

Contemplative Nuns Speak For Themselves

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On May 15, 2018, the Vatican announced the promulgation of *Cor Orans*, the document containing the directives for communities of contemplative nuns around the world. In the years that followed, few Catholic websites in the United States have given a platform for contemplative communities who want to follow the Vatican's directives to share their perspectives. Where Peter Is has covered *Cor Orans* and has provided a window into how some of the subsequent issues and controversies have affected these communities. You can find our series of articles here.

May 15, 2023 will be the fifth anniversary of *Cor Orans*, and to celebrate we would like to share two recent initiatives undertaken by contemplative nuns themselves. As Pope Francis wrote in 2016, "The world and the Church need you to be beacons of light for the journey of the men and women of our time. This should be your prophetic witness." Thanks to the assistance of modern technology, nuns are answering that call and witnessing to the wider world without even leaving the cloister!

The first initiative is a series of articles published by the prestigious Institute on Religious Life. The Institute on Religious Life (IRL) was established in 1974 by the Servant of God Fr. John A. Hardon, SJ. Fr. Hardon founded the IRL to support and promote religious life in the United States. He was encouraged and supported by such notable Catholics as St. Teresa of Kolkata and Venerable Fulton J. Sheen. Past supporters of the IRL have included Cardinal John O'Connor, Mother Angelica of EWTN, Mother Mary Francis, PCC of the Roswell Poor Clares, Fr. Thomas Dubay, SM, and Fr. Benedict Groeschel, CFR of the Franciscan Friars of the Renewal.

The affiliate Members of the IRL are religious communities and congregations, both male and female, active and contemplative, as well as some lay associations. The IRL organizes conferences and meetings aimed to support and encourage religious and consecrated life in the United States. The conferences are given by such well-known priests and religious as Fr. Brian Mullady, OP, Fr. Boniface Hicks, OSB, and Fr. Thomas Nelson, OPraem, the National Director of the IRL.

The IRL publishes a bi-monthly magazine, *Religious Life*, and in the Summer 2022 edition, Fr. Nelson announced a series of upcoming articles about *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*. He wrote that these two documents "caught the immediate attention not only of contemplative nuns, but also of the Christian faithful from every state in life far beyond the cloister walls. This is manifest by the large number of journal articles, conferences, webinars, and online articles which have already examined or discussed these documents." [1]

The IRL counts some 185 Catholic religious communities and congregations that are affiliate members. Of these, over 70 are communities of contemplative nuns, including Cistercians, Carmelites, Cloistered Dominicans, Handmaids of the Precious Blood, Benedictines, Poor Clares, Norbertines, Passionists, and Visitandines. In his capacity as the National Director of the IRL, Fr. Nelson writes, “I have been blessed to interact with countless nuns who have freely and frankly shared their experiences regarding how they have received, studied, sought counsel about, perhaps even greatly struggled with, and then successfully implemented various aspects of *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*.”

From his contact with nuns who have tried to put the documents into practice, he notes, “One concern that has repeatedly been voiced to me regards the ‘misinformation’ about *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans* that all-too-quickly pops up online when searching for new articles or commentaries about the documents.” He recognizes that the nuns themselves “sometimes find it very easy to discern when an article completely ‘misses the mark’ about what *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans* actually say and aim to accomplish, such as when incorrect terminology is used, and false conclusions are therefore made.”[2]

Responding to these communications, at a meeting early in 2022 “with the religious members of the IRL Board, it was agreed that it would be beneficial to have a series of articles on *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans* in forthcoming issues of *Religious Life* magazine, some written by cloistered nuns themselves who are eager to share their wide and varied experiences regarding this new legislation.”[3] The articles, written by the nuns themselves, would cover the four main topics of *Cor Orans*: autonomy, federation, the cloister, and formation. The first of these articles appeared in the November/December edition of the magazine. It was written by the superior of a Passionist community who described how the decision was made by Passionist nuns around the world to form themselves into a monastic congregation with a Mother Superior. It then described the work required to bring this about. The writer ends her account by saying, “It gives me great joy to share with you our community experience. I hope this article will encourage other cloistered communities to ‘stay the course,’ and to strive for the deepest contemplative life possible, in communion with other monasteries.”[4] Planned upcoming articles include one on enclosure by a Carmelite and another on federations by a Poor Clare.

Visit CloisteredLife.com to read more about the IRL’s presentation of contemplative life.

At the same time that Fr. Nelson was planning the IRL’s series of articles, a similar, but much smaller, initiative began in the shape of a new website, Seeking the Face of God. This is a website “About Contemplative Nuns By Contemplative Nuns.” It was established by our friend Sr. Gabriela of the Incarnation, OCD, a Carmelite nun and a regular contributor to Where Peter Is.

Sr. Gabriela explained why she was motivated to start this new website, saying, “Since *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans* came out, I had been corresponding with a nun in another Order. Both her Association and ours had to update their Statutes, and she and I were sharing information concerning this. We and several other nuns also shared information about what was being published in Catholic media about the documents, and we were very concerned about the misinformation that seemed to be so prevalent.”

In April 2022, the nun shared the following experiences with Sister Gabriela:

The other week we had two priests from the diocese visit. They were prayer partners when they were seminarians and have been ordained 5 years. They are not “traditional.” Just solid, diocesan priests. Somehow, the conversation in the parlor hinted at *Cor Orans* and one of them asked, “Why is the Holy See micromanaging the internal life of the monastery?” We knew where that was coming from, and we spent the next 45 minutes answering their objections and our concerns and the reasons for *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*. ...

My spiritual director was here a few days later. ... Father said to me that we would do a great service to the Church if we answered these objections and concerns in a very straightforward way. I told him about our proposal with IRL [the Institute on Religious Life]. He said it needs to be something more succinct and suggested that for *each* concern or objection there should be a short response from nuns from different Orders.

Sr. Gabriela explained, “This gave me the idea to start ‘Seeking the Face of God.’ In it, I provide the actual texts of the two documents, as well as other documents concerning them and their backgrounds. I give links to other articles by contemplative nuns, and I give short videos presenting the facts about the documents and contemplative life. I am very careful to provide clear references for any quotations. Many articles have been written by people of good will who unfortunately have themselves no experience of life within a contemplative community.”

Like Fr. Nelson and the nuns who shared their concerns with him, Sr. Gabriela is worried about the effect that misinformation will have on priests and lay persons who depend on what they hear and read for their knowledge of contemplative religious life. She said,

I want to reach Catholic families and parish priests, and give them the facts about *Vultum Dei Quaerere* and *Cor Orans*. The future of contemplative life in the Church depends on our Catholic families and on the priests who guide and support them. If they don’t have a true understanding of what our contemplative life is about, the many communities of contemplative nuns like those writing for *Religious Life* will close for lack of vocations.

Sr. Gabriela asks for two things from her readers: for their prayers and to make her website known. She requested that we “Share our website and our links, our articles and videos with your friends and family and especially with the priests you know. The more the truth is

known, the more the faith will grow.”

Please visit these two excellent websites, cloisteredlife.com and seekingthefaceofgod.org, to learn about the vocations and experiences of the contemplative nuns who support us with their prayers and sacrifices. Share *Cloistered Life* and *Seeking the Face of God* widely with your friends, fellow parishioners, and on social media, and in your personal networks. You are free to reproduce this article for print and the web. We ask that you please credit *Where Peter Is* if you can.

Notes:

[1] *Religious Life*, May/June/July 2022, p. 10

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Religious Life*, May/June/July 2022, pp. 10-11

[4] *Religious Life*, Nov/Dec 2022, p. 10

Image: Courtesy of Flemington Carmel.

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