

Reflections for August Day of Recollection on CONTEMPLATION

After Vatican II, many congregations experimented with clothing, community living, ministry options but Mother Timothy Marie led the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Heart to begin in contemplation and prayer. An Historic Customs and Practices Committee was formed and reported that a **devotion** is defined as "religious exercises or practices other than the regular corporate worship of a congregation."

Several General Chapters spent considerable time on this subject of devotional prayer, this is what has been retained as indeed the fruit of listening to the Spirit. Therefore, devotions prescribed in our documents are the devotions to be passed on to new members. The delegates to the General Chapters which followed Vatican Council II took seriously the instruction given in the *Motu Proprio, Ecclesiae Sanctae*:

In order that religious may share more intimately and with greater profit in the holy mystery of the Eucharist, and in the public prayer of the Church, and that their interior life be more abundantly nourished, priority should be given to mental prayer over a multiplicity of other prayers. However, those community exercises which are traditional in the Church should be preserved and care taken that religious be rightly instructed in the ways of spiritual life.

The delegates decided to eliminate a multiplicity of prayers and to retain those "community exercises" which are "traditional in the Church".

After writing of participation in the sacramental life of the church and in the Liturgy of the Hours as identified in our constitution, the delegates specified certain devotional practices as communal, others as personal. Among these are:

1. Communal Devotions

- a. Daily prayer to the Sacred Heart
- b. Daily prayer to Our Mother of Perpetual Help
- c. Weekly prayer for vocations
- d. Monthly gathering of each local community for spiritual considerations
- e. Participation at wakes and the Mass of Christian Burial for the deceased members.

2. Personal Devotions

- a. Daily rosary for the spiritual and temporal welfare of the Institute
- b. Monthly day of recollection
- c. Annual retreat
- d. Daily one hour of personal prayer and spiritual reading
- e. Ten days of work and prayer offered for a deceased member

Finally, it was written into the Handbook referring to Personal Prayer Life:

Ordinarily all devotions except those prescribed by the Constitution are left to the discretion of the individual sister out of respect for the uniqueness of her prayer life. For example, shared prayer experiences are encouraged but not mandated. Extraordinary community devotions are discussed at the Local House Meeting.

The Spirit of Prayer from the Commentary of the Rule for Third Order Franciscans

From the exhortation to make ourselves a dwelling place for the Trinity, we move to this Spirit of Prayer which summarizes key elements of prayer in the Rule identifying our TOR Franciscan tradition. We know that Francis did not offer a complicated prayer method. Francis calls his followers to prayer with a decidedly contemplative dimension - to be present to God who is present to all His creatures is prayer. He requires that our prayer be Trinitarian. Our prayer is always addressed to the Father in the Son by the power of the Spirit (cf. Francis' dictated paraphrase of the "Our Father"). Our prayer is to be Incarnational. We become alive to God's deeds in His greatest deed, the Incarnation, in which God becomes one with us in the Son. The purpose of all Franciscan prayer, then, is to give God ceaseless praise and thanksgiving for all He has done and does in creation and in our re-creation in Christ.

Prayer is a way of life for us - all the time and everywhere. We should be so filled with God that He is adored from the depths of our inner life ("puro cor-de") with joy and thanksgiving. We should want nothing other ("et non deficere"), because the Father wills to be one with us. This is the holiness we are called.

Our every day should thus be sanctified. In Francis' time, this sanctification of the day was given clear expression in the divine office: This is still the Church's understanding of the Liturgy of the hours. We pray with the Son in His Mystical Body celebrating God's gift of salvation throughout the day. Today, as the "General Instruction" for the Liturgy of the Hours notes, it is also intercessory prayer for the Church and the world. It becomes for us both a turning to God and to our neighbor. For Francis, praying the Office is also a sign of fidelity to the Church.

The article addresses the many congregations within our Order of specifically contemplative life. All of us are called to contemplative prayer, but we are strengthened and enriched by the brothers and sisters who embrace the life of intercession and adoration in an exclusive way. Their lives within our Third Order regular family witness to the diversity supported by our common charism.

The motivation for our life of ceaseless prayer is described. Francis' love for creation and his insight into its meaning is central. Notice that we praise with all creatures. Creatures are determined and, unless abused by us, they do God's will. It is possible for us to seek union with God as we do His will because we are made in His image. The created world is the expression of God's goodness and the theater of his redemptive love for us. Thus, the Franciscan does not flee the world in order to "escape" to God but seeks immersion in its sacramental reality.

Francis calls for "humility and reverence" as dispositions for receiving the Eucharist. After the Fourth Lateran Council, Francis and the friars played a crucial role in helping to reform Eucharistic theology and devotion. We must remember that our understanding of "humility and reverence" must be deepened to include the renewed meaning of the communitarian dimensions of the Eucharist given by the Council of our day, Vatican II. "Participation" then, should become the by-word of renewed and reformed Eucharistic theology and practice among us.

Citing two other traits - often translated into specific "devotions" - associated with Franciscans and, indeed, with every reform movement in the Western Church. These are reverence for the holy and saving name of Jesus and respect for the sacred character of the words of the gospels. For Francis, such respect is a sign of conversion and our readiness to put the Lord's word into effect. Jesus continues his saving work (the meaning of his messianic titles) through the power of His presence in the Gospels and the reserved sacrament. As we contemplate the Paschal Mystery, the height of Franciscan contemplation is transformation into him "who chose to be crucified because of the excess of his love for us" (LM 13:3).