

The challenges of the hidden life of the nuns

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A year ago I happened to go to the cinema and see a film "The Great Silence" - a reportage on the life of the monks at the Grande Chartreuse. The cinema was packed but during the three hour show not even a chair creaked. A film about the hidden life of monks. People were leaving the cinema in silence; and also, when the show was over they did not rush out at once.

Going through the hall one saw colourful posters advertising various films; they seemed even brighter than ever. The film was on in Warsaw for a long time and there were always spectators. So the film must have appealed to people - to ordinary people of a modern city. What did they see in this film? In the simple, ordinary life of a monastery, they saw people who were happy with their faith, who were transformed by prayer, aware of the presence of the Living God that they sought because they had found Him.

I think that each contemplative monastery is to address the modern man - not in a film-style manner, but not less unequivocally and clearly. To be a sign and a challenge to see deeper what the desire for happiness and the need for the sense of life are, that are written in the heart of each man. Such monasteries have never constituted a great percentage of the population; people devoting their lives to God in contemplative orders constitute a small part of the Church. But still, they are to be the "yeast" that is essential for the mission of the Church. And although our numbers are small, and our life is hidden, we are seen. Believers and unbelievers look at us - some out of curiosity, some with respect, some critically, and others with annoyance. They are demanding. The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life organized, in 2005, a symposium on "Perfectae caritatis". One of the talks was on the results of the research into the way people see the religious life today. It turns out that people's opinions center not so much on what we do, but on the quality of our life. The more the testimony of our life is trustworthy, the more it is redemptive and salvific for the world. The only necessary thing in our religious life is the Gospel. We are to faithfully follow, to make present, the Gospel life of Jesus Christ Who also today saves the world. He acted through that Who He was and how He lived. People asked Him for signs and miracles, but the closer He was to death, the more He gave up signs and pointed to

Himself - the One Who was obedient to the Father to the end. In the Gospel, there is the redemptive and sanctifying power - we are to remind the world of that. The life of Jesus that we prolong in the Church has that power. We are to be a testimony that God is, that He is Love, Truth and Beauty - that is what people long for, whether they know it or not. He can be likened to the sky spreading over the world. Many people cannot see stars in the sky because their eyes are blinded by lights that are much closer; the bright and passing glare of supermarkets, places of entertainment, advertisements, the light of the city that people cannot leave.

In our vocation, we have been given a possibility of going out to a field, as it were, where nothing obstructs the view of the sky. We can see the light of the stars, we can find out that the more we look at the sky, the more it is spangled with stars. That gift is not only for ourselves! We are to be a challenge to everybody; after all, the sky spreads over everybody. To be a testimony that God really is, that it is worth-while seeking Him. That is

the sense of our enclosure. Silence is an expression of our hidden life. Silence which is "the other face of the enclosure", as it were; it makes it possible for us to learn the weight and power of the word. The Word of God and the word of man. The world, flooded with masses of various bits of information, often misses the most important news item - that God is, that He speaks to man, that each man is beloved, called to happiness, to the fullness of Life.

"The nuns seek God by observing the norms of the purely contemplative life, by maintaining their withdrawal from the world by enclosure and silence"; leading this kind of life, we do not so much keep wise precepts that have been tested over the ages, but we open up to the word of Truth that can transform and cleanse us, that can make us more and more the way God wants us to be. They say that travelling is instructive, but here, in the monastery, we are at the wellspring. I think we are like the ground where the spring of the Word of God has sprung. It has power. Its water flows channeling the bed of a stream that gradually turns into a river. The spring is shaped by the living water. We are to be a stream channeled by the Word of God. To let the Word of God shape us, so that It can flow into the world. And we will be shaped after Him. How long and in what way this process of shaping will go on remains a mystery of God's artistry. When He achieves His goal, we will become, even not realizing it, His witnesses. We will radiate peace.

Our hidden life is to be a challenge for people tired of all the hurry and commotion, tormented by fear and anxiety - a challenge to see that it is possible to pause, to enter into oneself; that it is possible to see and hear more than it is thrust upon us by the life of the modern world with all its wonderful technological progress.

The instruction *Verbi Sponsa* says that one should not diminish the forms of contemplative life "with which the Church manifests to the world the preeminence of contemplation over action, of what is eternal over what is temporal" (cf. *Verbi Sponsa*, 9).

"The monastery represents what is most intimate to a local Church - its heart where the Spirit always groans in supplication for the entire community and where thanksgiving rises unceasingly for the Life which He sends forth each day'. (*Verbi Sponsa*, 8) In his address to Benedictine abbesses in 1980, Pope John Paul II said: "Monastic prayer (...) is, as it were, a shining sign in the night, an oasis in the desert of disillusionment and dissatisfaction (...). By her prayer, coming from the faith that has been maturing for a long time and which is lived out profoundly, the contemplative nun (...) seems to be saying to the whole world, modestly but firmly: 'I know that God exists, that he is the almighty and caring Father, and I strongly believe in this. I know that God has revealed Himself in Christ, the Incarnate Word, and I love Him tenderly. I know that Christ is present in His Church and I follow Him faithfully!"

Many people, particularly when they are in difficult situations, ask us to pray for them. They discover the power of prayer. Many begin to see the need for prayer, many want to learn it. And then, the monastery becomes a school of prayer, as it were, whose extern students learn to trust God, Who hears our every sigh, Who is good and merciful. Our love of God is translated into compassion for our brothers and sisters in solidarity with them, in being close to them, in receiving other people and accompanying them. Our misión is to try and convince people that Jesus comes to them with tenderness and mercy, forgiveness and hope. We are called to be the human and compassionate face of the Church. "We ourselves have known

and put our faith in God's love toward ourselves". This is the principle of our answer to our vocation. Our whole religious life is about returning this love. Mutual love - only such love - is happiness. And it is a convincing testimony. In order that the monastery may be a testimony and a challenge to seek God, Who is Truth and Love, we ourselves must take up the challenge that the hidden life is for us. Point 5 of the Fundamental Constitution defines the way of our life. It reminds us that "seeking God in the purity of conscience and the joy of sisterly concord, in freedom of spirit" takes place in ordinary, everyday life, often over many years, when we experience our weakness and learn to bear it patiently. Is it not an everyday challenge - "working diligently, searching the Scriptures with ardent heart, praying intently, willingly practicing penance, pursuing communion..?" I All that is in order not to fall into a trap of mediocrity. The nuns are called, in all their life and with all their strength, to seek "God who now makes them dwell together in unity and on the last day will gather into the Holy City a people acquired as his own. In the midst of the Church their growth in charity is mysteriously fruitful for the growth of the people of God. By their hidden life they proclaim prophetically that in Christ alone is true happiness to be found, here by grace and afterwards in glory" (*LCM, 1 V*)

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