



# Boston Catholic Journal

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## A Serpent in the Second Garden

### The Plight of Cloistered, Contemplative, and Consecrated Nuns



#### **The Prologue:**

Some still hear the ancient whisper, even in the lingering, the serpentine shadows of their lengthening years. And to those who give heed in a withering night, it deceives, even now in the end as it did in the beginning – and this is the lie:

*“The Second Garden, the Cloister Wall, is a dangerous fiction as was the first promise of God, seducing men and women to believe that the call to prayer and not the clarion to social reform is the remedy of the world; that strident voices, and not sacrificial lives, redeem the world of its evil; that unbridled self-assertion, not humility and silence, assuage the suffering of man.*

*Tear down the Garden walls! Pull down the Cloister and make the Vineyard of God a brothel of men; predate the Vine and prepare the winepress. Self-fulfillment ... not sacrifice! This is what the world craves for, although it is not what the world needs. Like Joseph in the desert, let the dreamers all die. It is the workers who have built the great marvels in Egypt and at so paltry a price as slavery to sin!”*

*Of what possible use are these dreamers of prayers? What have they accorded you? Better to prevail in suits on the courts of men, than in prayers before the Courts of God.*

*Poverty? It is your curse. Chastity? It is your bane. Obedience? It is your abasement!”*

In an age of unbridled self-esteem and self-assertion, there is no room for Cloisters that hem in the hubris of women and the madness of men.

## **... or is there?**

We have heard the voice of the world and the worldly, and darker voices still ... but what is *your* voice? What say you? Who and what are these women to you, to the Church, to the world?

Before you answer, we strongly encourage you carefully consider the following. *It is not the voice of the world ... but the immutable voice of Holy Mother Church herself:*

The following excerpts come from, "**Verbi Sponsa, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns**" issued on 13 May 1999, and poignantly, beautifully, describe the value, the contribution, of women's lives lived contemplatively in Christ.

What you are about to read is not just a document; it is a Divine summons, a summons calling us ... each of us ... to awaken to a realization of the ways that our lives have been touched by simple, humble, Consecrated and Cloistered Nuns throughout the world.



## **"Verbi Sponsa, Instruction on the Contemplative Life and on the Enclosure of Nuns"**

- **“The Church's journey is entrusted to the loving heart and praying hands of cloistered nuns.** (Verbi Sponsa 1.4)
- The monastery is the place guarded by God (cf. Zach 2:9); it is the dwelling-place of his unique presence, like the Tent of Meeting where he is met day after day, where the thrice-Holy God fills the entire space and is recognized and honoured as the only Lord. 1.7
- “With the tenderness of Christ”, (52) nuns bear in their hearts the sufferings and anxieties of all those who seek their help, and indeed of all men and women. 1.7
- The *vital renewal* of monasteries is essentially linked to the authenticity of the search for God. 2.9
- The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* presents the vocation and mission of cloistered nuns as “a sign of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with her Lord, whom she loves above all things”, (1) showing how they are a unique grace and precious gift within the mystery of the Church's holiness.
- The ancient spiritual tradition of the Church, taken up by the Second Vatican Council, explicitly connects the contemplative life to the prayer of Jesus “on the mountain”, (11) or solitary place not accessible to all but only to those whom he calls to be with him, apart from the others (cf. Mt 17:1-9; Lk 6:12-13; Mk 6:30-31; 2 Pt 1:16-18).
- Nuns, in living the whole of their life as “hidden with Christ in God” (Col 3:3), realize in a supreme way the contemplative vocation of the entire Christian people, (6) and thus *they become a luminous sign of the Kingdom of God (cf. Rom 14:17), “glory of the Church and wellspring of heavenly graces”.* (7)
- *Nuns moreover, by their very nature as women, show forth more powerfully the mystery of the Church as “the Spotless Bride of the Spotless Lamb” ... was it not in a woman, the Virgin Mary, that the heavenly mystery of the Church was accomplished? (22)*
- By means of the cloister, nuns embody the exodus from the world in order to encounter God in the solitude of “cloistered desert”, a desert which includes inner solitude, the trials of the spirit and the daily toil of life in community (cf. Eph 4:15-16), as the Bride's sharing in the solitude of Jesus in Gethsemane and in his redemptive suffering on the Cross (cf. Gal 6:14).

- Through prayer, especially the celebration of the liturgy, and their daily self-offering, *they intercede for the whole people of God* and unite themselves to Jesus Christ's thanksgiving to the Father (cf. 2 Cor 1:20; Eph 5:19-20).
- Therefore **the contemplative life is the nun's particular way of being the Church**, of building the communion of the Church, of fulfilling a mission for the good of the whole Church. (33) Cloistered contemplatives therefore are not asked to be involved in new forms of active presence, but to remain at the wellspring of Trinitarian communion, ***dwelling at the very heart of the Church***. (34) V.S. 1.6
- By force of **their vocation, which sets them at the heart of the Church**, nuns undertake in a special way to have “the mind of the Church (sentire cum Ecclesia)”, with sincere adherence to the Magisterium and unreserved obedience to the Pope. 1.6
- Their life thus becomes a mysterious source of apostolic fruitfulness (39) and blessing for the Christian community and for the whole world. 1.7
- The specific contribution of nuns to evangelization, to ecumenism, to the growth of the Kingdom of God in the different cultures, is eminently spiritual. It is the soul and leaven of apostolic ventures, leaving the practical implementation of them to those whose vocation it is. (44) 1.7
- ***And since those who become the absolute property of God become God's gift to all, the life of nuns “is truly a gift set at the heart of the mystery of ecclesial communion ...”*** 1.7
- Nuns are a particular foreshadowing of the eschatological Church immutable in its possession and contemplation of God; 1.7
- It is important that the faithful learn to honour the charism and the specific role of contemplatives, their discreet but *crucial presence*, and their silent witness which constitutes a call to prayer and a reminder of the truth of God's existence. 1.7
- As pastors and guides of all of God's flock, (50) **the Bishops are the chief guardians** of the contemplative charism. Therefore, they must nurture contemplative communities with the bread of the Word and the Eucharist, offering where necessary the spiritual assistance of properly trained priests. At the same time they share with the community the task of keeping watch so that, in today's society marked by dispersion, a lack of silence and illusory values, the life of monasteries, nourished by the Holy Spirit, may remain genuinely and wholly directed towards the contemplation of God. 1.7
- **The vital renewal of monasteries is essentially linked to the authenticity of the search for God 2.9**

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## **The Plight:**

Clearly, our Church is not addressing the "Sisters" who heaped their habits in the same conflagration that consumed our society in the "Days of Rage", and who, with astounding celerity, attired themselves in suits of business more proper to Wall Street than to the Convents that fell into ruin as they abandoned vows, veils, and religious life for something more "progressive" in that chimerical, albeit "currently correct" pursuit of the rehabilitation of man as a social species and not as possessed of an immortal soul; of man configured to the parameters of politics, and not as a being created in the image of God. "Redeem the soul through rehabilitating society." How quickly, how predictably, Jesus Christ subsequently became a footnote to the issue, a "patriarchal" anomaly, a cultural gloss, much more a solecism than a Savior. They set out to redeem the world themselves, unfettered by robes, veils, the continuity of the Saints, and even Christ Himself.

Look around you ...it is not a wasteland. It is no man's land. Words cannot verge on something remotely descriptive in the wake of this mass defection. The winepress verges on ruin and the vineyard is laid waste. In stupefaction we stand, speechless at the ruin. So an entirely new lexicon has subsequently, necessarily, evolved around the self that has become the axis of the universe. We are now called to empowerment, not poverty, to aggressive pride instead of Marian and holy humility, to self-affirmation instead of self-effacement, to self-fulfillment, instead of self-abnegation. We feast on ourselves and know nothing of fast. In short, we are impelled by a centripetal social evangel to a frenetic pursuit of the self in place of the holy pursuit of God.

Seeking "justice" they abandoned sanctity, failing to see that justice follows from sanctity. Seeking "relevance", they abandoned the holy for the profane, failing to see the utter irrelevance of everything profane in light of the holy. It was, it remains, nothing less than a ramiform fulfillment of Nietzsche's vaunted "Transvaluation of Values". Setting out to free the world, they have subdued it ... by having succumbed to it.

These strident voices ... have they saved your child, kept your sanity, delivered you from peril? Have their voices at the Houses of State redeemed your brother's, your sister's, your husband's lives ... rather than the quiet voices in prayer rising up as holy incense borne by angels to the Altar of God at Matins in a Monastery in the dark watches of the night? Ask yourself!

Have these holy women touched your life? All the men fled Christ, save John ... and even John fled the Garden. It was the holy woman who stayed ... unto the foot of the Cross, unto the last drop of Blood. Were they adroitly petitioning the Sanhedrin? Cleverly lobbying the halls of the Temple? When your child was sick, when you were despairing, were you delivered by clever legislation, or by soft words prayed from the lips of a Nun hidden from the world, lips blazing with love at the very lintels of the portals of Paradise?

***What is your your hidden debt?*** Who is it that you cannot possibly repay ... who never *sought* repayment, even through the just currency of love that to this day you have withheld ... and which in justice was her due?

Who has borne your suffering? Who has shared in your secret pain? Who has grieved with you for your sins? Consoled you in your sorrow? Who has sought *absolutely nothing* ... but to bring you to God, with those you love? Who kept faith with you, loved you, bore you when you were forsaken by the world? In whom have you found Mary, Mother of God and Refuge of Men? Who revealed to you the face of Christ?

*The Cloistered Nun.* Hidden to man. Intimate with God. A bridge of grace over which you have passed in your suffering to a place that no man, that no woman, in and of this world could bear you. And she brought you there with unspeakable love. Unfeigned love. Genuine love. Sacrificial love. Love that has known the sting of your own tears upon her gentle cheek. She is the Bride of the Lamb, the Spouse of the King. ***She has His ear ... for she has His heart.*** Cleave to her who cleaves only to God!

It does not bode well for the man, for the woman, who imprecates Cloistered Nuns and disdains the call of Jesus Christ to His Brides to meet Him in the second Garden of innocence regained ... a Garden which He Himself hedges and around which He Himself sets Holy Enclosure as to the Bridal Chamber of perfect union through a perfect embrace made perfect in love. To disdain the Bride is to dishonor the Groom. And to dishonor the Groom is to despise His predilection for His Chosen, His beloved – and who denies the signal love of God denies God Himself. For God is Love.

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