

*Spiritual Worship and the Canonesses of Prémontré*¹

In religious families that have a male and female branch, the female branch, traditionally called the Second Order, is constituted of cloistered religious. These women make the same profession as the men, and together with them “*give and offer themselves*” to realize the vision of the founder.

Speaking about the life and mission of the canoness of Prémontré, our own Constitutions say:

The canonesses regular of the Order of Prémontré, no less than the canons and lay brothers of the Order, participate fully in the canonical life, for they all make the same profession and are engaged in the practice of the same manner of life (Preliminary Chapter).

The Constitutions also tell us the manner of the canonesses’ participation: “*The sisters of our Order are especially devoted to the contemplative duty of our way of life*” (20). This concept of contemplative duty is key for understanding the place of the canonesses of Prémontré within the Order. In what follows, we wish to reflect on the *rationabile obsequium* (spiritual worship) of Rom. 12:1 in the life of Christ and of his Church in order to put into relief the place of the canonesses in our Norbertine Family. For, the carrying out of “our contemplative duty” is the particular way that the cloistered contemplative offers the *rationabile obsequium*.

The Spiritual Worship of Our Lord

Holy Scripture makes it clear that, in the days of his ministry among us, our Lord’s actions were the fruit of his communion with his Father in prayer. To name a few incidents, at his Baptism inaugurating his public ministry, Jesus is rapt in prayer; he spends the night in prayer before naming his Apostles; he often goes alone to solitary places to pray; his Transfiguration takes place while he is praying; he prays to the Father during the Last Supper; and while he hangs on the cross he is praying. The Catechism describes prayer as “*a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God*” (2558). Now, as the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the life of the Son is constituted by the relation of mutual, eternal self-giving between the Father and the Son – the Father, the source of life and power gives himself to the Son, and the Son, the one who receives life and power from the Father, gives himself to the Father. When the Son of God becomes man, this eternal *vital and personal relationship* is made present in time. It is this dialogue of self-giving that constitutes the prayer of Jesus. Jesus prayed always; for him it was an act of being, even as we breathe always for the sustenance of our life. His prayer is the essence of his spiritual worship.

¹ An article published by the Norbertine Canonesses of Tehachapi in the COMMUNICATOR, a publication of the English speaking Circary of the Order of Prémontré, December 2014, Volume XXXI, Number 2; Cumulative Issue 60.

Spiritual worship is an offering of the person in his entire self, of his body and his whole life, as a holocaust to the living God: “*Offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship*” (Rom 12:1). This offering, which is essentially interior and spiritual must find exterior expression. The living sacrifice of self-giving which, now as the God-Man, Jesus offers to the Father is Jesus’ spiritual worship, and his deeds are the concrete realization of this loving self-oblation to God for the sake of humanity. He realizes this love towards the Father in his consecration as the chaste, obedient, and poor One who fulfills his Father’s plan for humanity. Towards men, he realizes this love in deeds of mercy– in his work of redemption (priestly ministry), in his revealing the Father (prophetic ministry) and in his recapitulation of God’s people (kingly ministry) for the glory of his Father. In Christ, spiritual worship finds its culmination in his death on the cross, wherein God is glorified and man is redeemed for the sake of the kingdom. Christ’s spiritual worship did not end with his Ascension into heaven. He continues his living sacrifice of self-giving through his body, the Church.

The Spiritual Worship of the Church

The nature of the Church is revealed above all in her liturgy. The liturgy is the prayer or the dialogue of love that takes place between the whole Christ (the head and members) and the Father in the Holy Spirit. In this dialogue, Christ, through the ministry of the priest, presents to the Father his self-offering, (accomplished in his Paschal Mystery for the redemption of his bride, the Church), united to the self-offering of his Mystical Body so that, it is, as it were, the living sacrifice of self-offering of the one Mystical Person, namely, the Church in its head and members². The love or living sacrifice of self-giving to the Father that constitutes the Church’s spiritual worship is in the body of the Church as the soul that animates the Church’s life and apostolate. Just as the assumed nature, inseparably united to the Son, is the instrument for the concrete manifestation of Jesus’ spiritual worship, in a similar way, it is through her social structure that the Church’s spiritual worship is made manifest. Animated with the same love as Christ her head, the love of the Church is realized towards God and man – towards God in the holiness of its members and towards man in the various apostolates through which is realized the three-fold office of Christ for the building up of the kingdom. The intimate reciprocal connection of the Church’s spiritual worship and her social structure confer on her the nature of a sacrament (cf. MR 3). “*The Church is a sacrament, i.e., a sign and instrument, of intimate union with God and of the unity of the whole human race*” (LG 1).

² “Jesus draws men into this prayer through the Eucharist, which is thus the ever-open door of adoration and true sacrifice, the sacrifice of the New Covenant, the “reasonable service of God”” Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy* 29.

...Realized in Her Members

Through baptism each member of the Church's Mystical Body is incorporated into Christ's living sacrifice offered to the Father in the Holy Spirit. Each one of us therefore is offered, but each must also consciously offer oneself, above all in the liturgy, as participants in the spiritual worship of the People of God. This self-oblation of the bride of Christ, is manifest in the holiness and apostolate of the Church's members in different ways according to the gift of the Spirit given them. In the clergy it is realized in their greater conformity to Christ the head through priestly ordination and in their sacred ministry to the people of God in the celebration of the sacred mysteries, in the preaching of the Gospel, and in the pastoral ministry. In the laity, it is realized in the offering of spiritual sacrifices in the ordinary circumstances of family and social life and in their mission of consecrating the world to God. Those in the religious state however, realize the spiritual worship of the Church in *a closer following of Christ*, the chaste, poor and obedient One.

The Spiritual Worship of Consecrated Religious

Consecrated religious are those from among the clergy or the laity who, responding to the Father's call to give themselves exclusively to Him and to His plan of salvation, and under the influence of the Holy Spirit, unite themselves to the self-oblation of Christ by vowing a life of consecrated chastity, poverty and obedience for the perfection of charity in the service of the Kingdom of God. Their closer following of Christ makes present in the Church and in the world "*the way of life which Jesus, the supreme Consecrated One and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples*" (VC 22). The Church's spiritual worship is most apparent in her consecrated religious. This is because their way of life more closely conforms to the reality of the Church's self-oblation, that is, of her exclusive self-gift as bride to Christ her divine Bridegroom and through him to the Father. "*The nuptial dimension belongs to the whole Church, but consecrated life is a vivid image of it, since it more clearly expresses the impulse towards the Bridegroom*" (VS 4).

Thus, the two-fold manifestation of spiritual worship – holiness and apostolate – shines forth with particular brilliance in the religious way of life. "*As a way of showing forth the Church's holiness, it is to be recognized that the consecrated life, which mirrors Christ's own way of life, has an objective superiority. Precisely for this reason, it is an especially rich manifestation of Gospel values and a more complete expression of the Church's purpose, which is the sanctification of humanity.*" (VS 32). While all religious institutes have the "closer following of Christ" as their goal, each institute carries this out according to the gift of the Spirit given to their founders to particularly manifest some aspect of Christ's mystery. There are Religious who *more closely follow Christ* in the various deeds through which he manifested to mankind the mercy and solicitude of the Father. These give rise to the manifold apostolates of the religious families. There are also some Religious, however, who through a gift of the Holy

Spirit *more closely follow Christ* who prays. These latter have no external apostolate; moreover, in them is most perfectly manifest the spiritual worship of the Church.

The Spiritual Worship of Cloistered Contemplatives

Consecration means to be set apart or dedicated for a sacred purpose. Thus, separation is the distinguishing mark of consecration. The religious life is a more manifest sign of the consecration or holiness of the people of God because the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience separate the consecrated person from the world and its affairs: “*An unmarried woman or a virgin is anxious about the things of the Lord, so that she may be holy in both body and spirit. A married woman, on the other hand, is anxious about the things of the world, how she may please her husband.*” (1 Cor.7:34). The reality of separation, however, is most explicit in the life of the cloistered religious. Cloistered contemplatives are not only separated from the world by the vows of religion, but also by the discipline of the enclosure which requires “*the renunciation not only of things, but also of ‘space’, of contacts, and of so many benefits of creation*” (VS 3) as well as the withdrawal from external works of the apostolate. Indeed, the aim of the enclosure is to eliminate all “*that may divide the spirit against itself in any way*” so that the cloistered contemplative may be wholly given, in union with Christ, as a living sacrifice to God and on behalf of the people of God. The cloistered contemplative focuses all her attention on the Divine Bridegroom as the one thing necessary and so, her life more clearly manifests the Church’s bridal self-gift to Christ, and through Christ to the Father. The image is even more vivid in the female contemplative who as a woman has “*a special capacity to embody the nuptial relationship with Christ and be a living sign of it*” (VS 4).

The nuptial dimension belongs to the whole Church, but consecrated life is a vivid image of it, since it more clearly expresses the impulse towards the Bridegroom. In a still more significant and radical way, the mystery of the exclusive union of the Church as Bride with the Lord is expressed in the vocation of cloistered nuns, precisely because their life is entirely dedicated to God, loved above all else, in a ceaseless straining towards the heavenly Jerusalem and in anticipation of the eschatological Church confirmed in the possession and contemplation of God (VS 4).

The biblical concept of the *first-fruits* may be helpful in illustrating this reality. The Israelites separated the first-fruits of land (considered as the best of the harvest) or of the womb, and offered them to God both as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the gifts of God and as a symbol and a pledge that the whole harvest, i.e. the whole of Israel, is consecrated to God. “*If the first fruit is holy so is the whole batch of dough*” (Rom 11:16). As a symbol, the first-fruits represent those for whom they stand; thus, the offering of the symbol means the offering of what is represented³. In the mystical body of Christ, the term first-fruits is applied to all the baptized in relation to the rest of humanity,

³ Representation, vicarious sacrifice, takes up into itself those whom it represents; it is not external to them, but a shaping influence on them.” Ratzinger, *Theology of the Liturgy*, 34.

and to consecrated religious in relation to the whole people of God. But, it most specifically applies to the cloistered contemplative in relation to other religious, to the Church, and to the world, on account of her more explicit dedication to the Church's spiritual worship. The cloistered contemplative is *par excellence* a living symbol of the Church as bride, and as a living symbol of the people of God, she carries all the members of the Church in her heart, so that in and through her perpetual self-offering in Christ the whole people of God are offered as a spiritual living sacrifice to God.

The holiness of the cloistered religious shines forth in a life lived wholly consecrated with Christ in God in which "*docile to the Holy Spirit and enlivened by his gifts, she listens to the Son, fixes her gaze upon his face, and allows herself to be conformed to his life, to the point of the supreme self-offering to the Father, for the praise of his glory*" (VS 5). Her apostolate is to enter into the solitude of Christ. This solitude with its trials of the spirit, with its battles with the spiritual darkness that oppresses the world, and with its daily toils of life in community, is the particular way that the cloistered contemplative participates in the Paschal Mystery and thus, in the work of redemption. As our Lord (and our Blessed Mother with him) accumulated for the Church by the Paschal Mystery a treasury of graces, so through her participation in this mystery, the cloistered contemplative is a channel of these graces to the Church and to all of humanity. In entering into the desert of the cloister, the cloistered contemplative does not so much separate herself from her fellow men as enter into the heart of the Church and thus of the world. And, from this "*well-spring of Trinitarian communio*" (VS 6) she draws living water for the life of her fellow men. Her life is made a "*silent emanation of love and superabundant grace in the pulsing heart of the Church as Bride*" (VS 5). "*In the heart of the Church my Mother I shall be love*" (St. Therese). Being love, that is, being total gift, a holocaust, an oblation, is the particular role of the cloistered contemplative in the Mystical Body of Christ.

The Spiritual Worship of the Family of St. Norbert

The members of the Mystical Body of Christ are gifted with the grace of the Holy Spirit for living the various ways of life that make up the Church's social structure so that, as it were, they function as various specialized organs, each with their particular task working for the good of the whole. As it is among the members of the Mystical Body so it is with the members of a religious family. Indeed, religious institutes that have an active and contemplative branch more fully express the nature of the Church who although she is "*eager to act is yet intent on contemplation*" (SC 2). Each way of life found within the religious family has its particular function which its other members do not perform. But all the members of the family work together to realize the life and mission that has been handed on from the founding father. The mission of our Order of Prémontré is to actualize the *Vita Apostolica*, a way of life that has *communio* – "*a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit*" (LG 4) – as its essential characteristic. We are to actualize

communio in our communities and to promote it among men. *“The primary apostolic mission (diakonia) of our churches consists, therefore, in promoting this unity in Christ”* (Const. 71). However, *‘mission is not an appendage, but an integral part of the intimate nature of a religious family’* (cf. CL 61). The nature of our Order is canonical and so its purpose is divine worship. It is above all in the celebration of divine worship that our Order realizes its mission. For, the communio of the people of God is brought about principally through the liturgy, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist. *“The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread”* (1 Cor 10:16-17). In our canonical way of life, contemplation does not exist primarily for its own sake but, as a preparation for divine worship and as that which follows from it. It would seem therefore, that one of the purposes that the contemplative duty of the canonesses of Prémontré realizes is preparation for a fruitful celebration of the liturgy. Another purpose, also connected to divine worship, is that the canonesses are to be an offering of the Order for the realization of its mission.

To prepare the people of God for Divine Worship – As cloistered contemplatives, the canonesses of the Order exist in relation to the other members of our Norbertine family as the heart to the members of a body. Each organ of the body has its particular role that only it can perform for the good of the whole. Dom Bruno Webb, O.S.B vividly describes the role of the spiritual heart: *“The heart, by its continuous pulsations, sends the life blood coursing through the entire body, clearing away waste matter and rebuilding tissue; so by the continuous pulsation of their prayer, contemplatives send a ceaseless stream of grace coursing through the arteries and veins of Christ’s mystical body throughout the world.”* The celebration of the Church’s liturgy especially the Divine Office and the Holy Sacrifice, to which our canonical communities especially dedicate themselves, is always in itself fruitful and an abundant source of grace. However, in order that ministers and people may experience this fruitfulness they must be prepared to receive the gift.

The spiritual oblation of the cloistered contemplative is an abundant source of grace for the ministers (the canons of the Order) and those who assist them (the lay brothers, the sisters and the lay members of our Norbertine family) that being conformed to the mysteries they celebrate, they may grow in holiness, becoming ever more docile instruments in fulfilling the apostolate of the Order and the mission of the Church. This spiritual oblation of the canonesses is also an abundant source of grace that reaches out beforehand to prepare the hearts of those to whom the active members of our religious family minister, so that the seeds planted may not fall on rocky ground, but rather, finding rich soil irrigated by the waters of grace, may bear fruit in an ever deeper participation in the *koinonia* of Christ. *“It is, besides, easy to understand how they [cloistered contemplatives] who assiduously fulfill the duty of prayer and penance contribute much more to the increase of the Church and the welfare of mankind than those who labor in tilling the Master’s field; for unless the former drew down from heaven a shower of divine graces to water the field that is being tilled, the evangelical laborers would reap forsooth from their toil a more scanty crop”* (Pius XI, *Umbratitem*).

To be the offering of the Order – The Israelites offered first-fruits both as a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the gifts of God and as a symbol and pledge that the whole harvest, i.e. the whole people, is consecrated to God. The Norbertine canonesses, on account of their contemplative duty, are the first-fruits to be offered to God by all the members of the Norbertine family. The consecrated religious, and in the particular way already described, the cloistered contemplative, is more than a sign, she is indeed the reality signified – a living holocaust with Christ “*filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church*” (Col. 1:24). Thus, although through their common priesthood all the baptized are in some form called to this role, nonetheless, it is a particular duty, or one could say, the particular specialty, of the cloistered contemplative, to be *a helper fit for the priest* (cf. Gen 2: 18) to fill up what is wanting in his ministry. The priest, *in persona Christi*, offers to the eternal Father through the Holy Spirit, the Paschal Mystery of Christ so that the work of our redemption be carried out. But, it is not Christ alone that he offers, he offers also the spiritual worship of the members of the mystical body, and in a special way, cloistered contemplatives, whose vocation it is to be given wholly as a holocaust, as first-fruits, in union with the Crucified One. As priests, the Norbertine Canons have particularly been given the Norbertine canonesses who “*make the same profession with them*” to offer in union with Christ for the fruitfulness of their mission. The Norbertine canonesses are to the Norbertine Canons, (and indeed to the whole family of St. Norbert) as “*a helper fit for him*” in realizing our common mission of promoting a *communio* that embraces all men.

Epilogue

The last time that we see the blessed virgin Mary in the Scriptures she is in the upper room with the Apostles and disciples of the Lord “*who devoted themselves to prayer with one accord together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brothers*” (Acts 1:14). As this is our last explicit encounter with the Blessed Virgin in the Scriptures, it seems that the Holy Spirit suggests that this is the place in the Church where Mary remains and is found. She dwells in the upper room, in the heart of the Church, in the heart of the world, praying, together with the women, for the Holy Spirit to come upon the disciples of Christ and renew the face of the earth. Norbertine canonesses, the first-fruits of the Order of Prémontré, have for exemplar and model Mary praying in the Cenacle.

Abbreviations and Sources

CL – The Consecrated Life and its role in the Church and the World (Vatican Synod Secretariat)

Constitutions or Const. – Constitutions of the Canonesses of Prémontré

LG - Lumen Gentium

MR - Mutuae Relationes or Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church

Scripture Quotes from **NABRE**

SC - Sacrosanctum Concilium

Umbratilem - Apostolic constitution of Pope Pius XI approving the statutes of the Carthusian Order

VC - Vita Consecrata

VS - Verbi Sponsa

Why Enclosed Nuns by Dom Bruno Webb, O.S.B (Catholic Truth Society Pamphlet)