

# Life of the Spirit

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## THE BRIDE OF CHRIST Being the Apostolic Constitution

### SPONSA CHRISTI

*concerning the advancement of the sacred institution of nuns*

By POPE PIUS XII

**T**HE Church, the *Bride of Christ*, from the very beginnings of its history has by repeated acts and indications shewn its sense of esteem and tender, maternal love for those virgins who are dedicated to God: and this regard has been plainly confirmed in documents. Small wonder, since Christian virgins, 'the more illustrious part of Christ's flock', stimulated by charity and spurning all alien worldly cares, have overcome the easy and danger-fraught division of the heart, and have vowed themselves wholly to Christ as to the Bridegroom of souls, and permanently enlisted their entire lives, decked as they are with the jewels of all the Christian virtues, under the banner of Christ our Lord and the Church.

In the first centuries of Christianity this mystical assignment of virgins to Christ, their surrender to the Church, was carried out spontaneously, and by deed rather than by word. When, later, virgins constituted not only a class but a status and an order defined and acknowledged by the Church, public profession of virginity began to be made, and as time went on it began to be strengthened by an ever tighter bond. Next, the Church in accepting this holy vow or promise of virginity, inviolably consecrated virgins to God and the Church by that solemn rite which is advisedly reckoned among the more lovely of the records of ancient liturgy. And the Church clearly distinguished them from those others who bound themselves to God by private ties only.

The profession of the life of virginity was guarded by a vigilant

and severe asceticism, and at the same time was nourished and fostered by every sort of practice of piety and virtue. In the early teaching of the Fathers, whether Greek, oriental or Latin, there stands out the faithful and beautiful image of the Christian virgin for all to see. In their writings whatever could in any way contribute to virginal sanctity and perfection, whether internally or externally, was brought into the light and shown in the brightest of colours by the Fathers, who wrote with great love and care on this subject. To what extent the angelic manner of living among Christian virgins in this first age of its history was in conformity with the exhortations and descriptions of the Fathers, and with what gems of high and heroic virtue their way of life was adorned, is known to us partly by the direct means of historical documents and records, and partly by conjecture and inference from other sure sources.

Especially after peace had been granted to Christians, and in the footsteps of hermits and cenobites, it became more and more customary for the consecration of virginity to be fulfilled and ratified by an express and definite profession of evangelical poverty and strict obedience. By this time women professed to virginity had already joined in a common life cut off as far as possible from social intercourse, partly from love of solitude, partly as a defence against the perilous dangers imminent on all sides in the corrupt Roman society of the time. But later, when circumstances were more favourable, they began to follow the example of the immense crowd of cenobites, and, leaving the eremitic way of life for the most part to the men, they nearly all adopted the cenobitical life.

In general the Church commended to virgins the common life (taken in a wide sense), but for a long time it was unwilling to impose strictly the monastic life on even consecrated virgins whom it left, held in honour, indeed, as was fitting, but still free in the world. But those virgins who were liturgically consecrated and lived in their own homes or in a rather freely organised common life became increasingly rare until eventually they ceased in many places to have any legal standing, and everywhere became extinct. They have never generally been revived, and were, at a later date, even prohibited.

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In these circumstances the Church turned its maternal care

towards those virgins particularly who, choosing the better part, and abandoning the world altogether, retired to monasteries, there to embrace Christian perfection in its fulness, adding strict poverty and complete obedience to their profession of virginity. The Church has made provision for the external protection of these virgins in their cenobitic profession by ever stricter rules of enclosure; while with regard to the inside it so ordered their way of life that little by little the Church came to portray clearly and distinctly by means of its laws and religious asceticism the type of nun (*monialis*) entirely dedicated to the contemplative life under a rigid, regular discipline.

Soon after the beginning of the Middle Ages the type of consecrated virgin living in the world ceased to exist altogether. Nuns, who by then had increased in number and fervour and variety, were regarded as the sole heirs and legitimate successors of the virgins of old; and not only as heirs and successors, but as faithful custodians of the patrimony and resourceful stewards who made another five talents over and above the five entrusted to them. These beginnings of the nuns, and their dignity, their merits and holiness are established and vindicated in liturgical remains, in canonical documents and historical evidence of every kind, in literature, sculpture or painting. The state of perfection had already been solemnly accepted and had been so fully recognised that its public character was ever more thoroughly emphasised. And for many centuries, right up to the end of the Middle Ages, it was the nuns—as is plain to see from the Decretals, or for that matter from the whole Corpus of Canon Law—who alone among women exemplified that state, alongside the monks and canons regular.

Subsequently, after many great difficulties had been overcome, first of all the Friars (Mendicants, Hospitallers, Mercedarians and others), and then after nearly three centuries the clerks regular, were recognised as coming within the category of true religious and regulars on the same footing as monks and canons regular; while all the nuns, both those who kept to the ancient monachism or canonical life, and those who were co-opted into the Second Orders of the Mendicants, followed and embraced the noble and time-honoured and (as far as Canon Law was concerned) single pattern of religious life.

So, up to the emergence of the first Congregations of women in

the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, those alone were reckoned nuns who professed in fact or in law a legitimately religious life. Indeed, so much so that even after the time when the Congregations had gone through the process of being first tolerated, then accepted as in fact existing, and later as existing with some sort of legal standing, it was the nuns and they alone who were admitted as being, in strict law, true religious and regulars; and this obtained right up to the promulgation of the Code of Canon Law.

If we turn now to consider the inner sanctuary of the monastic life, who is in a position to reckon and estimate the treasures of religious perfection hidden away in the monasteries? Who shall say what flowers and fruit of sanctity these enclosed gardens bore for Christ and the Church? Who knows what efficacy their prayers had, what was the value of their life of dedication, with what good things of every sort the nuns strove with all their might to deck their mother the Church, to sustain her and strengthen her?

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The strict and well-defined type of nun as depicted in the pages of Canon Law and ascetical writings was easily accepted and, in its main features, tenaciously maintained for many centuries by the innumerable Orders, monasteries and convents which have had their stable existence in the Church. From this common fidelity and constancy there has grown up among cloistered religious women a closely knit structure which ever offered a stronger resistance to every kind of innovation than was to be found in any of the other regular or religious institutes of either sex. Within just limits, undoubtedly and rightly it is to their credit that this is to be ascribed.

But this unity of the nuns, which we have just acknowledged, is in no sense derogatory, as far as asceticism and interior discipline is concerned, of that diversity and variety of expression for which there was ancient precedent, and with which God, wonderful in his saints, has enriched and adorned his Bride, the Church. The variety of nuns seems to have its source in that same sort of variety of Orders and religious bodies of men of which the Orders of nuns were in some sense an extension. Indeed, nearly all the monks, canons regular and, especially, the Mendicants were anxious to institute Second Orders which, while preserving the general

characteristic of nuns, should appear to be almost as distinct from each other as the First Orders were. Similarly, in later times, some Orders of clerks regular and some Congregations of men have founded Orders of nuns of their own institute.

This variety of nuns which we have mentioned, whether regarded in the history of the institution itself or in their common internal development, is indeed worthy of careful attention. Truly, that variety has as it were obtained a new vigour of holiness for the ancient institution, while at the same time maintaining integrally the general characteristic of the contemplative life and preserving the chief norms and principles of the rule they have been given.

In more recent times, especially since the end of the sixteenth century, new forms of Orders of nuns have been introduced and gradually approved by the Church: for instance, the Angelican Institute of St Ursula, the Congregation of the Religious of Our Lady, the Order of the Visitation, the *Compañia de Nuestra Señora*, the nuns of Notre-Dame de Charité, and many others. These new foundations, while they were forced or morally compelled to accept either at their inauguration or at a later date, the prevailing common law for nuns (i.e. that they should be in a position to make profession of the truly religious life as then uniformly recognised for women), were in fact preparing the road in their various ways for a reform of the law itself. Though these new forms of nuns professed the canonical contemplative life and strict papal enclosure as adapted to their own way of life, it was difficult for them, however sincere their attempt, to conform to the existing legislation, and sometimes they did not undertake the recitation of the divine office. With commendable solicitude they undertook as part of their obligation many works of charity and apostolic labours which were deemed compatible with their sex and juridical status.

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As the years went by, in several places many monasteries of a number of Orders, which had hitherto pursued the contemplative life exclusively by reason of their foundation, now undertook the work of the apostolate with the approval and prudent control of the Holy See; this came about for a number of reasons: either because of the example set by the new Orders, or because of the development of the Congregations and Societies which strove to

combine with a life of perfection the fruitful exercise of charity and succour and education: or finally because of the general development of all sorts of circumstances and ideas.

Then little by little it came about that whereas, before, the institution of nuns had contained a distinction of Orders with their own rules and constitutions, now a more profound division was recognised in it between those Orders and monasteries which pursued only the contemplative life and the Orders and monasteries in which—whether by reason of their law of foundation or from concessions subsequently made by the Apostolic See—canonically approved works of the apostolate were suitably combined with the contemplative life.

In the present age the institution of nuns as a whole—whether in those Orders and monasteries which have faithfully kept to the contemplative life exclusively, or among those especially who at the Church's direction have harmoniously allied the contemplative life with works of the apostolate—has felt profoundly the effect of changed circumstances. Indeed, since these latter Orders are devoted to education and similar works of charity which, by reason of the universal development of society or from the intervention of public authorities, are now carried on in such a fashion as to be either altogether incompatible or at least not easily compatible with some of the classical rules of papal enclosure, the norms of this sort of enclosure have had to be wisely mitigated, so that while the general principle of it has survived, it can be reconciled with those works. Such a course seemed to be demanded by the needs both of Holy Mother Church and of souls, for if this had not been done, those works could not have been attempted at all, or at least not in the same manner. And it is not only with the apostolic Orders, but also with the purely contemplative, that the change of times and the grievous poverty under which the nuns often labour seem to have required and exacted mitigations and wider interpretations.

To give an example, nowadays the civic or social sense of the community will not endure a too narrow interpretation of Canon 601, even when it concerns purely contemplative nuns. Therefore, in ever more abundant measure the Holy See maternally provides for the necessities and expediencies which under the old dispensation were not considered to be sufficiently grave to warrant the infringement or abolition of papal enclosure. Besides, security and

inviolability of domicile (which was not the sole cause of pontifical enclosure but varied according to the circumstances of the time, while contributing with other causes to its inception and regulation) is today in better order than it was in former days.

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Having briefly set forth the origin and history of the holy institution of nuns, we would now distinguish exactly what are its proper and necessary elements which relate directly to the canonical contemplative life of nuns as their primary and principal end. Besides these original and principal traits by which the legal character of nuns is clearly defined in canon law, there are other elements of great importance which, though not necessary, go to its completion, since they correspond closely enough to the official purpose of nuns and safeguard it. There are, however, other elements in the religious state for women as it stands which are neither necessary nor complementary, but are merely extrinsic and historical, since they took their rise in circumstances of an earlier age which are now very much changed. When these elements are of no further use or are sufficient to hinder a greater good, there seems to be no special reason for preserving them.

Further, without detriment to all the essential and most important elements in the venerable institution of nuns, We have decreed, with regard to those elements which may be deemed extrinsic and adventitious, the introduction with caution and prudence of such adjustments to modern conditions as may add to the dignity and efficacy of the Institution.

We are moved, indeed urged, to introduce these moderate adaptations in the institution of nuns by the full information which We have of the state of affairs in every part of the world, and Our certain knowledge of the grievous penury to which nuns often, not to say always, are reduced. Actually there are not a few monasteries in which, sad to say, they are all but dying of hunger, misery and malnutrition; many, again, through domestic difficulties lead a life which is hard and even scarcely tolerable. Yet others, though not living in want, often fall into decay because they are out of touch with any other religious houses. And the stringent rules of enclosure often prepare the way for no small difficulties. In a word, with the ever-growing needs of the Church and souls, and the pressing call for all to work for their relief, We

think the moment has come for a reconciliation of the monastic life, even, in a general way, among nuns dedicated to the contemplative life, with a moderate participation in the apostolate. Our judgment in this matter has been confirmed time and time again by the testimony of local Ordinaries and religious Superiors which has reached Us from several nations in unanimous agreement.

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It will be useful here to illustrate some of the points in the General Statutes of Nuns which are decreed below, so as to set forth rules and considerations from which each of the prescripts can be easily interpreted without danger of misconception.

First of all, regarding the contemplative life of nuns, the principle which has always been held, in accordance with the mind of the Church, is to be kept firm and inviolable: all monasteries of nuns should always and everywhere canonically profess the contemplative life as their prime and principal purpose. Therefore labours and employments which the nuns can and should engage in must be of such a kind and so ordered regarding place, time, method and character as not only to preserve but also to nourish and strengthen a life that is truly and solidly contemplative both for the community as a whole and for individual nuns.

The prescripts and concessions at one time granted in special circumstances to some regions whereby solemn vows were commuted to simple vows must certainly be classified as a dispensation prejudicial to the law (Canon 19); all the more prejudicial in that this immunity is contrary to the chief characteristic of nuns; for solemn vows, implying a closer and fuller consecration to God than any other public vows, manifest the most salient and canonically necessary mark of the Religious Orders. And so, since long experience in various places clearly establishes the fact that the solemn vows of men or women religious can be kept easily and without trouble even where they receive no recognition from the civil code, likewise other provision can be made well enough for the security of goods held in common even where religious orders and monasteries do not enjoy juridical status, as happens in some places. In this matter, for many years now, the laws and actions of the Holy See have rightly been at one in seeing that these exceptions prejudicial to the law of which we have been speaking should be restricted and, as far as may be, abolished.



And in truth it is not necessary for nuns to be deprived of the honour, the merit and the joy of taking the solemn vows, which are proper to their state.

To safeguard the pursuit of religious chastity and the contemplative life, and to ensure that monasteries should be a garden enclosed, not to be entered by the assaults of the world, not to be violated by any cunning or guile, not to be disturbed by contact with the secular and profane, but to be a true cloister for souls in which the nuns could more freely serve God, the Church has wisely and carefully decreed a more severe enclosure as something peculiar to the institution of nuns; has diligently ordained it and everlastingly warded it with grave pontifical sanctions. This venerable enclosure of nuns is called pontifical because of the supreme Authority in which it has its source and because of the sanctions guarding it within and without. In this Constitution of Ours not only is it deliberately and solemnly confirmed in face of the different circumstances affecting monasteries which are already bound by it, but it is now extended with safeguards to those monasteries which on account of legitimately obtained dispensations have not hitherto been bound by it.

Those monasteries which profess the purely contemplative life and do not admit within the bounds of the religious house the permanent pursuit of education, charity, retreats, etc., will retain or will be given the pontifical enclosure with which the Code deals (Can. 600-602), which will in future be known as '*major*'.

As for those monasteries which either from their nature or by legitimate prescripts of the Holy See harmoniously combine within the monastic building the pursuit of the contemplative life with certain services compatible with it, the pontifical enclosure is to be modified in such a way that while what is essential and necessary to it remains in force, in those respects in which its observance is either entirely impracticable or next to impracticable, it should be mitigated; while in other respects which are not reckoned so necessary to pontifical enclosure according to the Code (Can. 599, 604 para. 2) it is aptly supplemented. This modified pontifical enclosure suited to the needs of today will be called '*minor*' to distinguish it from the more rigid, older one. It can be granted also to those monasteries which, though retaining the purely contemplative life, do not have solemn vows or do not fulfil the conditions for major enclosure which are rightly

required by the jurisprudence and acknowledged usage of the Curia. The precise definition of all these elements in minor pontifical enclosure will be given below in the General Statutes and in the Instructions to be published by the Sacred Congregation for Religious by Our Authority and in Our name.

Regarding the autonomy or mutual liberty of monasteries of nuns, We think it opportune to repeat here and apply to nuns what We said expressly about monks in the sermon We preached on September 18th, 1947, in the patriarchal basilica of St Paul outside the Walls on the fourteenth centenary of St Benedict of Nursia. With changed conditions today, a federation of monasteries of nuns seems to Us desirable and in many cases imperative, as offering an easier and more convenient distribution of tasks, the possibility of temporary transference of religious from one monastery to another for various reasons (a useful and often necessary expedient), economic help, the co-ordination of labour, a defence of common observance and all such benefits. That all these things can come about and be obtained without injuring necessary autonomy, or weakening the strength of the enclosure or damaging recollection and the strictest discipline of the monastic life, is established beyond question both by the wide experience of monastic Congregations of men and by the frequent evidence of Unions and Federations of nuns which have already been approved. However, the establishment of Federations and the approval of the Statutes whereby they are to be governed remain reserved to the Holy See.

All, not excepting men and women engaged in the contemplative life, are under an obligation to work, whether with their minds or with their hands, and this obligation is not only of natural law but it is a duty of penance and satisfaction. Besides, labour is a general instrument for preserving the mind from danger and raising it to higher things. By it we co-operate as we ought in the work of divine Providence, both natural and supernatural, and perform works of charity. Finally, work is the principal form and law of the religious life, and has been so from its beginnings: 'pray and work'. Yes, the discipline of this sort of life has ever in large measure consisted in the prescription, arrangement and carrying out of work.

The work of nuns, looked at in the context of eternity, should be such that she who undertakes it should do so first of all with a

holy purpose; she should often think of the presence of God during it; she should accept it as an obedience and link it with voluntary self-denial. Work borne in this way will be a powerful and constant exercise of all the virtues, and a token of the gracious and efficacious blending of the active and contemplative life, following the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth.

In determining the nature and discipline of monastic work, it should be consonant with the rule, constitutions, tradition and customs of each Order. It should be proportionate to the strength of the nuns, and so devised and carried out that, according to time and circumstances, it may both earn a livelihood for the nuns and be useful for the service of the poor, for human society, and for the good of the Church.

The perfection of Christian life consists specifically in charity; and the charity by which we are bound to love God alone above all things and all people in him is truly one and the same; so it is that Mother Church demands of all nuns who make canonical profession of the contemplative life, perfect love of neighbour as well as perfect love of God. For the sake of that charity and for their own state of grace, the Church's religious, men and women, must be conscious of being entirely devoted to the needs of all the needy.

Let all nuns, then, be thoroughly persuaded that their vocation is wholly and fully apostolic, not circumscribed by any limits of time or place or circumstance, but always and everywhere available to perform whatever task is related to the honour of the Bridegroom or the salvation of souls in any way. This universal apostolic vocation of nuns does not in any way hinder their praying for the particular needs of the whole Church or of individuals and societies.

This apostolate common to all nuns by which they are bound to promote with zeal the honour of their divine Bridegroom and the good of the whole Church and all the faithful makes use of three principal means as its instruments:

(a) **THE EXAMPLES OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION:** for their life, eloquent without words, is for ever drawing the faithful to Christ and to Christian perfection; and like a banner it encourages the soldiers of Christ to do battle in the good cause and leads them on to attain the crown of justice.

(b) **PRAYER:** the public prayer of the canonical hours offered

solemnly in the name of the Church seven times a day; and private prayer in all its forms rising ceaselessly to God.

(c) ZEAL IN SELF-SACRIFICE (*Devovendi se Studium*): which will lead them to undertake works of self-denial, whether prescribed by the rule and constitutions or purely voluntary, in addition to the trials which arise from the communal life and faithful observance of the rule. In this way they generously fill up 'those things that are wanting to the sufferings of Christ for his body which is the Church'.

[The articles of the GENERAL STATUTES FOR NUNS which follow this Constitution will be published in the January, 1952, issue of LIFE OF THE SPIRIT.]



## NOTES ON CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATION AND PERFECTION

MARK BROCKLEHURST, O.P.

A CONVENIENT text for these notes is provided by 'A Challenge from the Cloister', printed in the May issue of the LIFE OF THE SPIRIT. It begins: 'A Carmelite life in the world does not seem to be really possible'. There is much confusion of mind implicit in this statement, but its elucidation does not call for any profound analysis of the nature of man or the nature of grace. The whole matter is stated quite simply and explicitly by St Thomas, in the *Summa*, not as a personal and novel view. What is found there is the traditional teaching of the Church.

'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with thy whole heart.' The perfection of the Christian life is the perfection of charity. And this perfection is the highest possible; no one can do better than have perfect charity. Furthermore, perfect charity is the vocation of all, without exception. There is not a minimum charity to which all are called, and then over and above this a maximum charity, the vocation of the perfect. It is not only an invitation; it is a command. With the grace of faith, the obligation is laid on us all to seek the high perfection of union with God through love, and this is our happiness.

The life of charity is, of its nature, both contemplative and