

Asociation of British Contemplatives Meeting with Sr Fernanda Barbiero, May 2018

Question and Answer Sessions

Q: How can we re-ignite the fire under the ashes?

Sr F: Pope Francis talks very often about returning to our first love – the fire that caused us to follow Jesus. It is prayer that re-ignites it – profound prayer that enables a relationship with the Lord. Prayer demands a discipline: it is not something to be improvised. That appointment with the Lord is the most important time of all. We must ask for the grace we want to receive. It is good if our prayer is based on the word of God. We can't even imagine what the word will bring us. It is important to evaluate how we pray. Prayer is an exercise – a work – and demands application. Little by little it will ignite the fire.

Q: We want to be open, and resonate with the need to find new paths. But what new thing are we to do? (We have already done many!)

Sr F: We need to live in reality and name our poverty. We think we've resolved the questions but we're kidding ourselves. We need to identify what needs to change, always in hope. Hope is the most important Christian attitude, because it is rooted in the paschal mystery of Christ.

Q: Talk of the superior being a mother can evoke negative responses.

Sr F: Every woman is a mother! Maternity is a positive value; maternalism is negative. The service of authority needs to give life, for everyone, without partiality. The first quality needed in a superior is interior freedom – this takes away maternalism (which is about possession). Pray for superiors who can fulfil their role as true mothers!

Q: While we look for new ways, many young people are looking for older ways.

Sr F: Candidates for both the priesthood and religious life are looking for traditional forms. This is a sign of weakness, and of looking for security in externals. It is a great problem and a great worry for the Church. Congregations of traditionalists are attracting young people. Pope Francis has said that this phenomenon is hiding problems. Serious discernment is needed. Maybe we have to listen to them and help them to mature. But we need to be very vigilant. Very often there are problems that are not manifest, such as sexual issues. Accompaniment and formation are extremely important; and maybe one day someone more or less normal will come along...

Q: How to respond to various cultural issues.

Sr F: Social media and the internet: these cannot be avoided, but need to be used adequately and in the right measure.

We have become comfortable, and allowed some things to come in that are not so good. You sometimes find worldliness. We have to return to a more radical following of Christ.

In general Europe has lost its faith, but there are still many people who have faith. A vocation is given by the Lord, and he can call whomever he wishes. It is a gift. We shouldn't be worrying because we don't have vocations – though admittedly some situations are not good. We must do what we can, and there are two gospel imperatives: (1) Pray the Lord of the harvest, and (2) Come and see. Use creativity in interpreting these – prayer, and the witness of our life.

Q: Cor Orans re-affirms the need for a material separation from the world. So how are we to 'go out'? Is it just a matter of outlook?

Sr F: If we take cloister to mean a space with no doors or windows, that is a prison. If we mean a place where we live a life focused on the Lord, we don't have to have big walls and avoid all contact with outside. We have to create signs that we are dedicated to God. The cloister is a means to an end, not an end in itself. Men don't have this problem! Women have transformed the means into an end in itself. Some material sign is good, but it shouldn't be anything heavy. Each monastery has its own sign: a grille, a low wall, or whatever.

Q: What is meant by choosing our own form of cloister?

Sr F: Pope Francis leaves every monastery free to choose the type of cloister they wish, in accordance with their charism. The choice should be made after discernment by the *community* (not just by one person), and they must then remain faithful to that choice. Opening the doors and the windows doesn't mean that the monastery becomes the piazza! To be open is to be able to welcome the reality of the world, and bring the needs of the world to the Lord. It means having a heart the size of the world. We bring all humanity in our prayer to the Lord. Each community has to decide how that openness is to be practised. Some have no contact with people outside. Others, such as the Benedictines, offer hospitality and welcome. The Pope gives the freedom – but to reconcile openness and enclosure, you have to keep enclosure only as an instrument, a means, not an end.

Q: How to go about formation for leadership.

Sr F: It is necessary today to form superiors. Life has become very complex, and new superiors need to be accompanied. *Cor Orans* states that courses are needed. In apostolic life courses are already available. This is something we have to consider. The ABC might need to make this a priority: how to help superiors. This need not be a full-blown course but a meeting.

Q: How to attract vocations.

Sr F: The Church is holy but still sinful. In many places it is not responding to the needs of young people. How can contemplative life give credibility to the Church? We must help people to see the good in the Church while not denying the reality of its sinfulness. We need to give example, pray for the Church, and pray for priests. Adopt a priest in your prayer. These poor men are really alone, and need to be encouraged and loved. They give us Jesus and forgive us our sins.

Q: Are apostolic forms of life more attractive to young people today?

Sr F: No – the reality speaks for itself. Some young people are attracted to new forms. There are lots of them, and that is causing a fragmentation of vocations. Most of these new forms still have to pass the test of history. Judge them after the exam, not before. Many of them already have enormous problems. Last year, 50 new congregations were dissolved. Only the Holy See can accept new communities. *Cor Orans* elaborates the safeguarding of the new forms. Some are for their own time only.

Q: How are we to encounter the other?

Sr F: Begin with politeness! If someone writes to you, respond. If you meet someone, speak to them. 'How are you?' – the small rules of life together. We have to create the space for encounter. The instruments are words and gestures. The encounter is very simple. There needs to be encounter both within the monastery and with those outside. Invite a group, arrange a time of prayer, or testimony, even share a meal. Contact produces encounter. Also let them speak to us. If we don't do anything, nothing will come out of it.

Q: What does it mean for us to live radically?

Sr F: A life that is radical is rooted (*radix* = root) in the fundamentals. If we cut the roots of a tree, it dies. To live radically means not being superficial. Some things in contemplative life are not essential: they arrived later, and are not always authentic. Sometimes we give more importance to the ornaments (e.g. elaborate habits) rather than the foundations. We become ostentatious, and show off our strangeness, rather than showing Jesus to the world. People won't follow us if we are like that. We have to ask the Lord to give us the grace of balance and normality. We can become ridiculous through certain ways of dressing or being.

The Community of Bose is an example of a radical community: they are rooted in history, and follow the Rule of St Benedict, but they have applied it radically to their life. There are both men and women, Lutherans, Catholics, and Orthodox. They live the gospel: everything is centred on the word of God. They do not go in for any strange ways or outfits! They have a charismatic leader, which can be taken as a sign that the charism is a gift from God. The founder is no longer the superior – he was able to hand over to another.

Q: Is there a difference between an association and a federation?

Sr F: Yes. They are both structures of communion, but they differ from each other. Each is described by its own statutes. Both have to take *Cor Orans* into account: all the canonical elements apply to associations, federations, and congregations alike e.g. if there are only five sisters in a community they cannot elect a superior and the president has to report the situation to the Holy See. The religious assistant represents the Holy See to the association or federation (this is new). The whole purpose is to help build communion. The religious assistant is obligatory! But it is not about control. The assistant would normally be a member of your own Order. A congregation has more 'power' than an association or federation because of its governing body. Nos. 1-14 of *Cor Orans* explain it all.

Q: The role of associations in formation.

Sr F: The natural place for initial formation is in the monastery. If a community is not formative, there is a problem. For specific subjects of formation, several monasteries can join together. For matters common to all charisms, the ABC could organize formation.

Comment from Sr Raymunda: The ABC has organized formation meetings in the past.

Sr F: You are the first in everything!

Q: Questions on initial formation.

Sr F: The minimum nine years is obligatory. Cf. VDQ 15; this was written by Pope Francis. However, it should not be applied to those already in formation, only to those who enter from now on. But every norm has its own exceptions, and since some now enter at a certain age, you cannot have them going straight into the infirmary! If someone enters in her 50s and has education and experience, use your common sense. The superior with her council and the novice mistress can shorten the time. But at 50 there may be complex baggage: you have to be vigilant, and consider the good of the person, *not* the good of the monastery. Otherwise we can create monsters and a life that is not liveable. There are certain situations where a sister is aggressive, dangerous, even violent in community; maybe proper discernment should have taken place in the past, for the sake of the person. But now we have to look after her.

If formation is done well, there is no reason why the requirement of nine years should generate insecurity; rather, it should serve to strengthen the person.

Cor Orans specifies temporary vows for three years and then renewed annually for two more years, but you have to work out what is best in your situation – you could have e.g. two years and then three years. But the forthcoming Ordinale on formation will give further clarification.

Q: Questions on affiliation.

Sr F: No maximum number of years is specified. It may be a time to revitalize the affiliated monastery, but if that does not happen, the monastery will have to be suppressed. A new foundation that has not fulfilled the criteria for canonical erection within 15 years must be suppressed. The monastery to be affiliated decides which monastery it will ask to be affiliated to; the chapter of the monastery then decides whether to accept. Affiliation is a collective decision. There needs to be a conversation between the monasteries. If after a few years of affiliation a monastery is suppressed, its assets might go to the monastery where the sisters have gone, or some to the federation, or some to charity. In the past they went to the bishops! You have to be aware of any conditions the original donors may have imposed. If a monastery becomes totally extinct, the assets go to the federation/association/congregation.

Q: As an association, do we have to follow all that Cor Orans says about federations?

Sr F: No. Only some canonical aspects have to be applied to associations. See no. 13: an association must proceed according to its unique nature and its own statutes.