

RIMOA MEETING – ANGERS – 11 AUGUST 2016

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CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN THE CONGREGATION

Contemplative Life in the Congregation

Thank you for the invitation to share about contemplative life in the congregation today.

I want to start with speaking about all of us being endowed with the gift of contemplation. By the very fact that we have been born we are called to rest in God. That is what contemplative prayer is all about: being in the presence of God in a unique and quiet way. We all experienced the moment when we were held in the heart and mind of God even before we were born. We have a memory of this and our hearts as St Augustine has said are “restless until they rest in God”. This is one of our fundamental calls as children of a loving God. It is universal and each of us is compelled to this union.

So the gift of contemplation is our heritage. It has been given to each of us who are present here today.

What is the difference then between the apostolic and the contemplative sisters’ call to contemplation? We as contemplative sisters, have a life style that supports this contemplation. We live in a community that sustains this contemplation. You who are apostolic sisters receive your support for contemplation mainly from the people to whom you minister.

We who live this contemplative life style are women who always pray, but not ones who are always saying prayers. A life of prayer is not a life spent on one’s knees, incessantly talking to God; it is a life wherein we are ever conscious of the God within, and without, above and below, over, under and all around. To be living a contemplative lifestyle is to be a woman whose every thought, word and deed is not about God but rather directed towards God; a woman who eats, drinks, sleeps and works, laughs and cries, suffers and rejoices, triumphs and fails in God and for God’s honor and glory.

Prayer is more than attention given to, an awareness of the Divine One; prayer is an atmosphere. It is the taking of a direction. We fix our thoughts, words, mind, and heart even our acts and gestures towards the Light which alone gives them worth.

Our vow of zeal is to live and to pray for the salvation of persons especially those served by our congregation. What does salvation mean? If we look to Scripture we find that God sent His Son that we may have the fullness of life. That is salvation. That is our incessant prayer. That each person will attain the fullness of life. That each person will have his or her dignity upheld or if necessary restored. That each person will have all that is necessary for him or her to reach his or her full potential.

APOSTOLIC INCARNATIONAL PRAYER

I invite you to pause for a moment of silent reflection and then jot down your thoughts on what you think APOSTOLIC INCARNATIONAL PRAYER is as lived by our Contemplative Sisters. How is it different from the way in which you pray?

St. Mary Euphrasia founded us to be a prayer support for our apostolic sisters. Today our vow commits us to **“live and pray for the salvation of persons especially those served by our congregation.”** This vow of zeal remains central in our lives. We are witnesses of God’s mercy and mystery. We see this as a gift of God which gives dynamism to the whole of our lives through prayer, silence, intercession and reconciliation. We make our own the concrete situations in the world where women and children are marginalized.

In our Contemplative Intercontinental Assembly document from 2008 we state, **“As contemplative women we wish to be a wellspring of new life and zeal flowing from the Spirit and being outpoured upon all creation.”** In 2014 we recognized that Eco-spirituality challenges us to grow in the awareness that we are the “containers” of the divinity of God and that our apostolic incarnational prayer is interconnected with every element of the Universe.

As a contemplative I am not for myself but for others. We are sent by the Church through the Congregation to be wounded healers, living an embodied prayer with sisters who share our journey, encouraging one another to follow this mission with fidelity and love at all times, despite the many difficulties.

Our prayer is universal because we bring into our moments of prayer the current reality in which humanity lives, with its joys and sorrows, its goodness and evil.

I would invite one of you to please read from the Constitutions under Mission and Spirit - Article 6 where it says: For Contemplative Sisters.

Reader:

(As contemplative sisters)... we witness to the absolute primacy of God and seek to be a means of reconciliation by our prayer, gospel asceticism, solitude and silence. We pray for the Church and for the entire world. With Jesus, we give ourselves up to ardent intercession that the beauty God’s image be revealed in each person. In a particular way we support the endeavors of our sisters who are engaged in the active ministry of reconciliation. Art 6

This is at the core of our Apostolic Incarnational Prayer. At the heart of the world and of the congregation we lift up God’s people to the mercy of the Father, and repeat over and over, comfort, give comfort to my people. We unite our prayer with the prayer of Jesus and with the prayer of others.

Like Jesus’ hidden life in Nazareth, apostolic incarnational prayer makes us live in the middle of our own reality, accepting of one another in community, ready to forgive, letting go of one’s own plan and opinion, having an on-going spirit of conversion, humility and simplicity, searching together for a more just and caring society.

As we seek to make each moment a moment of contemplation we find that there is a contemplative way of doing things, of approaching things. To live in the moment. To be

totally aware of what is happening now. To stay in this moment and to find God there. This awareness brings us closer to the realization that God dwells within each of us. That the mercy of God is outpoured from our hearts to all of God's people. God also encloses us. Julian of Norwich, one of the English mystics, says that God is nearer to us than our clothing. So God is within and God is without.

Example of Apostolic Incarnational Prayer

Sister: I was on a bus. It was about a two and one half hour journey. "What makes my prayer apostolic and incarnational?" I asked myself. I watched the expression on different faces, men and women, old and young.

Woman: (looking at sister and smiling) Can I sit beside you? Can I speak to you?

Sister: Yes. Can I help you in any way?

Woman: (crying unable to speak)

Sister rises addressing the others
I feel helpless and a bit fearful. "Lord, please help me to console this woman".

Sitting down again and lightly holding the woman's hand offering her handkerchief

Woman: May I have your address and telephone number?

Sister: Certainly. (gets out a pen and pencil)

Woman: Thank you (woman leaves)

Sister: When I came home, the face of this woman was in my heart. I brought her in my prayer and tried to enter into the feelings of that woman – sadness, loneliness, discouragement ... If I were her what would I do. Again and again I brought this woman into the presence of the Good Shepherd.

Two days later

Sister 2: You just received a letter.

Sister: (opening the letter and reading aloud) "Thank you for saving my life, the other day I was on my way to commit suicide".

Then I understood that apostolic incarnational prayer is not the prayer that comes only from my lips but rather it is becoming one with the persons who suffer and bringing these persons into the presence of the Lord.

ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS POWERPOINT

COMMUNITY LIFE

It is a great challenge, a personal experience, a struggle to constantly cultivate the values of contemplative life. Our contemplative lifestyle lived in community provides a support for the contemplation to which we are called.

Our first constitutions asked, “How shall we know the sisters? It is by the sincere love that they have for one another. **“May charity unite all hearts, souls and spirits so closely that they truly are one; may it be read on their faces and on their whole being. May they form only one heart and one soul.”** Constitutions of 1834 and 1857

The words of Pope Francis resonate in our hearts: “Build community life. It is the Holy Spirit who is in the middle of community. Always contemplate, always with Jesus..and in community life always with a big heart...A sign of this is joy which is born of true contemplation and from the beauty of community life”. *Address at Basilica of St.Clare in Assisi, October 4, 2013*

- Attend with care to community life:
 - Nurture a permanent attitude of pardon and reconciliation in our communities
 - Form ourselves in communal discernment to assist us in creating a balanced life of prayer, work, study and leisure.
- Live our intense community life with a generous heart, being faithful to our *horarium* and daily renouncing my desires for the good of the whole, united together with the pain and suffering of our people.
- Put others first; listen and dialogue respectfully; sacrifice my time, talents and energy for my sisters.

ENCLOSURE

Article 43 says that: ***The enclosure is a sign of our exclusive attention to the Lord and our total dedication to prayer. It enables us to enter the solitude and silence so necessary for our vocation. This solitude is fruitful to the extent that we are sensitive to the sorrows, the hopes and the joys of all people. Although the enclosure separates us from others it helps us to become more profoundly present to them in the Heart of Christ. In the light of faith and zeal we value enclosure as a gift of God.***

What happens when we to go outside of our enclosure? When we explored the meaning of our constitutional enclosure at the 2003 General Assembly we define it as enclosure of the heart that is reserving Sacred Space for God within ourselves and our homes. When we leave our convents for necessities we carry this Sacred Space with us.

Our document, “Impelled by God’s Love” urges us to be a welcoming community to those who come to share prayer with us, while always respecting the requirement of the enclosure. I experience enclosure of the heart when I can call myself back to the silence of the moment and am able to relate to others with attention and compassion. When I re-focus on Jesus and

his dwelling within me, I realize that God's people are with me too and I am never alone in my intimate moments with the Lord.

Enclosure allows me to suffer with the suffering, weep with those who weep and rejoice with those who desire in their hearts to change their lives. It leads to respect and love of oneself and of others.

Intimate communion with the Lord helps me to be in inner harmony, communion and intercession for others.

The atmosphere of silence and solitude frees me from selfishness, leads me to an inner freedom and a more lively and committed prayer, getting me closer to the realities of joy or suffering of humanity. I become another Christ in gentleness.

Please join me in looking at **Article 53** which sums up what I want to say about Enclosure:

Our mission commits us to love and to seek God above all else. Our lives must be hidden in Christ Jesus. This intimate communion draws us to a profound knowledge of divine love. The gospel call to renunciation is intimately linked to our prayer, and is an important element in our life of contemplative.



CHALLENGES OF TODAY AND JUSTICE

I have entitled this segment: Challenges of Today and Justice!

Today we have many challenges. The quiet life in the monasteries of yesterday is no longer possible. We live in the reality of today where we are called to a radical transformation. At our Assembly in 2008 we were challenged to "Break the Flask" as the woman in the Gospel of John did. To be poured out in mercy and compassion on the suffering people of the world. To not cling – to let go. How is this to be accomplished? What discernment do we need to safeguard our contemplative life? Do we dare to move into the future with courage and hope? Can we rid ourselves of outdated structures so that we have hearts full of compassion? These are some of the questions that we are asking ourselves today.

We are challenged to increase our awareness of global realities and take concrete action in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. How does this correspond to the contemplative life?

There are many things that we as contemplatives can do. For example: elderly and poor people who could not take public transportation purposely lived in an area near a food store. When we became aware that the store was closing for renovations our sisters contacted the manager by telephone and by mail asking that the management would provide transportation for these people to another store. Without that transportation it would have been impossible for them to buy what they needed.

Our contemplative sisters in Canada adopted a group of sisters who were imprisoned for trespassing on government property to protest armaments. For the time that these sisters

were in prison our sisters wrote weekly to them promising them their prayers. Upon their release the Superior General of their congregation told us that it was only the letters of the sisters that helped them to survive the conditions in prison.

Sisters in Latin America are very conscious of the shortage of water and so collect the water from their showers to water their gardens.

Some Sisters write, telephone or e-mail their government leaders when they hear of an unjust situation or when there is a possibility of just legislation to be implemented.

Over the years we have become more conscious of our consumption. We try to limit our use of electricity, gas and water. We are committed to recycle and reuse.

Justice demands that we passionately defend the beauty of God's creation which we value as an Icon of God

In the reality of the world today we need to provide our sisters with sound theological studies, with training to give spiritual direction, with preparation to pray with and for God's people. Our formation must be holistic and lead us to move out of our comfort zone in order to promote new life. We claim Justice, Peace and Care of Creation as integral to our charism. What is the contemplative dimension of Justice? What can we, as contemplatives, do to promote justice in our world?

In our own communities and in our relationships with others we are confronted with the desire to be respectful and reconciling in every encounter, careful in our words so that we do not judge or label others.

UPDATE AND ARTICLE ONE IMPLICATIONS

What does it mean to be a contemplative in an apostolic congregation?

Article One tells us that we belong to an apostolic congregation. What does contemplative life look like in this setting? How do we relate to our apostolic sisters? Is complementarity tending towards union and then beyond to communion? What implications does this Article have for us? What implementations do we need at this time? We are growing into the answers to these questions.

What implications of Article One can you recognize? What dialogue do we need to have together as apostolic and contemplative sisters? How do we better understand each other's lifestyles?

CONCLUSION

To conclude we would like to ask you just two more questions:

1. What have you learned about contemplative life that gives you a better understanding of this way of life in our congregation today?

(Microphone is passed around from person to person)

2. What additional information do you need in order to better understand the two ways of life in the congregation? (Response from anyone in the group)

I want to share with you the conclusion of our Document “Impelled by God’s Love” from our Contemplative Assembly 2014:

A deep sense of gratitude wells up within us, gratitude for our call to live the contemplative life through our vow of zeal. Our awareness of the primacy of God creates a desire to give our absolute best in witnessing to the Gospel. We are drawn to the Heart of the Trinity and a deep desire to remain there. At the same time we experience the pain and the suffering of the world and we know that we too share in the sinfulness and violence of the world. Daily we are called to conversion and transformation into Christ.

Impelled by God’s love for all of creation, and in union with the Heart of Mary, we are moved to reach out and touch the face of God in suffering creation. Knowing that we are called to experience God in all things and all things in God we offer the witness of our contemplative lives. We offer the power of our apostolic incarnational prayer. We offer a permanent attitude of reconciliation.

“Then they will risk, and wonder at their daring, run and marvel at their speed, build and stand in awe at the beauty of their building.” *Charles Peguy “The Heart of the Matter*

SOURCES

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