often legislation about enclosure seems to carry unspoken fears about what we would get up to if we had the chance. This can pose very real problems for formators anxious to be both honest and loyal.

Paragraph [83] suggesting that nuns' association with institutes of men will guarantee fidelity to their charism is rather offensive, though one hopes this was only due to insensitivity. The benefit might be the other way around, that the nuns help the men to keep

faithful to their charism. Best of all if there could have been an acknowledgement of mutual support and encouragement, of a complementarity of charism and psychology.

Whether it is particularly helpful to have contemplative life treated in a section on its own at all, is doubtful. Almost inevitably one tends to regard that section as the relevant one and all the rest as pertaining to the apostolic life. At a deeper level, one must ask if separate treatment is the best way to express the fundamental insight that whatever the different orientations, there is only one religious life in the Church. The difficulty of treating all religious life under one heading, of course, lies in the fact that the contemplative and apostolic lives are almost mirror images of each other, as anyone who has transferred, or accompanied someone transferring, will testify. Nearly everything has to be rethought and relearned because the orientation of the apostolic life is to mission while the contemplative life itself is its mission; the consequences of this are far-reaching indeed. Yet all forms of religious life are committed to the evangelical counsels and there seems no reason why a single treatment could not have been offered, with the occasional comment or paragraph particular to one or the other.

The essential features of the contemplative life are both deep and simple and not radically different from any committed individual's growth in prayer and love, namely a slow process of allowing one's eyes to be opened to see the present glory of God, and one's heart to be opened to hold the pain and goodness of the world. As the Incarnate Word was a meeting place of the divine and the human, so is the contemplative called to be just such a meeting place, an incarnation of the Incarnation, a process wonderfully exemplified in Francis of Assisi (among others). No matter how the externals shift and modify, the essentials must always, one presumes, remain the same and as a result the task of contemplative formation remains broadly what it always has been, to lead a person deeper into this mystery so that withdrawing from society contains no element of rejecting the human. It is a process of leading a person deeper into inner silence, into integrity and self-giving; as society changes so the starting point shifts but only, so to speak, around the circumference of a circle of which the centre, God, remains the same. It is not an angelic life and tendencies to speak as if it were should be stoutly resisted. Within this wide framework, the various contemplative orders and people evolve their different characteristics.

In general, however, on my first reading of the document, I found many things which were helpful or encouraging. On my second

reading I began to wonder where they had gone. Several readings later I can crystallize my response into three main anxieties.

The first is that in spite of nearly thirty quotations from *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, their positive attitudes to our world do not seem to have leached through to the *Directives* which tend to regard religious life as a sort of gathered Church living the life of the kingdom in separation, for example: 'The Kingdom of God, which is shown by religious life "to surpass the things of here below" is not of this world' [36b]. In fact, *Lumen gentium* 44, the reference given, seems to say almost the opposite, that religious work 'for the implanting and strengthening of the Kingdom . . . and spreading it to the four corners of the earth'. Apart from anything else, this seems a serious fundamental shift of emphasis. What would or will be the results of applying the *Directives* in a Vatican II context if this shift should prove a fact?

The second anxiety also lies behind, rather than in, the text and it is that the overall picture of a religious formed along the lines laid down in the *Directives* is of one thoroughly grounded but heavy, inflexible, static. There is an absence of vision, of zeal and enthusiasm as well as a lack of historical depth, yet without that depth it is much harder to discern the directions of growth for the future. Of all the great legislators in the history of religious life, only Augustine and Ignatius are mentioned; giants admittedly but there is much wisdom which has not been drawn upon. By far the largest number of quotations are from the Code of Canon Law, as yet relatively untested in life.

The third anxiety, the most fundamental of them all, is a sense that the direction in which the *Directives* seek to lead religious life is radically different from the direction in which the Spirit seems to be leading it 'out in the field'. Theory and practice are moving away from each other and that is always a matter for concern.

There is still a place for a document which looks at the experience, the aspirations and idealism, the gropings and mistakes of religious life over the last thirty years and which uses these as raw material for reflection by an objective authority. Out of that reflection could grow a set of guidelines for the future which would embody what the Spirit is saying to the Church through religious life right across the spectrum. There is a real need for this, religious are struggling heroically and wonderfully but sometimes it is uncoordinated and there is little opportunity to benefit from the mistakes and discoveries of others. Tradition in its transmission should be as creative as it was

in its conception. As Rahner remarked in *The shape of the Church to come*:

Together with the necessary function of defending the tradition, office holders in the Church as such have at least equally the right and sacred duty to provide for the Church's endurance in a situation still to come.

It is this provision *vis-à-vis* religious life for which we are still waiting.