

Sisters of the Good Shepherd

Towards Transformation: A Study on Community Life for our Contemplative Communities



The Trinity illumines life in community. Between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is a relationship of welcome, of trust and of utter respect. Their look of positive regard is turned to the other in joy and at the same time, their circle is open – prepared to receive still another into their friendship. Notice the color of divinity reflected in each; see the extended feet – had these just been washed by the other? Behold the chalice of sacrifice at the center – it is the source of energy, of love and total self-giving.

PREFACE

It is with great joy and enthusiasm that I present to you "*Towards Transformation: A Study on Community Life for our Contemplative Communities.*" For me, this booklet is a dream come true! It is an insightful document on the essential element "community" with distinctions specific to the contemplative lifestyle within the congregation. You will find that it also addresses many other areas of religious life which affect the way community is lived. Additionally, it is a wonderful representation of the thinking of all the sisters who have participated in the process. Thus, I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all who assisted in the creation of this document. Reviewing the history strengthens my "*thank you!*"

Established in 2004, the Contemplative Life Commission (CLC) has as its purpose: "to deepen the ways in which Good Shepherd Sisters in the contemplative way of life are *life-bearers for and with the poor* in light of the directions set at the 2003 General Assembly/Chapter." The members are: Agnès Baron (France/Belgium), Fe de Paz (Philippines), Jude Ellen Golumbieski (Mid-North America), Reyna Escobar (Central America), María Leticia Cortés (Chile).

- One of the ways in which the CLC implemented its mandate was to prepare a questionnaire on the Essential Elements affirmed at the General Assembly. As an outcome, the highest priority was "to deepen our understanding of community." With the help of Socorro Galvez and Fe Mendoza (Philippines), Helene Hayes and Edith Olaguer (New York), they prepared a theological reflection process for the contemplative communities.
- To synthesize these materials, as well as preparing a position paper and another theological reflection process, the CLC recommended the setting up of a temporary international contemplative community. This community became a reality in Angers from 14th September to 21st November, 2006. The members were: Betty de Lourdes Araujo (Paraguay) Denise Briant (France/Belgium), Véronique Colomies (France/Belgium), Socorro Galvez (Philippines), Edith Olaguer (New York) and Cynthia Bone (Ecuador). During their time together the group studied the feedback from the contemplative sisters. They were helped by input from Odile Laugier and Magdaléna Franciscus. With Hélène Halligon, they had access to resources in the Spirituality Center. Annunciata Gatt helped with communication. Congregational Leadership Team members, the Provincial and Councils of France/Belgium and the Motherhouse Community also lent support.

The process will continue and become a tool for conversation at the Intercontinental Assembly of Contemplative Sisters in Ecuador in 2008. When possible, the Congregational Leadership Team recommends that apostolic communities also reflect on this document. Thus, it is available on the reserved area of our website: www.buonpastoreint.org.

I hope that the transformation called for will open new paths! As stated in the General Assembly Statement of 2003, "*We believe that the spirit of God calls us to CREATIVE fidelity in order to open up new paths and thus penetrate the mystery of God, our Center. We are women who dare to make the dream of God a reality and to this we dedicate our lives.*"

May St. Mary Euphrasia accompany us closely as we continue along this path, experience transformation and come to know more profoundly the depth of God's love!

Brigid Lawlor

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Congregational Leader

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Introduction

To clear the way for our study, we need to establish some basic facts and face some necessary questions so that our eyes are more open to the light.

First of all, where our contemplative communities are located will affect the quality of life we live in community. A place that is conducive to prayer, silence and solitude is paramount for the life that we are *called to* – an exclusive and unceasing desire for union with God, the world and one another. Equally, our houses, monasteries or convents witness to our simple lifestyle, which varies according to the country and the culture where we are. Nevertheless, to have enclosure and to live it in a healthy manner, we need space, which possibly adds a ‘grand’ look to the places where we live. While there is a general agreement that our communities can be established either in the city or in rural areas, proximity to daily Eucharist and other necessary services determine our ultimate choice, especially for those of us who have to walk or must rely on public transportation. Also, we acknowledge a slight preference for the countryside without it being too far for others to reach us; hospitality is part of our tradition.¹

It has now been over 10 years since we were encouraged to have small communities and perhaps some questions are necessary. Is a small community conducive to our way of life? How can liturgies, so central to contemplatives and by their very nature celebrated in an assembly, be *alive* when there are only two or three to participate? What about community work? Fewer Sisters mean that the workload is heavier and this consequently creates an imbalance in priorities. To have the total picture makes it necessary, nevertheless, that we look at other experiences, which say that small communities are conducive to genuine relationships, flexibility, creativity and new life. Sociological data also reveal that new movements or fresh beginnings come from such places.

Is it time to think about re-structuring?

During recent years, we have worked very hard to re-discover our identity, renew and clarify for ourselves the form of life to which we are called. We feel, however, that we may still need more time, space and support to really understand our place in the Congregation, especially in the light of Article 1 of our Constitutions.

Finally, a majority of our Sisters, especially in Europe and North America, are now in Infirmaries and Nursing Homes. More often than not, these decisions are made due to specific legislations of the different countries. While we recognize the pain in these situations, how can they be mutually life-giving for all concerned? How are we helped to *live fully* our contemplative life at this phase of life?

*We need to face some questions so that
our eyes are more open to the light.*

¹ *Deus Caritas est*, ¶ 40. First Encyclical of Pope Benedict XVI

Part 1: Elements Common to All Contemplative Communities

1. SILENCE, SOLITUDE, ENCLOSURE

From age to age, silence, solitude and enclosure (going *apart* for clarity and breadth of vision) are the great enablers for a life dedicated to prayer. They are the structures employed by contemplative communities whose ‘joy is to be near God’ (Ps 73:28) and are attracted (*called*) to Jesus who went by the mountainside to pray by himself (Matt 14:23) or who, “very early in the morning, while it was still dark, got up, left the house and went off to a solitary place where he prayed” (Mk 1:35) and spent nights praying to God (Lk 6:12).

Contemplative communities therefore have assigned times and places for silence (exterior) so that they can listen to God’s voice (interior) inviting them to look at the way God loves them – just as they are, unconditionally and totally.² The resistance that human beings put up against this invitation (if it is even heard), the fear and reserve to accept those parts of the self that are felt to be shameful or laden with pain create a din and clamor so unbearable that ordinarily, one flees from silence and solitude rather than face vulnerability and purification. *True* contemplatives take to heart the discipline (for so it is) of silence/solitude and allow themselves to be stripped of all the layers (illusions) hiding the truth of who they are: children of God who are so loved even in their sinfulness (I Jn 3:1-3; 18-24). They *take the time* created by silence and solitude to develop this loving relationship that God initiates, they grow in trust as they experience being healed and set free. They gradually understand that what they want above all is to be like this God who always offers forgiveness and whose mercy knows no bounds.³ Transformation becomes *daily conversion* to a life that is spent in service to the community in imitation of the God of love. This, as we know, is the *desert* – the arduous and hazardous journey into the rugged, interior landscapes of self-knowledge where one learns to *let go* and *let God*. This is why contemplative communities choose to live within an enclosure, a prescribed geographical space,⁴ and do without external (indeed awesome) contacts with the ‘world’ to prepare for the gift of *inner freedom* that allows them to circle the heavens and penetrate the heart of what really matters: solidarity with one’s brothers and sisters and all of creation. They highlight for everyone the goodness and beauty inherent in us all.

*... In silence and solitude,
contemplative communities
perceive their connectedness
to every woman, man and child,
present, past and future*

Thus, communities who listen in the silence and are faithful to the God of love in their solitude even as they allow inner anger or permit difficult memories to surface into consciousness, will, like the ‘God who is silent no longer’ (Ps 50:3), also *hear* opportunities and find ways to lend their voice to their sisters and brothers who suffer from any form of injustice. Becoming more and more like the God they contemplate, they will do justice and live in justice. They put aright every relationship they have; their lifestyle points to values that are not the values of this passing world, their values include contesting any injustice that diminishes the dignity of the human person.⁵

The communities that abide in silence and solitude are also quite familiar with conversations from the heart, when to speak and enjoy each other genuinely in laughter and songs, how to break open the Word and share profoundly their faith. They learn the skills of speaking the truth in love when

² Constitutions # 43.

³ Constitutions # 4.

⁴ Traditionally, there are two types of enclosure: papal and constitutional.

⁵ “Spirituality in a Globalized World.” Miceál O’Neill. 2003 General Assembly. Angers.

they must challenge one another or evaluate their life vis-à-vis gospel / constitutions demands; crisis calls forth from them teamwork and understanding rather than accusation or blaming sessions. They become highly creative especially with what pertains to the coming of God's Reign, attentive to paradigm shifts and evolutionary changes in society; they are adept at holding their ear to the ground for the groaning of creation and the cry of the Spirit that is too deep for words (Rom 8:26). They recognize the cry of Jesus deep in the heart of the Gospel, mourning over Jerusalem and in his abandonment on the Cross – when he needed his *Abba*-God the most (cf. Miceál O'Neill).

Above all, in silence and in solitude, contemplative communities *perceive* their connectedness to every woman, man and child, present, past and future because they have *seen* the Heart holding us all in a tender knowing and caring. It is in this *fundamental communion* with all of creation that contemplatives will at last grasp, in all its glory and in all its pain, in all its breadth, incomprehensibility and depth, that love of God and neighbor are *one* and always, they will express this insight through beliefs and behavior shaped by the gospel.

For Your Reflection

- ♡ How do silence, solitude and enclosure assist your life in community?⁶ What are the times and places for silence that are helpful for you? Why? What about a hermitage-space?
- ♡ Our life of enclosure includes *formation* in appropriate use of the media (TV, radio, movies and magazines, etc.) and technology (telephone, internet, etc.) as well as the ability to critique information received. Community care is exercised so that indiscreet or unlimited use of media and technology does not develop into addiction, etc.
- ♡ Good conversations (which exclude gossip) facilitate knowing and loving one another better. Sharing insights can deepen our awareness of what is going on in the world including noticing the signs of the times. What is the level of conversation in your community?
- ♡ We need to *prioritize* enclosure exits (departures) keeping in mind that there are some external meetings to attend, community errands to do and hospitality requirements. A regular evaluation of the community's spirit of enclosure is of first importance.⁷
- ♡ Reflect on the cries that you recognize in the world, in your community, in your own life. Through your *Lectio*, identify where they come from; listen to them ... do they tell you anything?

⁶ Constitutions #6 and 43 (Working Document, July 2006).

⁷ *Ibid.* #43.1.



... *Time is God's story and, in their telling of it,
Contemplatives discover inexpressible joy.*

2. PRAYER

Prayer determines the day of contemplative communities and this basic rhythm is derived from the Liturgical Year, which first and foremost, celebrates Christ's paschal mystery. From the *rising of the sun to its setting* (Ps 113:3), the community responds to the call to prayer (worship), be it the summons to morning meditation, the ringing of bells for the Liturgy of the Hours or the lighting of candles at eventide. The celebration of the Eucharist is central to the day and praying the Angelus together brings to mind Mary's *fiat* (yes) to God's plan of salvation. Such a schedule helps communities to be more awake to the mystery that surrounds them, to develop an inner ear for the *gentle breeze* that brings *presence* and a 'third eye' that discerns movements of the Spirit.

Through the ages, this style of schedule has allowed for a *rupture* in time – eternity intercepts it, subverts it, so that people, unawares, are caught with the *whys* and *wherefores* of their lives.

When Jacob awoke from his sleep, he thought, "Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not aware of it. He was afraid and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God; this is the gate of heaven."
Genesis 28:16-17

It is a very good thing, for example, to be interrupted from daily work when the clock chimes – it is *time* for Vespers! It affords an opportunity to rest from physical labor or to have a break from some economic endeavor perhaps, but also to re-align one's purpose and manner of *being-at-work*. The contemplative community is not immune to the predominant culture's sense of time, which includes efficiency, success, ambition and in this age of technology, the immediacy of results and the dislike for disruptions. God's sense of time, on the other hand, embraces patience – the time each one needs for the forgiveness of sins – our reconciliation, not only with our creaturehood but, with the other's limitations as well (2 Peter 3:8-9). Interruptions are revelatory (H. Nouwen)!

Moreover, the day that is marked by prayer and follows the liturgical year is filled with hope: if time is a *movement* towards total well-being in God then no matter how bleak it may be or how desperately incongruent it may feel today, one knows that time points to the 'day of the Lord' when God's purpose for all creation will be fulfilled and transformed in Christ. It is to be remembered, moreover, that by its very nature, such a day is experienced within the larger redemptive process that the paschal mystery has inaugurated. Liturgical prayer is not an *in-house* event; on the contrary, *it urges a sense of mission to the world*; it challenges any temptation to revert to a static and highly individualistic sense of time for the salvation it announces is accomplished in the New Jerusalem whose gates are open to all, excluding absolutely no one. It proposes that the distance between what the liturgy exults in and what is practiced in daily life is bridged so closely until no gap exists anymore.

Thus, indeed, time is God's story and in their telling of it (prayer), contemplatives discover their most inexpressible and glorious joy (1 Peter 1:9).

For Your Reflection

- ♡ When we pray the Liturgy of the Hours, we represent the *praying Church*. Prayer in common also expresses life in community. By being flexible in its choice of Readings and Psalms on particular occasions, for example, or varying the ways of praying the Office, the community recognizes differences in culture, language and mind-sets.
- ♡ Posting information on bulletin boards, letters and pictures concretizes our prayer. What do you do to personalize community prayer?
- ♡ The Church has entrusted to us a charism of reconciliation. What tradition do you have for *asking forgiveness* from one another? What are your particular times and expressions?
- ♡ The Church has assigned times when the Liturgy of the Hours can be appropriately prayed. Posting a schedule when Morning and Evening Prayer, Midday and Office of Readings are said can be helpful to those we welcome to join us for prayer.
- ♡ A contemplative community acts as an oasis of wisdom and prayer and we are encouraged to open our doors to those who might want to pray with us.⁸ How does your community respond to this invitation? How are you able to share the love that exists among you so that truly, the Father is praised because of what others see in you (Matt 5:16)?



3. WORK

Human beings work and, like everybody else, contemplative communities have to work, not only to support themselves, but work is also a healthy balance for prayer, study and leisure. Work reveals to us skills and abilities that we did not even know we had as well as consequent disciplines we have to acquire for these possibilities to be realized. “Decent work is a fundamental human pursuit that is part of the inalienable dignity and goodness of all people in all social circumstances. It is an occasion to reflect the gifts, talents and contributions of each person to the common good and it enhances the human person.”⁹

Contemplative communities work because such an engagement is being *one with*, being *in solidarity with* ordinary persons who have to earn their living. Those who work help to make clear that the locus of human activity is the world – “God saw everything that God had made and indeed,

⁸ Letter of Sr. Ma. Gema Cadena. Regional Meeting of Contemplatives in St. Louis, MO. September 1988.

⁹ An NGO Statement to the Commission for Social Development on the Theme of “Promotion of Full Employment and Decent Work for All.” Statement prepared and submitted by: Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Special Consultative Status, October 2006.

it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). Of course contemplative communities can legitimately say that, “when we are at work we live out our contemplation as well.” How? Daily, faithful and persevering intimacy with the Word of God increasingly empowers the human person to become another ‘*humanity*’ for Christ in whom the goodness and tenderness of God is revealed in yet another unique way. Love is expressed through the struggle for ethical and unselfish behavior so as to be closer to gospel demands. When lived this way, work is an additional means for human beings to “*act justly, to love tenderly and to walk humbly with our God.*”¹⁰

God is in communication with us even while we work. Did Gideon not hear from God while threshing wheat (Jg 6:11)? Saul was looking for donkeys when he met Samuel (1 Sam 9: 20) and Moses was *being* a shepherd (looking after the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law) when God’s continuing plan of salvation was first unfolded to him (Ex 3). Physical labor, and especially working with the soil so close to nature, cleanses the mind of useless thoughts and prepares body and soul to be God’s abiding place.

Earth (humus), like nothing else, teaches the person her origins, (the garbage today becomes the compost for tomorrow’s rose, for example), her connections (the stars are made of the same matter as we are) and her eventual home. It shows us our *unique* place in the universe, which self nor anyone else can ever alter (Esther 13:9-11) and *this unique place is not at the center.*

For contemplatives, especially, it is important to employ images from the world of work that add shape and dignity to our lives of contemplation. Work expresses something of the divine image in people. The image of God the worker helps to accent our role as God’s partners in the work of creation, preservation and redemption. So whatever our work is, we need to see it as being in cooperation with God. Nevertheless, we need to recognize that we are the junior partners in this endeavor; we are dependent on God.¹¹ By seeing our work in the light of God’s work, we can see God in our everyday tasks. Unless we do so, we will underestimate the importance of God’s work and either worship our work or, think it worthless.

The great challenge that must be borne in mind with regards to work is to unhinge it from any imbalance or addiction. Work that is out of focus derails a community from its purpose and intent.¹² When contemplation deteriorates into over-activity and contemplatives become workaholics, unrest and meaninglessness follow until equilibrium is restored once more. In a particular way, we must let our elderly and infirm Sisters know that even when unable to work like they did before, we value them even more for who they are and for their presence among us.¹³

¹⁰ Micah 6:8

¹¹ “In Truth I am their Foundress.” Chap. 38

¹² Constitutions # 23.5

¹³ Constitutions # 34

For Your Reflection

- ♡ The holiness of work is perverted when it becomes an escape from relationships or when it is no longer “intelligent or free.”¹⁴ This happens, for example, when the wisely built structures of community life are not respected so that the balance between study and prayer, work and leisure is in disarray. Where are you, personally, in this regard? How about your community?
- ♡ Again, a disregard for just compensations, work that excludes those less able from others who are judged more productive and work done in unhealthy surroundings certainly needs correction as well. On the other hand, to judge some types of work as beneath one’s dignity speaks more of ancient myths than of the God revealed by Jesus. Jesus embraced every kind of work, even that of *begging*.¹⁵
- ♡ God rested from work on the Sabbath. Does the spirit of the Sabbath permeate your Sundays and holydays? How?
- ♡ A community budget gives us a sense of how much we earn and how much we spend besides the need to balance expenditure and income. Discuss among yourselves *budgeting* and how it teaches us to be responsible.

¹⁴ Pope Paul VI in *Populorum Progressio*, exhorts us: “Work of course can have contrary effects for it promises money, pleasure and power, invites some to selfishness and others to revolt. While it also develops professional awareness, a sense of duty and is charity to one’s neighbor, it carries a risk of dehumanizing those who perform it by making them its servants, for *work is human only if it remains intelligent and free.*”

¹⁵ He had to ask for water from a Samaritan woman, for water during the crucifixion and for fish with which to serve breakfast on the beach. He had nowhere to lay his head and had to rely on the goodwill of friends and disciples.

4. HOSPITALITY

The oldest stories of humankind already mention hospitality in the context of nourishment, shelter and protection of the vulnerable stranger while in the care of the host.¹⁶ There is the creation story, for example, of God whose hospitality made everything possible to make the home of our first parents a paradise. Most of the ancient world regarded hospitality as a fundamental moral practice for in a period, indeed, without hotels, credit cards or social safety nets, strangers and travelers depended on the hospitality of the communities while the practice of hospitality strengthened bonds that held peoples and communities together. The *Trinity* icon (Rublev's, for instance,) has its origins from the three strangers whom Sarah and Abraham entertained and who would turn out to be God and two angels. Isaac would be the reward of their hospitality (Genesis 18). In Genesis 19, Lot would similarly welcome the same divine guests who would save him from the destruction of Sodom. Women are hospitable to Elijah and Elisha and they are blessed (1 Kings 17-18; 2 Kings 4: 8 -37); Rahab lets the Israelite spies into her home, hides them but will become a foremother of Jesus (Joshua 2; Matt 1:5).



Hebrews 13:2 counsels, “Do for by doing this some have It offers two arguments for one entertains could be God’s God showed the Hebrews when refugees in Egypt, when they the wilderness, must now be

midst (Exodus 3:7-10; Leviticus 19:33-34; Deut. 10:18). Further, God tells God’s people in Isaiah 58: 6-7 the one fast required of them is “sharing your food with the hungry and taking the homeless poor into your house.” God commands the Hebrew children, descendants of aliens and refugees, to leave a portion of their fields to be harvested by the sojourner and the landless poor (Lev 19:10) and every fifty years those driven off their land by poverty are to be welcomed back to their homesteads (Lev 25:25-28).

not neglect to show hospitality entertained angels unawares.” hospitality: the stranger that messenger and the hospitality they were oppressed aliens and were weary/hungry travelers in extended to the traveler in their

Jesus, thoroughly a product of his culture and ancestry, was God’s hospitality personified. He also would be the stranger in need of food and shelter, revealing to an unaware world how much God wanted to be welcomed into its midst (John 1: 10-12). Jesus will make hospitality the gateway to God’s reign (Matthew 25), identifying himself with the ‘least of these.’ In Luke, when Jesus is asked what is necessary to inherit eternal life, he responds with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10:29-37) and the injunction to “Go and do likewise.” In Luke 16:19-31, Jesus tells us that Dives is sent to Hades because he ignored Lazarus and did not invite the poor man to his rich house even once.

At the Last Supper, Jesus gives new depths of meaning to the ancient rituals of hospitality. He himself washes the feet of the apostles; he breaks bread and pours out wine, identifying these with his death and the pouring out of his life, his ultimate acts of hospitality that broke all limits – the total gift of God-self. J. B. Metz has said that Jesus crucified, identified with the most marginalized and abandoned, forever challenges Jesus’ disciples to look at our history from the bottom up, from the perspective of the losers, the excluded, crushed and vanquished. The image of Jesus crucified is at the heart of the Eucharist; it questions the ways in which the people of God have carried out their stewardship of God’s hospitality in creation and redemption. When the Eucharistic action of Jesus is seen not only in the context of the farewell supper but who Jesus was in his lifetime, one who was constantly among the poor and outcast, concerned with their spiritual and material needs, one has to conclude that to accept Jesus’ Eucharistic hospitality entails

¹⁶ Christine D. Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. p. 17

solidarity with these concerns; it means responding to the needs of our own time and situation. The very existence of hunger and want in our world coupled with our own ability to respond would be call enough to practice in the world what we symbolize in the Eucharist. The young of today are asking: How can we worship on Sunday the One who had nowhere to lay his head and then the rest of the week ignore the homeless poor?¹⁷

Eucharistic communion is not merely church ritual. As a meal fellowship, as the Lord's own supper, it is an act of divine hospitality that calls those who participate to share hospitably with all people – not only at the altar but also at their own tables and at the larger table of the global economy.

For Your Reflection

- ♡ Hospitality is part of the monastic tradition from the earliest times. What *habits of hospitality* do you regularly practice, what skills does your community have, so that the hospitality that characterizes the Congregation becomes a reality for all? Are there people you know who could model for you how hospitality would look like in our complex world today?¹⁸
- ♡ Enclosure is not a barrier to hospitality. How do we sustain a sense of boundaries, restrictions and standards while also unambiguously welcoming strangers and *making room* for those who wish to share our life of prayer?
- ♡ Can some of our Sisters give retreats / spiritual direction? What formation will they need? How do we prudently use the media and modern technology (telephone, internet, etc.) for prayer requests? If we have a guesthouse, how are all the Sisters involved? If a Sister is appointed *guest mistress*, what is her role?
- ♡ It is also desirable, indeed very necessary, that we reflect on the Nursing Homes and Infirmaries where our elderly and infirm Sisters live. They (priests, religious and laity) suffer because they have had to abandon home, community, family and try to adapt themselves to their new circumstances at a very difficult time in their lives. Their psychological as well as spiritual needs are immense. What practical attitudes can help them and us?¹⁹



WELCOME



¹⁷ Christianity Today, "The New Monasticism." Vol. 49 #9 S, pp. 38-46

¹⁸ Starting Afresh From Christ, # 8.

¹⁹ Fraternal Life in Community, # 68

5. SIMPLICITY OF LIFE

Another sign of the Spirit's presence in our world today is the movement of peoples towards *simplicity of life*. In those places to which the media does not pay attention there are people who choose material restraint in place of relentless consumption, exercise intentional living (e.g. plant and eat the food they have grown) instead of mindless activity (e.g. two to three jobs to help pay for unaffordable luxuries). They have a preference for the examined life (prayer and reflection) that brings about meaningful existence (after much thought, experimenting with expanded households, for example).²⁰ The younger population especially, drawn by a sense of connectedness to others, pursue spiritual clarity and interior richness, only to discover the ancient wealth of monasticism: having things in common, a way of life not predicated on advancement, productivity, efficiency and accumulation but emanating rather from the desire for the *one thing necessary*. They call themselves the 'new monks' as they pray, engage in *Lectio* and voluntarily live lives of service.²¹

Contemplative communities live simply because the essential search for God cannot abide clutter. The God-quest needs the *simple gaze* of poverty (Ps 123), the single-minded heart of the chaste person and the totally attentive ear of obedience (Isaiah 50: 4-5) for God, who is infinitely simple, is one, undivided, whole (Matt 11:25). The simple life asks the question that Jesus asked John and Andrew when the gospel of John begins: "What do you want?" (John 1: 38) and the question that the risen Jesus asked Mary Magdalen in John 20:15: "Who is it you are looking for?" It is also the simple life that enables disciples to hear their names being mentioned with utter love, "*Mary... Betty ... Guadalupe ... Vero ... Denise ...*" Such fundamental recognition is what all human beings long for.²² Nothing will heal us more of restlessness, bitterness and insecurity than to hear God say: "I love you!" To hear God say directly "I love you!" awakens a person to the realization that "to be with God is my happiness and that is where I want to be" (Psalm 73). This *relationship of love* is central to the simple life; it is the current that sweeps away the frivolous and the toxic, leaving in its wake "streams of living water" able to heal, cleanse and quench the thirst of this world (John 7:38).

For Your Reflection

- ♡ A simple life is honest, is open to the ideas of others and can dispense with the unnecessary. How simple is your life – personally and as a community?

- ♡ Simplicity of life also goes hand in hand with a life led by the Spirit, that is, in discernment, dialogue and friendship. In terms of these characteristics, how simple is your life in community?

- ♡ A healthy community is able to hold the tension between differing points of view and conviction. How does your community balance the tension between good taste, (which sometimes means more expense) and simplicity of life?

²⁰ "Interview with Harvey Cox" in *Christian Century* #88.1, pp. 9-11.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Teresa Porcile. "Mary Magdalen, Contemplative Woman." 1997 CGS General Assembly.

Part 2: What pertains directly to Good Shepherd Contemplative communities?



A contemplative community of the Good Shepherd is, first and foremost, *a school of mercy* where healing and reconciliation happen.²³ The Sisters learn from Mary Euphrasia²⁴ that if they focus their gaze on Jesus (*contemplation*), they will become *like Jesus* (John Eudes) who “having loved his own who were in the world showed them the full extent of his love” (John 13:1). The Sisters show their love for one another like Jesus who revealed God not only in speech (the Word, *Logos*), but also, in the flesh, – totally, as a human being (incarnational).

What will the particular character of the Sisters of St. Magdalen be? How shall we know them? It is by the sincere love they have for one another. May charity unite all hearts, souls and spirits so closely that *they truly are one*; and may it be read on their faces and on their whole being ... may they form only one heart and one soul.²⁵

1. A SPIRITUALITY FIRED FROM THE INSIDE OUT

The Trinity is the life and foundation, the background and horizon of communities of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. That is, from the very beginning, the *relationship* that exists between the Father (the Source of all Being), Jesus (the Eternal Word) and their Spirit of Love (of Wisdom and of Joy), illumines the *formation* of each woman who joins our communities and it is this Trinitarian relationship that is the *permanent text* she studies and lives, as she journeys with her community through the different life stages.

In our Congregation, we have a *process* that allows us to receive this Trinitarian way of life, a gift from St. John Eudes (1601-1680) whose spirit our Mother, St. Mary Euphrasia imbibed as a Sister of Our Lady of Refuge. To this day we treasure this process because used rightly, it helps us become true contemplatives. John Eudes was a practical person; he was concrete. Re-discover the truth of your Baptism, he counseled, be sure of who you are, that you are God’s child. This is your fundamental identity. A consequence of baptism is conversion, not by self-merit but as a fruit of contemplation; taking time everyday for a *long loving look* at Jesus, seeing Jesus in all reality. This process is Christocentric. Looking at Christ (through *Lectio Divina*, by the everyday practice of virtues and the humble acceptance of what it means to be human),²⁶ we allow him to imbue us with God, to be penetrated by God like he was. John Eudes often repeated, “Jesus live, be formed and reign within us!”²⁷ Because John Eudes *looked at* (contemplated) the mystery of the Incarnation very much, which is the Mystery of Love, *par excellence*, he developed little by little the spirituality of the heart, of tender mercy and compassion. For him, Mary was the one who welcomed God’s loving heart into her life and lived this love fully. We are to do the same.

²³ Constitutions (Working Document, July 2006), # 3-6.

²⁴ In Truth I am their Foundress. Chapter 6.

²⁵ Constitutions of 1834 and 1857, Life of the First Community, p. 34

²⁶ Constitutions, # 32-39, 41-43.

²⁷ Cf. Conversations with Sr. Magdalena Franciscus, October 3-6, 2006. Maison-Mère, Angers.

It is said of Cardinal Bérulle, the founder of the French School of Spirituality of which John Eudes was a part, that he often prayed, “Oh God, since you loved the world so much, teach me to love the world like you did.”²⁸ Such a love creates a total trust in God’s mercy. The riches of God’s mercy! It is so inconceivable that God should allow God-self to be so vulnerable to humankind’s sufferings and misery but it is so. Mercy burns a wound within God’s womb that will not heal as long as suffering exists because not even sin, no, nothing, no one, will make God want to separate from the fruit of God’s womb (*cf.* Romans 8). Rather, the ‘womb’ of Mercy²⁹ breaks into places of pain to bring grace, comfort and forgiveness, for God cannot be unfaithful to covenants, to relationships with God’s very own (2 Timothy 2:13). Thus, Mercy is lured to hearts left in pieces; it is attracted to those whom society has defeated that these may be restored to original beauty and harmony, life and health. Mercy is a fire, a flame³⁰ that eats away at our selfishness and from inside out, transforms us into a *new creation*, a *new humanity* for Jesus, on earth.

For Your Reflection

- ♡ The church entrusts to us a share in her mission of reconciliation.³¹ Community life is a challenge when certain attitudes that break up harmony emerge. However, it would be a big step if every Sister resolved to be a builder of peace by being true to herself and in relation to others.³²
- ♡ Sometimes, it will be necessary to accept professional help so as to be healed of our inner wounds. Prayer, the virtue of humility, prudence and a spirit of faith are indispensable in such situations.
- ♡ The example of Mary teaches us how to permeate our relationships with the mercy of God, as St. John Eudes recommended. Under the protection of the Virgin Mary, and animated by the zeal of our Foundress, let us be witnesses of God’s mercy, our zeal embracing the whole world. Reflect on Mary as once also being a refugee, Mary as the mother of a Criminal, Mary as an unwed mother.³³ How does she teach you mercy, reconciliation and faith?

2. A WAY OF PRAYING

There have been many times when, like the disciples, we have cried out, “We do not know how to pray. Lord, teach us how to pray” (Luke 11:1). The disciples of Jesus kept their minds and hearts open to the Word of God. Such was the case with St. John Eudes and so in our Congregation, as has been said above, we are truly blessed to have a way of praying that he taught. A road to mercy, it is also a contemplative process that has four movements: Adoration, Thanksgiving, Forgiveness – Reconciliation and the Gift of Self.

²⁸ Conversations with Sr. Odile Laugier, October 2006. Maison-Mère. Angers.

²⁹ Response to Questionnaire

³⁰ ‘Our Foundress said to us’: from Testimony of a Contemplative Sister of the Good Shepherd, Process, pp. 1209-1210. p. x of the 1987 Constitutions.

³¹ Constitutions #4

³² Response to Questionnaire

³³ Litany of the Virgin Mary, *Pax Christi*.

- ♥ Start by praying to the Holy Spirit: “Come, Holy Spirit, enlighten my heart, enkindle in me the fire of your love.”
- ♥ Settle down ... establish quiet around and within yourself ... Open your heart to listening to the Word of God.
- ♥ Read the text slowly, repeating those words that touch you, underline them, welcome them into your heart, linger over them.
- ♥ Read and reread the text, make yourself available to the movements of prayer swelling up within you:
 - 🕯 Adoring
 - 🕯 Giving thanks
 - 🕯 Asking for forgiveness
 - 🕯 Giving of yourself
- ♥ Be open to the Spirit, allowing the Spirit to deliver the message God has in store for you.
- ♥ Do not be concerned if you feel nothing is happening. Remain in prayer until the end of the pre-set time.
- ♥ Conclude by giving thanks for what the Spirit enabled you to discover.

- *Spiritual Itinerary for Today*, p. 27

For Your Reflection

It is highly recommended for Formators and Coordinators to be very familiar with the *Four Movements* of John Eudes so that they are able to impart this way of praying to those in Initial Formation and to the Community who might be attracted to this contemplative way of praying. (Please see Appendix for ‘How Best to Pray.’)

3. GOSPEL ASCETICISM

Community life and selfishness do not go together. Interior conversion daily – making one’s self, beautiful (less and less selfish) so that the image of God in us becomes clearer³⁴ – is another name for asceticism. It is an effective tool for weaving into one’s daily existence the life of Jesus Christ, which is given not only to souls but also to *embodied* human beings. According to St. John Eudes,

³⁴ Constitutions # 6

asceticism is having the inner freedom when to say *Yes* and when to say *No* for the sake of the gospel.

What might constitute a new asceticism for our time? First, it must consist of practices fully as good for body as for soul. Our Christian faith teaches us that the body is an integral and permanent aspect of the human being. Therefore, it must be explicitly cared for and enhanced by any ascetic practice that we accept as good for our souls. Second, ascetic practices must be temporary, consciously chosen and carefully designed to locate and correct a particular, debilitating habit pattern. Thus, we need self-knowledge and spiritual direction. Mother Foundress has this to say:

There are two things that can ruin us all: thinking too much of self and of one's health and, thinking that in order to be perfect, one must utterly disregard one's health and be mortified in everything. They say they want to do penance. Yes, but simply using the ordinary means and occasions: being content with the food whatever it may be, keeping the recommended silence/recollection; study and manual labor help control the imagination, non-participation in gossip; openness and minding one's business!³⁵

We must not ignore the bodily practices that recognize and affirm our incarnated life, in which what we do is as important as what we think. Fasting from food, media and technology, physical and breathing exercises, bodily postures, silence and solitude, attention to what we need to do, etc., are highly effective and valuable for locating and treating the habituation and addiction that result finally in a dullness of body and mind.

Through the years, many of us have thought that the word REPARATION was equal to making penance either for our personal sins or that of others. On the other hand, St. Mary Euphrasia's understanding of reparation started when she was young – on discovering the abandonment of the crypt of St. Philbert to disrepair and dirt, she and her little friend cleaned it up, bringing it back, *restoring it*, to its original beauty. Teresa Porcile³⁶ explained that within the human being is a core, a nucleus that is naturally inclined to *return* (to be converted) to its original state of primitive innocence. From this center will also emerge the 'new innocence' that is brought about only by the redeeming grace (to save, to restore, to repair) of Jesus' passion, death and resurrection. Innocence, in Latin, means to be incapable of wounding. This 'new innocence' is given to us as a *gift*.

In our world today, reparation is also understood as *commutative justice* – a restoration of stolen goods to the owner in the manner that Zaccheus promised he would do after Jesus stayed at his house (Luke 19: 2-9).³⁷ This is the story behind *debt cancellation* that John Paul and other responsible citizens of the world have advocated for and continue to work on.

In our time, moreover, reparation (atonement) includes learning our place in the universe as simply one among God's created ones and rejoicing in our interconnectedness with the rest of creation. The people of today are sensitive to the respect we owe, not only to one another, but also to the earth, source of our nourishment, the place where we live and already, the building stones of the *new heaven and the new earth*.³⁸

³⁵ Chapter 32 of "In Truth, I am their Foundress."

³⁶ Porcile, *ibid*.

³⁷ New Catechism of the Catholic Church

³⁸ *Gaudium et spes* #

For Your Reflection

- ♡ Review your understanding of *reparation*, using the texts used above and from the Appendix or some other of your choice. Be sure to discuss ‘*reparation*’ at one of your community meetings.
- ♡ Where before we used to say “penance and conversion” now we say, “penance and conversation.” Dialogue that is open to the truth demands listening skills; it is a real form of asceticism for our time.³⁹ How is dialogue employed at your community meetings and evaluations?
- ♡ An incarnational spirituality (such as the spirituality of St. John Eudes) teaches us to respect and love our bodies for *it is with the body* that we give God’s compassionate look to someone and *it is with the body* that we are a face for God and *it is with the body* that we are God’s hands and feet. “The Eucharist shows us the vocation of our human bodies: to become gifts to each other, the possibility of communion” (Timothy Radcliffe). How are you in this area?
- ♡ What are some ways that we can make up for the abuse that our planet receives from human beings?
- ♡ We all know the episode about the young Rose Virginie taking the initiative to clean the crypt of the church. Do we realize what was in the crypt under the main altar? Dung, straw soiled by the horses belonging to the army that was sheltered in the church.⁴⁰ *Are there ‘crypts’ in our lives, in our communities, that we have not restored to their original beauty and which we prefer not to look at, or just forget?*

4. RECONCILIATION

To speak of reconciliation ... is for the women and men of our time an invitation to rediscover, translated into their own way of speaking, the very words with which our savior and teacher Jesus Christ began his preaching: "Repent and believe in the Gospel."⁴¹ As Sisters of the Good Shepherd, how do we interpret and live *reconciliation*? In our Constitutions (no. 4) we say:

The Church entrusts to us a share in her mission of reconciliation. This demands an awareness that we ourselves are always in need of conversion. In our unceasing return to our compassionate God, we discover the depth of our sinfulness and in openness to God’s initiative of love we find mercy. United with all people in their struggle with sin and in their need for reconciliation, we witness among them to the power of this mercy.

³⁹ Fraternal Life in Community, nos. 29-34, “*Communicating in order to Grow Together.*”

⁴⁰ St. Mary Euphrasia and Her Ways of Reconciling. Sr. Odile Laugier, Reconciliation Workshop 2006 (http://www.buonpastoreint.org/media/blinesv/sme_180606_ang1_000.doc)

⁴¹ Reconciliation and Penance, John Paul II.

Awareness ... always in need ... unceasing return to ... these words tell us that for Sisters of the Good Shepherd, reconciliation is a way of life, it is a process, 'it is in the beginning, the end and along the way of our journey as we *grow* into its meaning.'⁴² It is also about *relationships – unceasing return to the O-other*. In our contemplative communities, for example, John Paul II's invitation to interpret reconciliation in our own way means that we *notice* when "There exists within us aggression, anger, revolt and refusal, even, of the *other*. It is all a question of recognizing our experience of remaining in our anger or our bitterness and not wishing to be reconciled."⁴³

For us, St. Mary Euphrasia is the one who incessantly witnessed to reconciliation and the power of merciful love. She walked the way of being hurt and humiliated; she was not beyond expressions of anger or impatience, but, also, it did not take her very long to accept her mistakes or to recognize when she was in the wrong – a very important part of the process of reconciliation. According to repeated testimonies of many of her contemporaries, she was discreet, – “dumb” – about the injuries, the hurtful words and accusations that go back and forth in conflict. It was her custom whenever possible, to talk openly with the person concerned and “keep silent on all that could aggravate the situation.”⁴⁴ In other words, when in many situations Mary Euphrasia was the aggrieved party (victim), she *initiated* the reconciliation process. She did not wait for the wrongdoer to ask for pardon. Her love of God and of the other was such that she crossed the threshold first to restore harmony in relationships. Hearts fragile with pain, or consciences weighed down by sorrow, could be open with Mary Euphrasia. People *felt safe* with her, they knew she would not betray nor add dishonour upon their disgrace and their trust was not in vain. Thus she was able to reconcile families and disagreeing Superiors; novices could reveal their pain to her and be eased of their burden. Mother Foundress' openness to welcome different cultures and identify her own self with all nationalities are well known. She sought to maintain good relationships with opposing political parties of her time and was at home with both the humble workers in the Mother House and the rich benefactors whose help she needed 'for the holy work.'⁴⁵



Our communities are called to be special places of reconciliation. When harmony is disturbed we are ready to pardon and to ask pardon with a sincere heart.⁴⁶ Referring to this section of the Constitutions in her talks at the Reconciliation Sessions in Angers 2006, Sr. Brigid Lawlor, said, "We should be ready to pardon ... the victim is ... the initiator of forgiveness. We should be ready to pardon and to be pardoned ... the wrongdoer is mentioned second!"⁴⁷ What an evangelical challenge – something that Mary Euphrasia could truly live up to! Can we do any less? Moreover, when the pardon we give and the pardon we receive take place in an environment of mutual understanding – not only of what is said but of what is not said; where we offer space not only for the facts but for emotions as well and therefore time and trust, acceptance and humility have to be unmeasured, we truly know in the depths of our hearts why "there is more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent" (Luke 15: 7,10). If such witnessing to God's love and mercy becomes '*a way of life*' then we can truly say

⁴² Reconciliation Sessions 2006. Sr. Brigid Lawlor. Angers
(http://www.buonpastoreint.org/media/blinesv/recon2006_one_conference_1_eng.doc)

⁴³ Reconciliation Sessions 2006. Sr. Odile Laugier. Angers
(http://www.buonpastoreint.org/media/blinesv/sme_and_reconciliation_26_ang.doc)

⁴⁴ Laugier, *ibid.*

⁴⁵ Laugier, *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Constitutions # 35.

⁴⁷ Lawlor, *ibid.*

with St. John Eudes, “true acts of reconciliation are as a new Baptism and a new creation.”
Reconciliation is transformation.

For Your Reflection

- ♡ Which icon of God illumines your reconciliation journey: God all merciful, forgiving, just, compassionate, keeps your sins as far as the east is from the west (Psalm 103:12). Name your God who guides you on the path of reconciliation. Spend time with the *Prodigal Father* in Luke 15: 11-32. Is there perhaps someone in your life, maybe in your community, to whom you need to run as you *initiate* the first steps of reconciliation?
- ♡ Spend time with Mary Euphrasia and ask her how she truly learned mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation from the heart of Jesus. People felt safe with her and she did not bad mouth those who hurt her. What do you need most to learn from her?
- ♡ Jesus died on the cross rather than be separated from any of his relationships. His love embraced all that his Abba-God had given him including sinners, lepers, children, women, publicans, Pharisees – everyone who believed in him (John 17). In prayer, we learn from the Spirit directly the last wish of Jesus: *that we may be one* just as Jesus and his Father are one. How can you encourage your community to take opportunities to be in dialogue with other groups quite different from yours or from whom you may be estranged?



5. JUSTICE AND PEACE

Today, for our contemplative communities, to speak or think ‘*Good Shepherd*’ is to place within the same heartbeat the urgency of PRAYER for JUSTICE and PEACE ... for what else can come up so high or descend far below to embrace the desperate needs of our world and hold them in steadfast hope if not the fires of prayer burnt directly into the Heart of Mercy?

What are the insistent needs that our apostolic Sisters seek to serve and that our life of prayer supports? Or, what are the cries of the poor that Good Shepherd is especially sensitive to?

“If the church (the people of God, us) needs to become inclusive and embrace people in a non-judgmental way, making space for women to come together for mutual help and support is critical. Everywhere, there is a call to aid women in situations of domestic violence and to work against

unjust economic structures. To have a more feminine and mothering church, it is necessary to foster qualities of compassion, caring, gentleness, hospitality and warmth.”⁴⁸

Girl child and the trafficking of women ...

“... a very urgent task is the education of the human rights of the girl child. It is in her own community that the *girl child* begins to shape her *identity through education*. Women and girls at the grassroots can be organized to know that they are the only ones who can change their culture and male dominated policies. Entering mainstream systems and networks is really the only space from which women can draw their strength.”⁴⁹

“What is at stake in the issue of human trafficking is our bedrock belief that every human person is of infinite worth and dignity, not a commodity to be bought and sold for profit in the underground marketplace. Human trafficking is a stark, haunting cry in our time that matters deeply and must be answered.”⁵⁰

The Millennium Goals... The Eradication of Poverty ... Wars and ethnic cleansing ...

“We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future... We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice and a culture of peace”.⁵¹ Compassion that lovingly embraces the suffering of humanity is at the heart of our call as contemplative women. We recognize justice as an essential value, deeply rooted in the Gospel and our Good Shepherd spirituality.⁵²

We live in a world where the richness of communication, solidarity and spirituality are intertwined with oppression, war, violence, a lack of social, political and economic well-being. But it is in this world that God is incarnated and that is why we cry out together, apostolic and contemplative sisters and laity, that Justice reign universally.⁵³

For Your Reflection

Mary Euphrasia knew the workers’ living conditions; she saw the marks of them in the women and young girls she received. But she was also in contact with people from affluent milieus, benefactors who were indispensable to the life of the house. When there was question of the future of a person who was leaving the Good Shepherd, friends and benefactors were solicited.

The testimonies to the Process of Canonisation tell us that the Mother House helped in different ways: giving food and clothing to the families of sick workers. We see that she quickly paid for work ordered from outside knowing that the craftsmen lived from day to day. She recommended that the Sisters never keep a workman waiting in the parlour so that he would not lose his day’s pay. She even went as far as paying the bridge tax (the tax imposed on people using the bridge) for the parents of such and such a young girl in order to promote family reunions, so that the price of the

⁴⁸ Reported in *Japan Catholic News*, Oct 2005

⁴⁹ Vandana Lobo, UN-NGO Report. Embrace the World, June 2006.

⁵⁰ Sr. Helene Hayes, RGS

⁵¹ Preamble of Earth Charter, 2000

⁵² 2003 General Assembly Statement

⁵³ 2003 General Chapter Statement

crossing would not be a pretext for ‘abandoning’ a difficult daughter placed with the Good Shepherd.

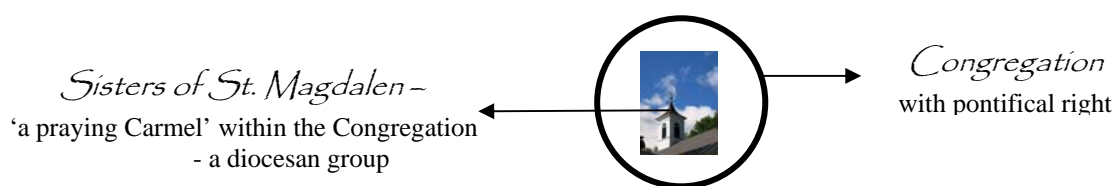
We also know how much Mary Euphrasia recommended that the Sisters were not to neglect teaching all the young girls in the house to read, write and count. “Being instructed and knowing how to work, they would be able, not only to provide for their own needs, but also help their families.” Today we talk about helping on a long-term basis.⁵⁴

- ♡ What do these lines of action from St. Mary Euphrasia suggest to you? What change in behavior do they imply, what values do they invoke? Share your insights in community.
- ♡ How do we take an active part in restoring life and dignity for all, especially where it is most diminished? How can our spirituality, formation programs and ministries contribute to this call? How does our charism impel our action?
- ♡ Justice is God’s way of being and acting. God’s justice is done with generosity and it is justice that does all that is required and *a little more*. Where this justice abounds, so does joy and all of creation is honored and safeguarded; there is peace. It is both God’s gift and something for which people have to work. This way of justice always seeks the good. It is always salvific.⁵⁵ Within this context, are there ways that your community can respond to the request of our young Sisters in Formation to have more balance between work and study? What about the plea of many communities for their handiwork to be included in the sales of Handcrafting Justice to help income and expenditure?

6. A LEADERSHIP THAT IS NEW

There are differing ways of giving ourselves a direction that can bring us to the place which is ours (leadership). At this precise moment in our history we are being invited to focus on knowing our story better – check the memory of our beginnings and growth in self-identity and self-awareness – a process culminating in a good grasp of what we are about (mission). A propitious way of doing this is to *take the time* to study, assimilate and integrate into our lives Article 1 of our Constitutions and allow it to *form* us into *newness*. How necessary it is to take the first steps of this *re-creation* that will lead to new ways of being community. It will prepare us to be midwives of the future God is about to give!

When Mary Euphrasia founded the Sisters of St. Magdalen in 1831, she gave them a Rule based on the ancient rule of Carmel but one that she thoroughly imbued with the riches of *God’s mercy* and *compassion* – undoubtedly in the spirit of St. John Eudes whose teachings she lived. Her idea was that the Sisters would be the praying group within the Congregation.⁵⁶ This metaphor would be the underlying image of our self-understanding for over a hundred years.



⁵⁴ 2006 Reconciliation Sessions, Sr. Odile Laugier

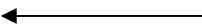
⁵⁵ Please see the Manual for Promoters of Justice and Peace. Rome, 1997

⁵⁶ “The Crowning Work of the Good Shepherd.” Père Bernard Tenailleau. 1991 CGS General Assembly. Angers.



In the years after World War II, a new consciousness of ‘what is right and just’ gained momentum in the minds of peoples. It was around this time that Mother Ursula Jung, intuiting as it were, a perceived desire within the Congregation, asked Rome to articulate anew the identity of the Sisters of St. Magdalen.⁵⁷ In 1950 Rome responded by a decree that declared “the Sisters of St. Magdalen are truly reparatory Religious, incorporated as a special branch into the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers.” The Sisters from now on will make the *vow of zeal*. The words ‘true and reparatory Religious’ were highlighted and recognized but somehow, the reality of the word ‘incorporated’ would be glossed over in the collective perception of the Congregation; this slip would leave a scar on some of the contemplative Sisters for a long time.⁵⁸ Still and all, the Sisters of the Cross – the new name given to the Sisters of St. Magdalen in 1964 – will gradually claim the spirituality of the Congregation as also theirs.

*Incorporated as
a special branch
into the
Congregation*



It would take 53 more years for Article One of the Constitutions to be voted on (unanimously, at the 2003 General Assembly and Chapter), bringing to a peak the evolution of the contemplative sisters’ “incorporation” into the Congregation and raising everyone’s consciousness to the original insight of St. Mary Euphrasia in founding a contemplative group within an apostolic congregation.

To rediscover and understand the deep desire St. Mary Euphrasia had when founding the contemplative branch of our Congregation seems to us a very special grace, a grace which we are permitted to live anew today, be we Contemplative or Active Sisters.”

Liliane Tauvette - Letter of April 6, 1992

The continuous movement towards ownership of Article 1– its implications, responsibilities and consequences – will form contemplative communities of the Good Shepherd; it is the context of the future that we are open to. Since we do not know what the future looks like, we will have to enter unknown zones, zones of risk – where mistakes may be made. Is this acceptable? Such possibilities never frightened Mary Euphrasia. She was convinced that “the Congregation is God’s work” and cannot be doomed to failure. This was her leadership – the way she carried out her vision, which was “the salvation of souls.” Everything else followed from this central gaze: her freedom to delegate, collaborate, to accept authority or support the decisions of others, her confidence in entrusting awesome tasks to young or inexperienced Superiors, her willingness to ask pardon for errors she made ... and her *humility* in allowing God to bring about the fruitfulness of the Congregation that she labored for, not with talents, nor with riches but “*only with Love.*” Her leadership was out of love, – *she loved with all the strength of her soul.*

⁵⁷ Conversations with Sr. Odile Laugier, RGS. October 2006. Angers

⁵⁸ *Idem*

For Your Reflection

- ♡ *Take time* for a Lectio-Oratio-Meditatio and reflect on your self-awareness as a woman, a Christian and a Sister of the Good Shepherd living your contemplation in a contemplative community.⁵⁹

Take time with Article 1. What *responsibilities* does it demand of you?
Take time with John 4: Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman. What new facets of your self-awareness are you discovering?

- ♡ What/how is your sense of leadership? Where do you see yourself and your community going?
- ♡ Review your own knowledge of the history of the contemplative communities of the Good Shepherd. Compare it with what the others have. By doing so, maybe your community can have a *collective sense* of history that will be even more enriched when amalgamated with the stories of other communities and then of other communities...

Conclusion

The Trinity is the light that illumines our communities as day by day we endeavor to be an expression of the one, mutual love *uniting* us. Our familiarity with God's merciful love and of being embraced by Jesus' compassion as we ourselves heal from our own wounds impel us to bring to one another the same experience of being in Jesus' caring presence. In other words, *as we live community* and as we go through the process of *setting aright each of our relationships*, Jesus **sends us** to be envoys, messengers of *forgiveness and reconciliation*. Like Mary Magdalen, we are commanded by the Risen Christ to announce his Resurrection to his sisters and brothers – with the *new* knowledge that we all are children of the *one* God (John 20:17).⁶⁰ Therefore, bearers of God's tenderness and good news of salvation to our own Sisters in community, we believe in faith that our hidden lives are all the while also bearing *fruits of communion* deep in the heart of the world.⁶¹

This is our mission, then – to be a means of reconciliation by our prayer, gospel asceticism, solitude and silence as day in and day out, we witness to the absolute primacy of God. We pray for the Church and for the entire world as in faith, we become more and more like Jesus. Like him, we give ourselves up to ardent intercession that the beauty of God's image be revealed in each person. In a particular way, we support the endeavors of our Sisters who are engaged in the active ministry of reconciliation. Zeal calls us to be faithful to the common life as we continually seek to deepen the union that exists among us. Together, we share the responsibility to foster the growth of Christ in one another. In our efforts to do this we share in the difficult struggle for unity within the world.⁶²

⁵⁹ Macisse, Camillo. CGS General Assembly. 1997. Angers.

⁶⁰ Sandra Schneiders, ihm. *Selling All*. p. 293

⁶¹ Constitutions # 2, 3, 4, 5; 32, 33, 34, 35, 36

⁶² Constitutions # 37, 41-42, 43

Our commitment to reconciliation demands that we promote justice and peace in a world disturbed by sin and conflict.⁶³ Works of Justice are the urgent expressions of merciful love that are so needed today and as we carry with compassion the miseries of others, we move from wanting to help them to actually helping them. Until true dignity and integration are restored and the *worth of every person is inviolably respected, upheld and honored*, our zeal will not let us rest – we will keep on loving – with the love that the Spirit is pouring into our hearts. We will allow God’s womb of Mercy within each one of us to give birth to multiplied acts of love for the world that God has loved so much and loving it, will love it to the end (John 3:16; 13:1). *“I only loved ... but I have loved with all the strength of my soul.”*



This world that God has loved so much
and loving it, will love it to the end ...

⁶³ Constitutions # 6

Theological Reflection: A Way of Working on 'Towards Transformation: A Study on Community Life for our Contemplative Communities'



here are 12 Sections in the Paper. Each Section begins with the *formative* principles – drawn from Church tradition and Congregational narratives – that ground the point being discussed (one page or so) and ends with “*For Your Reflection*” (another page). The paper has a total of 22 pages. Also, most of the sections have ‘graphics’ that capture the point being made. They were inserted in view of our Sisters who find it difficult to read because of eyesight problems, reasons of health or, are just tired of papers.

Part I, *Elements Common to All Contemplative Communities*, includes the Cover and Introduction (treat these as a section) and has five Sections. Six sections in total.

Part II, *What Pertains Directly to Good Shepherd Contemplative Communities*, has six sections and ends with a short Conclusion. If a week is given to each section (two pages), twelve weeks are needed to study the Paper on Community Life.

We propose that in studying the Paper, we continue to use the *contemplative* process. For the convenience of the communities, moreover, we have made a table of four traditional methods, putting them side by side, integrating them, as it were, for a more comprehensive and clearer understanding of our *way of working with the paper*.

<u>How we come to insight</u>	<u>Questions we naturally ask</u>	<u>Lectio</u>	<u>4 Movements of St. John Eudes</u>
Discern	Why?	Lectio	Adore
Deliberate	What?	Meditatio	Give thanks
Decide	How?	Oratio	Ask forgiveness
Do	When?	Contemplatio	Gift of self

Immediate Process:

1. LECTIO / WELCOME

Read a section, which includes *For Your Reflection*. Attend to the Scriptural and Congregational texts referred to in the Section. Watch out for the footnotes. If you have any dreams at this time, keep them at the back of your head and await any information these might give you.

2. MEDITATIO / ABIDE with JESUS

Meet as a community at the assigned time. Discuss and share reactions (including feelings and the value attached to the feeling) to readings done of the Section as well as any other pertinent information that can enrich the conversations. We suggest that your community discussion be framed within the following:



- a. What story or experience of your own can shed light on this particular section? What stories, what movements are going on in the world right now that may have a particular relevance to this point being discussed? Why are they happening? Who is involved?
- b. What is the God-view (gospel) that has a bearing on this particular section? How is God feeling? Where is God's mercy manifested? God's holiness? Make connections.
- c. How do poor people regard this particular point (e.g. silence, hospitality, work, reconciliation, etc.) The challenge is to have actual conversations with people who are poor, on the periphery and have been forgotten by society.⁶⁴

3. ORATIO / CONTEMPLATIO / GIFT of SELF-COMMITMENT

Propose Next Steps.

As choices are proposed and made, be aware of feelings of peace or disquiet, empowerment or debility, restlessness or calm, energy or confusion, etc... Are these choices consistent with what/who we say we are (identity & mission)? *Remember that until we actually do what we decided, we really haven't decided and the values on which the decision was reached are not yet real values for us.*

⁶⁴ Please see Camillo Macisse's 'The Challenges of a New Spirituality' #5, pp. 6-7; Spirituality in a Globalized World, Miceál O'Neill. 1997 and 2003 CGS General Assemblies.

Appendices

APPENDIX 1

1. HOW BEST TO PRAY

Place	Finding a place you like, one where you are comfortable, helps create an atmosphere conducive to prayer. Do not neglect to find the right place.
Your body	Taking the time to relax, changing pace, deep breathing, walking, all prepare us for prayer. Find a position which helps you to pray without any tension.
Rhythm	In your day, in your week, find the most appropriate time for prayer and hold firmly to that schedule. Find what is best for you personally.
Duration	Before engaging in prayer, set a time limit: 15 or 30 minutes, an hour, whatever your schedule will allow.
Starting	To begin your prayer time, after having invoked the Holy Spirit, focus on one point (i.e. a Scripture passage, something you read, some event) being careful to avoid remaining vague. Remain nevertheless open to the action of the Spirit who may lead you along unforeseen paths.
The Unfolding	The aim of prayer is not to help a person reason things out, but to bring her/him to love. Here again the Spirit is the main agent for developing in us an attitude like that of Jesus praying to his Father, or of Mary allowing Jesus to form himself in her.
Concluding	Offer yourself to the Lord and express your wish to enter into the grace given you for this particular day and time.

2. SUMMARY OF UNIQUE QUALITIES OF GOOD SHEPHERD CONTEMPLATIVE COMMUNITIES⁶⁵

<u>Unique Quality</u>	<u>How Many Times Cited</u>
Thrust on, formation in appropriate response to Women, Justice, Peace, Integrity of and wonder at Creation	20x
Article 1: We belong to a Congregation of apostolic and contemplative Sisters under one Superior General, one Provincial Superior for both; Constitutional Enclosure; mutual effort to achieve complementarity as Good Shepherd Sisters	14x
Fourth Vow of Zeal	13x
Mission of Reconciliation / truth / forgiveness / fraternal love	12x
Life of Intercession / apostolic, incarnational prayer	12x
Spirit of Welcome, hospitality / radiating peace / love of neighbor / grateful, appreciative of all gifts, vocation, etc.	12x
Love and compassion for the marginalized, the poor / work in solidarity with the poor	12x
Openness to change and to the signs of the times, to experimentation and restructuring / prophetic / creative / dynamic / circular leadership / continued sense of evolution and change	10x
Emphasis on community life	10x
Holistic Formation	3x
Silence, Solitude, Prayer / Focused on God	3x
Fidelity, love, sacrifice for others / belonging to every family / sharing joys, pains and sufferings	3x
Acceptance, patience with limits – age and health	3x
Promotion and development of Lay Association	2x
Increased visibility	1x
Vocation recruitment based on quality rather than quantity	1x
Contacts to legislators to promote justice for all	1x

⁶⁵ Contemplative communities from twenty-four provinces participated in the Study Guide on Community Life

3. CHALLENGES TO CREATIVE FIDELITY

<u>Challenges</u>	<u>How many times cited</u>
Constant re-reading of our charism, ability to give new responses to new situations / restructuring and networking / reality of change / openness / creative fidelity to charism	8x
Attentiveness to our own formation / formative community / holistic formation of leaders and Formators / training in spiritual accompaniment / authenticity / renewals / commitment to new forms of leadership and structures in government / care of elderly with spiritual accompaniment	8x
Living a balanced life / discipline in offering hospitality and social encounters / contemplative and apostolic dimension	6x
Witnessing to gospel values / contemplative presence / authentic living	6x
Personal and communal responsibility without monastic structures of the past / justice / discernment	5x
Creative vocation ministry	4x
On-going conversion and reconciliation / practice of mercy and justice / living the Essential Elements	4x
Congruence in one's life and authentic renewal	3x
More creative participation in the Women, Justice, Peace, Integrity of Creation Thrust, awareness and responses / work at communication and dialogue / use of media and technology for the benefit of justice, evangelization and accompaniment	3x
To be self-supporting and self-sufficient and to find the help for these	3x
Maintaining atmosphere of silence and solitude for Sisters living in an infirmary setting	3x
Distinguishing between the essentials and cultural conditioning / letting go of non-essentials	
Ability to articulate our CGS identity	2x
Dialogue between CGS and RGS for mission	2x
Unity in pluriformity / diversity	2x
Creative organization and formation of our Lay Associates	2x
Lack of energy, self-confidence because of age and diminishing health	2x
Greater involvement in the needs of the world	2x
Having a great spirit of faith and deep prayer life/ participatory and revitalized liturgy with local people / spiritual stimulation and creativity	2x

4. SYNTHESIS OF COMMUNITY PORTRAITS⁶⁶

In drawing a synthesis of CGS community portraits, it seemed fitting to illustrate these through the prisms of Light and Shadow. In our Lectio, moreover, it was clear that these portraits are to be understood from the Sisters' continual exercise of Faith, Hope and Charity, which as we well know is an insertion into the Paschal Mystery. SME indeed reminded us many times that the Cross is our legacy for always, it heralds the Resurrection.

Light



Shadow

Enthusiasm in living the life, Joy

Extreme lack of vocations

Partnership with the laity

Illness and age

Province support
- Article 1 -

Unhealthy / disturbed personalities, which can be traced to:

- i. lack of education
- ii. unhealed wounds of the past
- iii. abuse
- iv. dysfunctional family of origin

Serenity, fervor and fidelity

Lack of understanding of the Contemplative life

Forgiveness and reconciliation are central

Deficiency of Formation

Simplicity (understood as transparency)

Selfishness / egoism

Solidarity with others
(particularly with women and children who have lost their dignity)

Lack of sense of belonging to the Congregation

Creativity especially with Liturgy

Lack of creativity

Zeal

Lack of role models

Centered on the Eucharist and prayer

Lack of self-esteem

In touch with the reality of the now:
– awareness of poverty within and without

Materialism and consumerism

Among small communities, immersion among the people, which becomes a catalyst for personal and communal conversion

A certain disinclination and hesitation for study

⁶⁶ Forty-nine communities submitted portraits of their communities

Light

Transition and Re-structuring:

- i. Caused movement from dependency to healthy lack of on-going formation interdependence
- ii. Loss of external structures offered opportunities for creativity
- iii. Devotion to sick and aged Sisters, a witness to the value of life
- iv. Nursing homes have become holy ground for gospel witness

Ministry of presence

Shared, inclusive leadership

Informed about world events and appropriately involved with government legislation

Awareness that the spirit of enclosure must not be exchanged for unsuitable activities

Self-supporting, with a strong inclination to share profits with the needy

'Anawim' in the presence of general lukewarmness

Friendship as a way of life

Desire for unity and networking

Small communities are places for deeper relationships, trust and friendships

Close partnership with the diocese

Ecological awareness

Prayer for clergy

The Word of God centers the communities

Desire for authenticity

Shadow

Lack (in some parts, a strong lack) of on-going formation

Unhealthy attitude towards work

Opaqueness and ambiguity of Article 1, causing disorientation and confusion

Absence of physical structures (due for example, to re-structuring) have bewildered the Sisters and the Essential Elements, a bafflement (silence, solitude, prayer, customary rituals, etc.)

Lack of responsibility

Laziness

Lack of zeal

Alienation of some sisters from other sisters in the same community

Lack of communication skills

Imbalance between work, prayer, study and leisure

Distance between ideal and reality

Difficult personalities are a heavy burden for small communities

For some Sisters, the feeling of being a 2nd class citizen in the Congregation continues; sometimes, this is caused by misunderstandings with one or two Apostolic Sisters

5. FOLLOW-UP RECOMMENDATIONS

Everyone agreed on three points:

1. To revisit theology of community life (go back to the sources) so that non-negotiables are distinguished from what is not essential and then, perhaps, 'new paths' will be found.
2. To ensure balance of life, organize (write it down!) time for prayer, the liturgy, study, work and leisure.
3. A healing process must be initiated for some communities.