

In July, Pope Francis issued an Apostolic Constitution on women's contemplative life, called *Seek the Face of God*. Although aimed at orders of cloistered women religious, this document can also teach lay people how to enter into a more authentic relationship with Christ. The phrase comes from Psalm 27, my favorite Bible passage on prayer. I encourage you to prayerfully read and meditate upon the entire Psalm.

Seek the Face of God was addressed to women because they comprise the majority of contemplative orders. It is the first apostolic constitution for contemplative orders issued since Vatican II. Pope Francis wished to address problems in contemplative life that have gone unaddressed for decades, as well as encourage contemplatives in their increasingly counter-cultural vocation. Here are some of the highlights of the document and my reflections on what we as lay people can learn from them.

A dialogue of love

"Seeking the face of God has always been a part of our human history. From the beginning, men and women have been called to a dialogue of love with the Creator. Indeed, mankind is distinguished by an irrepressible religious dimension that leads human hearts to feel the need – albeit not always consciously – to seek God, the Absolute." (No. 1)

Meditate on that! Really, I mean it. So many of the errors in the way prayer is taught and practiced come down to a failure to recognize that prayer means seeking God's face. Prayer is "a dialogue of love with the Creator." The desire for God is inborn. Nothing else satisfies the human heart. We long for an eternal love. Ask yourself:

- Has my prayer become mere rote?
- Do I dialogue with God in prayer, or just talk at Him?
- Am I seeking a new consciousness or an encounter with a divine Person?
- Do I feel drawn to a closer union with God in prayer?

City on a hill

Cloistered religious are called to become "a living exegesis of God's word" (No. 2). In other words, they are a living, breathing interpretation of Sacred Scripture. Or, as the document goes on to say: "The presence of communities set like cities on a hill or lamps on a stand, despite their simplicity of life, visibly represent the goal towards which the entire ecclesial community journeys. For the Church 'advances down the paths of time with her eyes fixed on the future restoration of all things in Christ', thus announcing in advance the glory of heaven."

If these women are a city on a hill for us, shouldn't we be learning more about their life, pondering what they can teach us? Long ago a friend presented me with the book *My Beloved: The Story of a Carmelite Nun* by Mother Catherine Thomas. This beautiful true story about life in a 20th century American cloister is now out of print. I encourage you to read it if you can find a used copy. If you have read similar books, especially any newer ones, please share them in the comments. Many movies in the last decade have also given us a peek within the cloisters. I hope and pray we'll continue to see efforts like this.

"The monastic life, as an element of unity with the other christian confessions, takes on a specific form that is prophecy and sign, one that 'can and ought to attract all the members of the church to an effective and prompt fulfilment of the duties of their christian vocation'." (No. 4).

Ask yourself:

- Am I as devoted to following God's will in my vocation as a cloistered religious is?
- Have I forsaken all worldly ambitions to follow God's will alone?
- Do I see the duties of my state in life as a means for holiness and union with God?
- Am I quick to respond to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, or am I sluggish?

Contemplative values

"In these past decades, we have seen rapid historical changes that call for dialogue. At the same time, the foundational values of contemplative life need to be maintained. Through these values – silence, attentive listening, the call to an interior life, stability – contemplative life can and must challenge the contemporary mindset." (No. 8)

Ask yourself:

- What can contemplative orders teach me about silence?
- About attentive listening?
- About my call to the interior life?

Is the Holy Spirit prompting me towards greater silence and simplicity in our noisy, distracted culture? *"Over the centuries, the Church has always looked to Mary as the summa contemplatrix."* (No. 10). I love that phrase, *summa contemplatrix!* Mary is the great



contemplative, the mother of all who seek the face of God. She is our model. She is our help. We turn our faces toward her and she turns them toward Christ her Son.

“Contemplatives appreciate the value of material things, yet these do not steal their heart or cloud their mind; on the contrary, they serve as a ladder to ascend to God... Contemplation thus involves having, in Christ Jesus whose face is constantly turned to the Father, a gaze transfigured by the working of the Holy Spirit, a gaze full of awe at God and His wonders.” (Nos. 10-11)

Ask yourself:

Do I still have a sense of wonder about the world?

If not, how might I get that back?

Do I instill this wonder in my children?

Do I let material things lead me beyond themselves to God, or do I mistake the means for the end?

Noonday devil

Number 11 uses a phrase hardly ever heard any more– *the midday (or noonday) devil*. Pope Francis reminds us that the Desert Fathers faced: *“the temptation to listlessness, mere routine, lack of enthusiasm and paralysing lethargy.”* Since reading *Vultum Dei quaerere*, I’ve become more aware of this temptation to acedia (slothfulness) in my daily life. How often do I finish a project and then feel restless! How often when I feel my prayer is useless or empty am I really just being tempted by the noonday devil?

Growth in holiness or just in numbers?

Parents, homeschoolers, catechists, pastors, and all who accompany others on their journey toward God can learn from No. 15, which states that “ample time must be reserved” for the formation of new candidates before they make their final vows.

Ask yourself:

- Do I expect too much, too soon of my children, students, or new converts?
- Am I too focused on numbers, ages, and statistics, instead of on true conversion of heart?
- Do I give others ample time and space to grow?
- Do I expect everyone to follow the same path down which God has led me?

Prayer, Word, and Sacrament

Perhaps my favorite section is this:

“Today many persons do not know how to pray. Many simply feel no need to pray, or limit their relationship with God to a plea for help at times of difficulty when there is no one else to turn to. For others, prayer is merely praise in moments of happiness.” (No. 16)

Can I cut these sentences out and send them to every priest I know? Please, teach us to pray!!!! Teach us this: *“Personal prayer will help keep you united to the Lord like branches on the vine, and thus your life will bear abundant fruit.”* From this point, the document begins to speak of new regulations for cloistered religious, including frequent Reconciliation, Eucharistic Adoration, and *Lectio Divina*.

“The entire Church, and especially communities completely devoted to contemplation, need to rediscover the centrality of the word of God, which, as my predecessor St. John Paul II stated, is the ‘first source of all spirituality’. The word of God needs to nourish your life, your prayer, your contemplation and your daily journey.” (No. 19)

Ask yourself:

- How often do I make use of the Sacrament of Reconciliation?
- Do I or can I make time for Eucharistic Adoration?
- Am I devoted to the Eucharist at Mass?
- Does the word of God enrich my whole life, through the liturgy, study, and meditation?

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