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**THE SILENT WITNESSES
A Spirituality of the Contemplative Life in Reference
to the Cottolengo Monasteries**

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A Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for a Diploma in Spirituality and Religious Formation

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To my dear mum Severina and late dad Daniel, whose love and support trained me to have a contemplative attitude towards life and enabled me to answer God's call to the canonical contemplative life.

Prayer makes you dear to God. Therefore, pray, pray always.

(St . Joseph B. Cottolengo)

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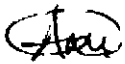
I am profoundly grateful to Jerome Paluku, OCD for helping me find the relevant literature as well as reading the first drafts of this paper giving very timely suggestions. I cannot fail to express my deep gratitude to Deacon C. Nchebere, SSC for his dedication in careful proofreading the whole of this essay, giving suggestions that made this work to take the shape that I desired.

Finally, my thanks to all my fellow sisters in the monastery for their indispensable support of prayer and suggestions through fraternal sharing and interviews. The Lord will reward you for being so kind to me.

DEO GRATIAS

DECLARATION

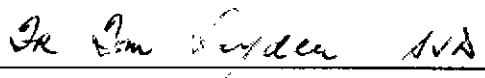
I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for diploma in spirituality and religious formation. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed: 

Name of Student: Sr. Agatha Mwalachi, SSJBC

Date: 14th March 2003

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval the college supervisor.

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

"Tell us something about your life". This request that has been often addressed to me either by the small groups of Christians who visit our monastery or the young people attending the prayer meetings that I used to animate, prompted my choice to do this research so as to deepen my understanding of the spirituality of the contemplative life in the Catholic Church and in our monasteries. To explain what contemplative form of religious life is today, especially to a young searching soul, as is the case of the ladies contemplating to make a choice for our monastery, a theoretical basis that is compelling and energising presented coherently is of crucial importance.

This essay attempts to answer four questions. First, what is contemplative life and which are its roots in the scriptures and in the history of religious life? Second, what is the Church's teaching on the contemplative life and which are the principal elements that distinguish it from other forms of religious life? Third, what is the mission of the contemplatives? And fourth, what are the challenges facing this form of religious life and what could be the most appropriate response of the contemplatives to these challenges?

The essay has four chapters. Chapter one is an elucidation of the terms spirituality, Christian spirituality and contemplative life. We found it of crucial

importance to understand well the meaning and use of these terms in order to grasp the message of the whole essay. Chapter two explores the biblical and historical basis of the contemplative life in the Catholic Church. Chapter three is a discussion on the contemplative life in the economy of salvation and chapter four focuses specifically on the Cottolengo monasteries.

The Cottolengo monasteries discussed in the last chapter serve as a concrete example of the reality of the contemplative life in the Catholic Church; hence completing the picture of what this style of religious life is all about. The essay closes with a general conclusion, which is a summary of whatever is discussed in the four chapters.

The essay draws ideas from the already existing rich literature on the spirituality of the contemplative life and history of religious life. It is also enriched by ideas from the critical reflections gleaned from my personal experience of more than a decade in the Cottolengo Monastery in Tuuru — Kenya, together with living testimonies of my fellow sisters through discussions and interviews reported in appendix I and VII.

Due to space and time limits, the essay goes straight to the point. It does not dwell much on the details about the customs and practices in the contemplative life. We have focused on the above-mentioned key themes in order to make the reader get to know what contemplative life is in a brief but complete way.

Even if I am a Cottolengo contemplative, I purposely chose to develop this topic in a broad way without confining my research on the Cottolengo monasteries alone for two reasons: one, because I strongly feel *cum ecclesiae*, that is, I am a Cottolengo

contemplative operating in the large reality of the universal Church. Secondly, although the Cottolengo Monasteries do not belong to the ancient monastic Orders such as the Augustinians, Benedictines and others, they have all the essential characteristics of any authentic contemplative community and their vocation places them at the heart of the Church. Therefore, I too can confidently say with St. Thérèse of Lisieux: "in my mother, the Church, I shall be love."

Chapter I

Definition of the Terms: Spirituality, Christian Spirituality and Contemplative Life

1. Introduction

The meaning given to a term depends on the context in which it is used. So, to understand a term or a concept implies knowledge of the context in which it is used. Thus, in order to approach our topic: *The Silent Witnesses: A Spirituality of the Contemplative Life in Reference to the Cottolengo Monasteries*, we find it very necessary to start by elucidating some concepts used in spirituality, that are misused in some casual spiritual conversations. Therefore, the first chapter of our essay is going to be a clarification of the terms: spirituality, Christian spirituality and contemplative life that are common in the field of spirituality. This is going to help us to understand our topic better and avoid much purporting when we come across these terms in our discussion on the contemplative spirituality, which is the theme of our essay.

2. Spirituality

When people speak about spirituality, particularly in our contemporary society, they have all sorts of implications that vary from one person to another unlike in the past when this word was used almost exclusively to designate the "sacred" and

whatever had connection with God and religion. R. Woods tells us that "today people can mean anything when they use this word spirituality — from the study of the lives and teachings of saints to the mental 'stance' and attitudes of football teams and automobile dealers."¹

J. Auman gives four reasons as to why it is difficult to define this term: First, he says that the theology of the spiritual life did not emerge as a well defined branch of theology until the seventeenth century, second, the term spirituality admits of a variety of meanings, third, the word is used in different senses by different theologians, and fourth, the spiritual life is itself so complex that it seems to evade any attempt at a definition.²

Therefore, we shall try to understand the term spirituality by choosing some definitions from a few authors who present the theme of spirituality in a more inclusive, updated and widely accepted approach while remaining faithful to the original notion of the term and keeping in line with the catholic tradition.

However, let us underline that spirituality is not restricted to the religious circles only and less still is it a privilege for Christians or Christian authors. Besides the Christian spiritualities, we have other main religious spiritualities such as the Hindu spirituality, Buddhist spirituality, Islamic spirituality, African Religious spiritualities and others.

¹ R. WOODS, *Christian Spirituality: God's Presence Through the Ages*, 9.

² Cf. J. AUMAN, "Trends in Catholic Spirituality", 10.

Following the above explanations on the term spirituality, we agree with J. Auman's affirmation that this term can be used in several senses: one, to signify the Christian life, which in turn is the participation of the human person in the 'mystery of Christ', two, it can be used in a more restricted sense to imply a particular mode of Christian life as manifested in the various schools of spirituality such as the Carmelite spirituality, Ignatian spirituality, Salesian spirituality and many others. Three, this term can be extended to include non-Christian spiritualities. Here spirituality is defined as the "basic practical or existential attitude of man which is the consequence and expression of the way in which he understands his religious or more generally, his ethically committed existence". Lastly, it may be defined in a more technical sense as "a theological science, which investigates the nature of the Christian life, the elements necessary to its existence, and the means by which it can grow to perfection."³

G.S. Wakefield agrees with J. Auman when he presents spirituality as "a word that describes those attitudes, beliefs and practices which animate people's lives and help them to reach out towards supernatural realities."⁴ And lastly, R. Woods seems to give a synthesis of what has been said above when he defines spirituality as that:

Intrinsic, self-transcending character of all human persons and everything that pertains to it including most importantly the ways in which that perhaps infinitely malleable character is realized concretely in everyday situations. Spirituality is therefore concrete and real since it encompasses all the ways, beliefs and attitudes that people have regarding the development of the human spirit in its collective as well as particular forms.⁵

³ J. AUMAN, "Trends in Catholic Spirituality", 15.

⁴ G.S. WAKEFIELD, "Spirituality", 549.

⁵ Cf. R. WOODS, *Christian Spirituality*, 9-10.

All in all, it is clear that the term spirituality embraces all the aspects of an individual's life. Unfortunately people at times create a dichotomy between religion and life. They tend to restrict their religious practices to the "Church". On the contrary, a person's spirituality should be manifest in all the spheres of his/her life because it is concerned with a person's relationship with God at all moments and in every situation.

3. Christian Spirituality

The main sources of Christian spirituality in the Catholic Church are the scriptures, tradition, Magisterium of the Church, liturgy and social sciences.⁶ Being the founder of Christian spirituality, Jesus Christ is the central figure in its study.

To know and to understand Christian spirituality in the Catholic tradition, one has to know Jesus Christ and his place in one's life. G. Gutierrez confirms this where he says that "the anchor of Christian spirituality is Jesus" and that "spirituality is an all embracing attitude, a force that bestows constancy and prevents a person from being tossed to and fro or being carried about by any wind of doctrine".⁷ Therefore when we talk of Christian Spirituality we are simply talking of Christian living.

That is why we firmly agree with M. -A. Huddleston's understanding of the term when she points out that Christian spirituality is putting into practice in the concrete conduct of life, specific Christian doctrines, ideas, commandments, instructions, traditions or habits by a particular way of living with the aim of entering into a deeper

⁶ Cf. S. PAYNE, *Introduction to Spirituality*, 7.

⁷ Cf. G. GUTIERREZ, *We Drink From Our Own Wells*, 105.

union with God.⁸ This finds support in P. Nwachukwa's observation regarding the spirituality of his people when he says that "when we talk of Christian spirituality, we are also talking of Christian life which should be a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God and a spiritual worship" (Rom. 12: 1-2).⁹ Therefore Christian spirituality has a goal — to reach full union with Christ, and a motivation — Jesus Christ himself.

This makes us to understand why Christian spirituality is not just a question of one's prayer life and devotions only but the whole person's life. There should be no dichotomy between spiritual life and life as such. An authentic Christian spirituality is the one that embraces every action and attitude of a person's life and is all-involving. In it, observes, M. Downey, "the ultimate Christian values perceived and pursued are rooted in God disclosed in Jesus Christ, through the power of the Holy Spirit active and present in the community of discipleship called the Church".¹⁰

Finally, we can say that Christian Spirituality is concerned with striving to live as God's children in Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit. It is about developing our relationship with God who is revealed to us by Jesus in the Holy Spirit.

⁸ Cf. M.-A. HUDDLESTON, *Springs of Spirituality*, 20.

⁹ Cf. P. NWACHUKWA, *Towards a Model for Igbo Christian Spirituality*, 1.

¹⁰ M. DOWNEY, *Understanding Spirituality*, 32.

4. Contemplative Life: Canonical and Non-Canonical

In a very wide and general way, J.F. Conwell defines the word contemplative life as "a term that is used to indicate a life characterized by solitude and prayers."¹¹ He goes on to note that there is a distinction between a life of actual solitude and prayer in which everything is officially organized so as to create an atmosphere of silence, which is the canonical contemplative life, and the life of a Christian who tries to blend and harmonize his/her contemplative dimension of life with the activities of one's vocation, which is the non-canonical contemplative life and has no juridical status.¹²

L. Bouyer, in his book, *The Meaning of Monastic Life*, sheds more light to help us to understand deeper the term canonical contemplative life. For him, "Monastic life" can also be called "contemplative life" because the aspect of contemplation is essential and predominates in it. Monks/nuns pursue contemplation more than any other people.¹³ R.P. McBrien supports him where he points out that "the ancient and especially medieval monasticism perceived its way of life as contemplative and so monks and nuns were called contemplatives."¹⁴ They lived in monasteries or contemplative communities. In this paper we are going to use the term contemplative life in the canonical sense, that is, to refer to that form of religious life that is so structured as to favour prayer in silence and solitude and has a juridical status.

¹¹ Cf. J.F. CONWELL, "Contemplative Life", 263.

¹² Cf. J.F. CONWELL, "Contemplative Life", 263

¹³ L. BOUYER, *The Meaning of the Monastic Life*, 1.

¹⁴ R.P. MC BRIEN, "Contemplation", 364.

In order to give flesh to what we have been said above regarding the meaning and use of the term canonical contemplative life, I sought the understanding and views of living witnesses in this life. I inquired through discussions and interviews from several contemplative sisters¹⁵ from the Cottolengo Missionary Monastery, Tuuru – Kenya, what contemplative life is according to their experiences. They replied in formal conversations and later gave their answers in written form (see appendix 1). Their replies, based on experience, revealed that the canonical contemplative life is a special and gratuitous call from God to some Christians who are not different or better than the rest of the faithful.

They also stressed that the contemplative life, understood in the canonical sense, is a life that is dedicated to continuous prayer, penance and mortification, in an atmosphere of silence and solitude. They also highlighted the point that the aim of everything in the contemplative life is to reach union with God and obtain salvation for themselves, their brothers/sisters and the whole humanity.

5. Conclusion

Without pinning down the term spirituality in one definition, we have seen that this word describes the attitudes beliefs and practices that animate a person's or people's lives. Again, when this term is used specifically for the Christians, that is, when we

¹⁵ In this paper we shall use term sisters and not nuns for the Cottolengo contemplatives. The term sister is a generic name for women religious, while nun, strictly speaking, applies only to the cloistered religious in solemn vows and papal enclosure. Let us note that the Cottolengo Monasteries are fully contemplative communities but not of solemn vows or papal enclosure. The norms which govern their enclosure are not sanctioned by the apostolic authority but by their proper Law/Constitution and Directory.

speak of Christian spirituality, it describes the Christian life or life in the Spirit and the concrete way of living one's faith in Jesus, according to one's specific characteristics. It is important to note that any authentic Christian spirituality is all-involving. By this we mean that there should be no dichotomy between one's daily life at work and the moments of worship, because what one believes and professes is supposed to be manifested in the concrete day-to-day life situations.

Further on, we have seen that in the Catholic Church, there are two ways of understanding and using the term contemplative life, these are: one, in the canonical sense and two, in the non-canonical sense. In the canonical sense — this is the way we shall use it in this essay, it refers to the form of religious life that is so structured as to favour prayer in an atmosphere of silence and solitude. In the non-canonical sense it refers to the form of Christian living that strives to harmonise the contemplative dimension of one's life with the activities of one's vocation so that ministry flows from prayer and leads to it.

Chapter II

Scriptural and Historical Basis of the Contemplative Life in the Catholic Church

1. Introduction

In this chapter, we are going to investigate the foundations of the contemplative spirituality in the scriptures and in the history of religious life. This approach is important because as T. Merton asserts, "a more biblical understanding of the contemplative life is called for: we must see it as a response to the dynamic Word of God in history and in the light of biblical eschatology. A contemplative finds God not in the embrace of "pure" love alone but in the prophetic ardour of the response to the Word of God..."¹⁶

From the history of religious life, it is well known that the contemplative life is founded on the rich patrimony of the desert Fathers. These fourth century ascetics are considered the first Christian monks and nuns. Therefore, in order to get a clearer grasp of this fact, we shall present in a succinct way, the principal founding figures of the Christian monasticism showing each one's contribution to the monastic spirituality.

¹⁶ T. MERTON, *Contemplation in World of Action*, 151.

2. Biblical Foundations of the Contemplative Life

Being a Christian spirituality, monastic spirituality finds its roots in the Holy Scriptures. As early as 4th century, Basil tried to trace the roots of the monastic life in the scriptures. C. Cary-Elwes, a prominent writer on the contemplative life, testifies to this when he says that: "our generation is not the first to undertake an inquiry into the scriptural bases of the monastic life because it has already been done by Basil in the 4th century".¹⁷

Although Basil did not make a clear list of the scriptural passages that are at the root of the monastic life, he nevertheless gave us several key passages that are very appropriate to the theme of monasticism. These are: (Matt 10:37), (John 14:21; 13:25), (Rom 8:35) and others. Basil did not limit himself to the above few passages. He included all the verses that speak of the love of neighbour, the love of one's enemy, good works and the commitments of baptism. For him a monk is not a "special" person but simply "a zealous Christian who has decided to live his Christian vocation with radicalism. He did not allow any "distinction, division or break between the monastic ideal and that of a zealous Christian."¹⁸

¹⁷ C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 61.

¹⁸ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 61-62.

2.1 Conversion

Monks wanted to "lead the apostolic life" not in the sense of missionary life but like the first disciples of Christ.¹⁹ For them, embracing the solitary life was a conversion to Christ. Just as the first disciples left everything and followed Jesus, so did those who choose to live the monastic life. They tried to emulate the promptness of the first disciples of Jesus.

Even in the Old Testament (Gen 12: 1-6; Ex 3:1-12) we find the same kind of response to the call of God. Abraham and Moses heard the voice of God and went where he commanded them to go without worrying about the outcome. We see this kind of answer to the voice of God in Anthony of Egypt. He heard these words: "if you wish be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me" (Mt 19:21).²⁰ Anthony did as the Word of God indicated and went to the desert.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council pointed out that "from the dawn of the chosen people's history, Abraham is depicted as being called to leave his country, his family and his father's house. This was the beginning of a long mystical journey to a homeland which is not of this world".²¹ For monks and nuns this, "leaving" is of paramount importance. It gave momentum to the first Fathers and Mothers of the desert who decided to leave their cities, families and familiar places to go to the desert to follow Christ, imitating him more radically in a life of sacrifice and self-denial.

¹⁹ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 64.

²⁰ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 46.

²¹ Cf. *Venite Seorsum*, I.

2.2 *Baptism*

In the understanding of C. Cary-Elwes, baptism is the second most important biblical theme dear to the monastic spirituality. He points out that:

Of all biblical ideas, the one closest to the monastic idea, the one that explains it very well is that of Baptism. It is said that the earliest monks fled the cities and congregated in the wilderness in order to restore to the Church its primitive zeal, now grown lukewarm once persecution had ceased with the accession of Constantine to the imperial throne. The enthusiasm, the zeal, the dedication and sacrifices had slipped away...the vows of baptism had been wholesome but were not heeded. The monastic vows are not another baptism but a renewal of it, an intensification of effort, a re-edification, a fixed determination to carry through with the vows of baptism till death...Monks did not take any vows but took their baptism dedication seriously²²

When I was preparing myself to join the contemplative life, I happened to have some conversation with a person who was a good Christian and quite acquainted with the demands of religious life. This person persuaded me not to choose the monastic life simply because *things were tough*. "Are you ready to be buried alive"? He continued. This question shocked me. I wondered why the use of a death metaphor. Probably this person too never knew that death to the old man/woman and rebirth to new life was a theme dear to monastic spirituality. The early monks/nuns desired to be born anew in their souls and in the totality of their lives. They did this by taking radical and uncompromising decisions that led them to the desert.

²² C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 66-67.

2.3 *Imitation of Christ*

The underlying idea behind the flight from the "world"²³ by monks and nuns was the desire to live a life similar to that of their master, imitating him whose voice they heard resounding in the Holy Scriptures. They desired to "reproduce" the life of Christ in silent and humble witness similar to the way he lived at Nazareth for thirty years before embarking in the public ministry.

We have to bear in mind that in the beginning, people understood monks/nuns as Christians who radically committed themselves to the imitation of Christ. This, according to C. Cary-Elwes, meant picking up the N. Testament or listening to it being read -- as was the case of Anthony, and then carrying out its advice almost literally.²⁴

Monks and nuns strived to imitate Christ in every way not just by keeping a few precepts such as the three vows that we have today — let us note that the early monks/nuns did not take the three vows. They took the counsels directly from the scriptures that were rich in precepts on how to grow in perfection of charity after the example of Christ. Their aim was to be fully configured to Christ after a long struggle to overcome their weaknesses. This is the reason behind all the austerities in the monastic life.

²³ By world, I mean all that is negative, enslaving and in opposition with God. For monks and nuns, to leave the world meant even material separation from the society.

²⁴ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 67.

2.4 *The Beatitudes*

There is no better and clearer way of striving to imitate Christ than to live according to spirit of the beatitudes. The desire to imitate Christ as we have said, generated in the monks a deep desire to live according to the beatitudes. It is reported that when Pachomius first set off on the work of founding the monasteries, he paid much attention to the beatitudes.²⁵ The beatitudes are the summary of the whole Gospel message, so if they fascinated the early monks, it is logical since their desire was to live the Gospel radically.

We have to know that the beatitudes do not invite Christians to a life of ordinary virtue. They call for a heroic practice of the counsels of the Lord. Only a person fully resolved to embrace the Gospel ideal could dare take them for a plan of life. The monks/nuns did so and succeeded in living them even with the sacrifice of life. It is worth noting that for the monks/nuns, as C. Cary-Elwes observes, "Christ taught the beatitudes rather than the vows, he taught many counsels not only three."²⁶ That is why the Holy Scriptures were highly treasured by them to the extent of almost knowing the whole bible by heart. Monks/nuns approached the scriptures not so much with a critical mind but an open heart, ready to absorb them and ruminate on the message that is contained in them continuously.

²⁵ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 69.

²⁶ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 69.

2.5 *Asceticism*

Of all the biblical themes in the monastic life, asceticism has a central part. In fact another name for the monks/nuns is ascetics, after their style of life. C. Cary-Elwes again points out that the early ascetics took Christ's words; "whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14:27) almost literally.²⁷ The theme of mortification as taught by Christ, recurs in several other passages of the scriptures. These passages were very dear to the monks. They nourished themselves with them and were the real food for their souls especially in their desire to imitate the sufferings of Jesus their teacher and model.

The other passages that inspired the monks/nuns to embrace a life of mortification are: Is. 53:1-12; Phil. 2:1-11; Gal. 6:14; John 12:24-25 and others. In these passages, Jesus is depicted as the humble and suffering servant of Yahweh, one who was chosen by God to suffer for the good of others in expiation for their sins, in this way bringing God's plan of salvation into fulfilment. This is why C. Cary-Elwes is right in affirming that:

It was these and similar passages which aroused the saints to great feats of bodily asceticism, partly in simple imitation of their saviour, partly in recognition that it was they who deserved the stripes that Isaiah spoke of, which the servant of God took upon his shoulders for us all, partly they did not rid themselves of the evil desires that original sin and their own had left crowding in their imagination and their mind. None practiced greater asceticism than those fathers of the desert.²⁸

The greatest desire of the monks, as we have said above, was to imitate Christ by living according to the Gospel. So, the theme of suffering could not escape their

²⁷ Cf. C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 76.

²⁸ C. CARY-ELWES, *Monastic Renewal*, 77.

acute desire to emulate Jesus whose sufferings, death and resurrection brought redemption to the whole human race.

Monks knew well that salvation without the cross is but an illusion. They loved the Lord especially in his aspect of suffering and humiliation. Everything for a monk, that is, love, asceticism, poverty, obedience, virginity, humility, silence, and even singing are all ways of embodying a response to Christ. They offered these sacrifices to God in union with the salvific work of Christ. These ascetical practices were the expression of their love for God and neighbour in imitation of Jesus their master and model.

3. Historical Roots of the Contemplative Life

3.1 Christian Monasticism: Origins and Reasons for the Flight to the Desert

Scholars of the history of religious life unanimously agree that from the historical point of view, monasticism was the first and only form of religious life in the Church for many centuries.²⁹ N. Brockman points out that "in the early Church there were Orders of virgins and widows dedicated to prayer and works of charity (1 Tim 5:5-11) which were recognized and institutionalised by the Church".³⁰ In support of this, J.F. Conwell observes that for women, it was the only form until the Middle Ages and

²⁹ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 29.31.

³⁰ N. BROCKMAN, *A popular History of Religious life*, 14-15.

that "it finds its roots in the earliest days of Christianity when men and women manifested their total consecration to Christ by deliberately choosing celibate life."³¹

Even if it is historically proven that monastic culture is one of the oldest cultures in the Christian tradition, its origins are shrouded with obscurity. History does not permit us to identify accurately the first manifestations of the flight to the desert but C.J Peifer argues that sometimes in the third century, certain ascetics abandoned the Christian community and retired into solitude. He maintains that because the earliest documentations come from Egypt, it is generally believed that the movement began there and marked the origin of monasticism in the Catholic Church.³² To confirm the above findings, J.A. Mohler points out that:

The 4th century seems the opportune time for the beginning of Christian monasticism since Christian ascetics were escaping from the city to the desert of God. This is when the Christianity had started to lose its primordial eschatological dynamism, after the edict of Milan in 313, and the subsequent patronage of Christianity when martyrdom and persecution ceased and Roman protection ensued. The Church became soft and complacent with the clergy becoming government officials. Although the earlier persecutions had driven some ascetics into the desert, it was Constantinian Church with its corruption and secularization, which encouraged a large scale of flight to the wilderness. It all began in Egypt, which had a tradition of monasticism going back to the Therapeuts.³³ (See map in appendix II).

The first contemplatives were the desert ascetics and their flight to the desert solitude was motivated by one thing: search for God. They left the city in search for deeper intimacy with God. For C.J. Peifer, they left the world purposely in order to become better Christians. They renounced it and the normal human values, only to live

³¹ Cf. J.F. CONWELL, "Contemplative Life", 263.

³² Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 31.

³³ J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism, A Historical Survey*, xvi.41-43. The Therapeuts (200 B.C. - 200 A.D) were a sect of Jewish monks and contemporaries of the Qumran Monks or Essenes. They lived a strictly contemplative life with long hours of prayer and strict fasting, ID., 27.

and be present to it on a much deeper level.³⁴ Although popular literature depicted them as people-hating and aloof individuals, their lifestyle, seasoned by long hours of prayer, produced people distinguished by hospitality of spirit and rare compassion.

4. The Pioneers of Christian Monasticism

4.1 *St. Anthony of Egypt (251-356): Father of Christian Monasticism*

Anthony, an unlettered Copt from a village in Coma in middle Egypt, while attending Church service, heard the words of Jesus, "if you wish to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come and follow me" (Mt. 19:21) and acted promptly as the word suggested. He gave his possessions to the poor and entrusted his younger sister to some virgins, then fled to the desert to lead a life of prayer, penance and mortification. His entry to the desert marked the beginning of monastic life in from where it spread to the west³⁵ (see map in appendix III). This is why J.F. Conwell is right in affirming that the contemplative life has its roots in the early movements to the desert as is testified by the example of Anthony who is hailed as the father of Christian monasticism.³⁶

Anthony is specifically the pioneer of hermitic life. In fact J.A. Mohler notes that the word *monos* indicates a man who lives by himself although the word was later

³⁴ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 35.

³⁵ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 45-46.

³⁶ Cf. J.F. CONWELL, "Contemplative life", 263.

adopted for the semi hermits and cenobites as well."³⁷ However, because Anthony's monastic life was hermitic, individuals lived alone and there were serious problems due to exaggerations in the ascetical practices that were at times unbalanced. All in all, thanks to him, the monastic life acquired its essential elements, that is, constant prayer, penance and mortification, in silence and solitude.

4.2 Pachomius (292-346): Pioneer of Cenobitic Life

The next earliest important figure in the history of monasticism is Pachomius. He too is an Egyptian and a contemporary of Anthony. He is reputed as the originator and pioneer of cenobitic life. Pachomius was a pagan drafted into Roman army at age twenty. He was converted by the exemplary charity exercised by the Christians who cared for the wounded soldiers and became a solidier-ascetic.³⁸

After his conversion, he spent some time with Palamon, his adviser, and then left him and founded a monastery at Tabennesis, on the banks of River Nile (see map in appendix IV). He developed the monasticism of Anthony further by organizing it in communities. His cenobitic monasticism eliminated the arbitrariness of the hermitic life, correcting some of the exaggerations. These monasteries were characterised by manual work alternating with prayer and conferences on the scriptures.³⁹

Pachomius had so many followers and when he died, he left about seven hundred monks in different communities. Towards the end of his life he wrote a rule

³⁷ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 45. The term cenobite derives from *cenobium*, which means group. The Cenobites are those who live in a religious community.

³⁸ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 51.52.

³⁹ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 52.

that is said to be the prototype of Eastern and Western monastic rules. Even today his rule is the one followed by the Coptic monks. The governing principal of Pachomian monasteries was fraternal love that was the most valued ideal in the community.⁴⁰

4.3 Augustine of Hippo (354-430): Monk and Theologian

Augustine, one of the principal founders of monasticism, was born in Thagaste, Numidia, in the present day Tunisia in North Africa. He led a restless life that led him to Europe in pursuit of his rhetoric career. It is at Milan, Italy, where he came into contact with St. Ambrose who influenced him with his preaching and contributed much to his conversion to Christianity. After conversion to Christianity, he returned to Africa and lived a quasi-monastic life. When he was ordained priest in 391, he founded his first monastery at Thagaste and later on converted his home to a monastery.⁴¹ (Appendix V).

J. Auman points out that it is Augustine who began the cenobitic monastic life in Africa that was not based on the Eastern type of monasticism. He brought it from the West where he had seen it at Milan. It was characterized by common life, poverty, celibacy, obedience, community life, silence, humility, and other austerities. More emphasis was laid on fraternal love. The monasticism started by Augustine spread to France, Italy, and Spain. Its traces are found even in the Rule of St. Benedict. Some Orders such as the Canons of St. Victor follow the Rule of Augustine.⁴²

⁴⁰ Cf. N. BROCKMAN, *A Popular History of Religious Life*, 25.

⁴¹ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 109-110. Cf. J. AUMAN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 66-67.

⁴² Cf. J. AUMAN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 67-68.118.

As years passed, the Augustinian monks started dedicating more time to active pastoral work and slowly by slowly, the contemplative aspect disappeared. These communities laid the foundations for future Orders that were entirely dedicated to active apostolate.⁴³

4.4 St. Benedict (480-547): Father and Legislator of Western Monasticism

Benedict of Nursia, whom scholars unanimously refer to as the father and legislator of Western monasticism, after his studies in Rome, withdrew in solitude at Subiaco where he organized monasteries almost similar to those in the East.⁴⁴

After establishing these monasteries, he stipulated a rule for them that is well known today as the Rule of St. Benedict (RB). In 817, this rule was proposed by the council of Aix-La-Chapelle as the basic rule for monastic life in the West.⁴⁵

The reason as to why the RB became universally popular is given by N. Brockman who notes that it "gave very sensible directives for all practical things of life, was moderate and prudent and offered a monasticism that was flexible and common sense as well as spiritually strict but with focus placed upon conversion of heart rather than physical penance."⁴⁶ In other words, Benedict wrote a rule that was faithful to the traditions of monasticism as well as adapted to the needs of the time.

The main contribution of Saint Benedict to the monastic life is his Rule and the norm or stability that helped to curb the problem of "wandering monks" that was

⁴³ Cf. J. AUMAN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 67.

⁴⁴ Cf. J. AUMAN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 69.

⁴⁵ Cf. J. AUMAN, *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*, 69.

⁴⁶ N. BROCKMAN, *A popular History of Religious Life*, 42-43.

a plague to the monastic life during those times. He is the one who established monasteries that were characterized by family spirit with the Abbot as the *Patri familias*, where nothing was ordered or forced. The monastery was supposed to be a school of service to the Lord and not like those of the East that resembled an army encampment.⁴⁷

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen that the principal motive for the flight to the desert by the early ascetics was the desire to be more deeply united with Jesus and to live radically their Christian commitments. The choice to go to the desert was a reaction against the laxity in the Christian life after the persecutions had ceased when Christianity became the State religion after the conversion of Emperor Constantine.

The biblical themes that we have presented in a brief way are a clear evidence that the contemplative life has very authentic scriptural basis. We have also seen that the desert ascetics of the fourth century are the pioneers of the contemplative life. From the historically point of view, the religious life that we have today — contemplative life included, finds its earliest manifestations in Africa — Egypt, with the pioneers being Anthony, the father of Christian monasticism, Pachomius, the initiator of community life and Augustine of Hippo, who brought back to Africa from the West, a monasticism that was not based on the Eastern rules. With this background, we can now proceed to the discussion on the contemplative life in the economy of salvation.

⁴⁷ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 202-205.

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⁴⁷ Cf. J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism*, 202-205.

Chapter III

Contemplative Life in the Economy of Salvation

1. Introduction

Today's society is undergoing what Erik Erikson in his psychosocial developmental theory calls identity versus role confusion crisis.⁴⁸ This expression is not to be taken to mean that everybody is a perpetual adolescent. It means that many people, young and old alike, are somehow confused about who they really are, as individuals or as a group and what each one's role is in the society. This, we are all aware, is mostly due to the supersonic speed of changes in the cultural, social-economic and religious conditions that characterize the post-modern era in which we live. Strong external forces, new ideologies and new lifestyles are bombarding the minds and lives of people, causing much confusion and loss of identity.

In such a context, the religious people, contemplatives included, need to re-affirm their identity and mission in order not to sink in the sea of confusion of ideas and roles.

⁴⁸ Cf. L.M. SDOROW, *Psychology*, 155.

It is by finding clear and well-defined answers to questions about their identity that the contemplatives will be able to re-affirm their relevance and mission in the Church and in the contemporary world.

Therefore, in this chapter, we will focus our attention on four important themes. These are: the identity of a contemplative by answering the question, who is a contemplative, the teaching of the Magisterium of the Church on the contemplative life, the apostolate of the contemplatives, the basic elements of the contemplative life, the challenges facing the contemplative life and the response of the contemplatives to these challenges.

2. Who is a Contemplative?

First of all, from the example of the desert Fathers like the great Anthony of Egypt and Pachomius, whom we have seen how they discovered their contemplative vocation by listening to the word of God, I agree with T. Merton who describes a contemplative as someone who takes most seriously the word of God in the Gospels and feels personally obliged to:

...develop a special relationship with him, seeking above all else to live by renouncing himself, taking up his cross of self-denial and following Christ, uniting himself with the hidden years of labour spent by him in Nazareth or by following him into the desert and sharing in his solitary prayer.⁴⁹

This is the reason behind all the mortifications that characterize the life of the contemplatives. Their identity lies in their faithfulness to the radical choice made in imitation of Christ's hidden life.

⁴⁹ T. MERTON, *Monastic Journey*, 6.

The term "contemplative" by itself speaks of the identity of the contemplatives. It reveals that a contemplative is a person of prayer and contemplation. To be called a contemplative, is to be described with the most basic element that constitutes the contemplative life. C.J. Peifer, points out that a contemplative is above all else a man or woman of prayer, in constant dialogue with God and constantly striving to be filled with his presence.⁵⁰

Again, in a more specific way, T. Merton describes a Catholic contemplative as someone who has "responded to the call of Christ to penance and prayer because he/she knows that discipline and renunciation deliver a person from particularly that spiritual insensitivity and lack of freedom that come from immersion in the cares and pleasures of self-seeking".⁵¹

We have to say that, although the contemplatives, because of their material separation from the society, assume a critical attitude towards its structures, which is a silent protest against all that is enslaving and sets people at odds with God, they do not look proudly at the rest of their brothers and sisters as less perfect in terms of relationship with God. On the contrary, they are very conscious of their need of God's mercy and grace to overcome their own sinfulness. That is why T. Merton's comment fits well here. He believes that a true contemplative is someone who knows that: he/she too can betray the Lord, that the 'seeds of death' are in him/her and he/she can also fail

⁵⁰ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 387.

⁵¹ T. MERTON, *Monastic Journey*, 7.

and be unfaithful to the Lord. This is why the contemplatives embrace a life of constant prayer and vigilance on themselves because they know that faith is a pure gift. They make the choice to embrace such a life aware of its costs, struggles and doubts that get their meaning in faith.⁵²

3. The Church's Teaching on the Contemplative Life

The most striking thing when one reads some documents of the Church on the contemplative life is that constant tone of emphasis on the need and the value of this form of consecrated life in the Church. This esteem and appreciation derives particularly from the validity of this kind of vocation and its mission in the Church and in the world.

The recognition and encouragement to develop and promote the contemplative life is echoed mostly by the Church's Magisterium, especially the recent pontiffs, starting with Paul VI, John XXIII and John Paul II. These popes have written magnificent pages that reveal clearly the thought and the stand of the Church regarding the contemplative form of religious life. In a speech addressed to the contemplatives, Pope Paul VI firmly stated that the Church and the world in their different but converging reasons need the contemplatives to withdraw from the ecclesial and social community and dwell in silence and solitude because in this way they serve the world today by helping people to

⁵² Cf. T. MERTON, *The Monastic Journey*, 5.

recuperate their personal life that is often threatened by noise, haste, crowd, exteriority hence threatening the interior life.⁵³

It is in this silence and solitude, continues John Paul II, that the contemplatives:

...participating in divine worship, personal asceticism, prayer, mortification and fraternal love, direct their whole lives to the contemplation of God and hence offer to the ecclesial community a singular testimony of the Church's love for her Lord and in this way contribute with hidden apostolic fruitfulness to the growth of the people of God. These institutes are for the Church a reason for pride and a source of heavenly graces.⁵⁴

The above two quotations suffice to show that the Church perceives the contemplative life as a life that offers a silent but a most effective irradiation of love and abundance of graces in a humble and hidden way. In this way, as *Verbi Sponsa* puts it, the contemplative life expresses the spousal dimension of the entire Church.⁵⁵

In addition to what has been said above, John XXIII points out that the contemplative life belongs to the fullness of the Church's presence and constitutes one of her fundamental structures and has been present during all the phases of her bimillenary history.⁵⁶ The document *Ad Gentes*, insistently exhorts the contemplatives to continue untiringly in their vocation because "their prayers are of greatest importance in the conversion of souls since it is in answer to prayer that God sends workers into his harvest" (cf. Matt 9:38).⁵⁷

⁵³ Cf. PAUL VI, "You are Chosen Souls but not Separated", 390.

⁵⁴ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, 8.

⁵⁵ Cf. *Verbi Sponsa*, 1.5.

⁵⁶ Cf. JOHN XXIII, *Allocution* of 20 Sept. 1960. See also *Venite Seorsum*, III.

⁵⁷ *Ad Gentes*, 40.

John Paul II seemed to summarize what the other two pontiffs have said above when he stated that "the contemplative life is an inestimable treasure for the Church and the society, since the one who is given totally to God is totally given to the society."⁵⁸ He confirmed his stand again in a speech to the Orthodox monks of the monastery of St. John Rila, when he told them that "the monastic life, because of its uninterrupted tradition of sanctity on which it thrusts its roots, makes up one of the most important elements of Christian life for today's humanity: the monk is an evangelical memorial for the Christians and the world."⁵⁹

4. The Principal Elements of the Contemplative Life

4.1 Constant Search for God Through Continuous Prayer

Canonical contemplative life is basically Theocentric, that is, God-centred. Its unique goal is to place God at the centre of one's life by living for him alone so that a person's life becomes a gift and an act of worship to the divine majesty. It is as described by J. Taylor and A. Dilanni, "a life that evokes St. Francis lying prostrate on the ground throughout the night calling out repeatedly, 'my God and my all.'"⁶⁰ This search for God cannot be substituted with anything because it is the program of life for the contemplatives. Whatever else is done should lead to it or favour it so as to know him in faith and love, and praise him who is the one thing necessary (cf. Lk 10: 42).

⁵⁸ JOHN PAUL II, "*Angelus*", 9.

⁵⁹ JOHN PAUL II, "La Visita al Monastero Ortodosso di San Giovanni di Rila", 10.

⁶⁰ J. TAYLOR, - A. DILANNI, "Contemplation", 148.

4.2 *Penance and Mortification*

The Second Vatican Council Fathers describe monks and nuns as men and women consecrated to a life of prayer and penance. This "willing penance" continues the Council Fathers, is a means for reaching union with God and has immense apostolic fruitfulness because the one who is united with God is also united with the Church and shares in her mission activities though in a hidden way.⁶⁴

Every Christian is called to practice some form of mortification in his/her life. In the contemplative life, this takes the form of a vocation so that it is no longer seen as something that is imposed or as a burden but an instrument of salvation and a way of participating in the salvific work of Christ.

Further on, we can say that according to the teaching of Paul VI, the contemplatives, like all other human beings, are aware of their human frailty and tendency to sin. So, they embrace a life of penance and mortification in expiation for their sins and those of their fellow brothers and sisters. This is because they are conscious of their need of conversion and continuous purification while struggling to change and become worthy of the Kingdom. The practice of penance and mortification is also undertaken in imitation of Christ, the model of all those who embrace a life of penance for the salvation of humanity.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

⁶⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, "*Paenitemini*", 1. See also *Lumen Gentium*, 8.

We know that the life of Jesus was intertwined with suffering and penance. Jesus did this to bring redemption to the whole humankind. In fact, Isaiah describes him as one whose life was marked by intense suffering for the salvation of sinners:

But he was pierced for our offences, crushed for our sins, upon him was the chastisement that makes us whole, by his stripes we were healed... he will take away the sins of many, and win pardon for their offences (Is. 53: 5, 12b).

4.3 Silence and Solitude

Canonical contemplative life is a life in which holiness is practiced and pursued in a hidden way. That is why T. Merton, himself a monk, says that the contemplative life is by definition, solitary life.⁶⁶ John XXIII, who wrote magnificent pages to the monks and nuns, points out that the monasteries are "oasis of silence".⁶⁷ The silence he is addressing here is not simple muteness or absence of words; instead, it is the silence of the whole person that is observed by keeping one's soul far from the transitory and vain things and directly turned towards God.

The external silence and solitude creates an atmosphere that is conducive to the interior silence of the soul. This condition is as necessary to the contemplative life as darkness and calm are for a chicken to lay an egg. Moreover, we have to note that silence and solitude are not ends in themselves; rather, they are means to the final goal, that is, total union with God. T. Merton clarified well this point when he wrote that silence and solitude for the contemplatives are not loneliness or a life without fraternal solidarity:

⁶⁶ Cf. T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a world of Action*, 252.

⁶⁷ Cf. JOHN XXIII, *Discorso Notre Joie*, 976. See also J. BIELECKI, *La Vita Contemplativa*, 182.

...nor are they mere luxuries and privileges which they have acquired at the Church's expense. They are necessary gifts of God to the Church in and through the contemplatives and are part of the precious inheritance of Christian truth and experience, which God gave to them to hold in trust, in order that the spirit of prayer and contemplation may continue to exist in the whole Church and in the world of our time.⁶⁸

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council called monks and nuns, men and women of prayer, silence and solitude, who lead a silent life in the presence of God.⁶⁹ According to T. Merton, silence and solitude have "a mysterious quality, something almost in the nature of sacramental sign with a particular way of participating in the death and resurrection of Christ".⁷⁰ We know that as Christians, we are pilgrims and so the contemplatives have a special consciousness of this wilderness and exiled aspect of Christian life.

5. The Apostolate of the Contemplatives

5.1 The Meaning of the Term Apostolate

It is not uncommon to hear people saying that the work of spreading the Good News or apostolate is the business of the priests, the religious brothers and sisters and the catechists who are directly involved in pastoral work. This is true but it is too narrow because, as C.J. Peifer observes, the term apostolate has a much wider meaning. It refers to any activity performed by the faithful which furthers the primary mission of the

⁶⁸ T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 182.

⁶⁹ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

⁷⁰ T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 251.

Church, that is, contributes in the building of the Church. This is because the mission of the Church is both external and internal, meaning that Christ wants to save the whole person, body and soul. Hence the Church's activities include active and spiritual works of mercy. The principal and primary aim of both active and spiritual works of mercy is to lead people to salvation, though this may contribute to the betterment of the society.⁷¹

From the understanding above, we can rightly say that apostolate is the duty of every Christian. Every faithful is called to collaborate in the spreading of the Kingdom according to his/her vocation. To do apostolate, one need not necessarily go to distant countries. If it were so, the Church could not have made St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus the patron of the missions, because she never went out of her monastery at Lisieux to preach the Gospel to far distant countries.

Further on, we have to know that the mission of the Church, as C.J. Peifer puts it, is two fold. "The primary one is to glorify God and to bring the divine economy to realization by converting people to the Church so as to lead them to heaven" and the secondary one is "to exercise influence upon the world in which it exists historically so as to remake it according to the divine plan thus turn it to God."⁷²

Contemplatives contribute to it "principally through prayer and personal asceticism that is practiced in the Church's effort to become more worthy of her divine spouse and oriented towards the welfare of the entire people of God."⁷³

⁷¹ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 316.

⁷² Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 315.

⁷³ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 314.

6. The Apostolate of the Contemplatives: Prayer and Witness of an Authentic Christian Life

The apostolate of the contemplatives consists principally on "being" rather than on "doing". Paul VI, in the encyclical letter, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, notes: "the first means of evangelisation is the witness of an authentic Christian life given over to God... because modern human beings listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers."⁷⁴ He also adds that the "witness of authentic Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission," specifying that "the contemplatives, with their existence of total surrender to God with radicalism, perform the apostolate of witness which is of prime importance in the work of evangelisation, because it is primarily by her conduct and her life that the Church will evangelise the world."⁷⁵

In line with the above affirmations, John XXIII, states that apostolate consists of "participation in the salvific work of Christ which is possible only through assiduous prayer and personal sacrifice," pointing out that "through their prayers, contemplatives contribute to the fulfilment of a function essential to the ecclesial community which is the glorification of God".⁷⁶

Further on, John Paul II, in the encyclical letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, highlights the importance of the spiritual cooperation in the work of evangelisation. He believes that "the first way of participating in the spreading of the Kingdom in our world is through spiritual cooperation by prayer, sacrifice and witness of an authentic Christian

⁷⁴ PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.

⁷⁵ Cf. PAUL VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 41.69.

⁷⁶ Cf. JOHN XXIII, *Epist. Causa Praeclara*, 568. See also *Venite Seorsum*, III.

life", noting further that "prayer accompanies the proclamation of the Word that becomes effective through God's grace."⁷⁷

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council echoed strongly that the apostolate of the contemplatives is as effective as it is hidden. This is because even if they are materially separated from the rest of the faithful, they are not separated from the Church.⁷⁸ This is what C.J. Peifer means when says that "from the very beginning, the contemplatives conceived their life as a contribution to the good of the whole Church and have always strived to contribute to the apostolate according to their own structures."⁷⁹ It true that their mission is not "incarnational", that is, not direct action, but "eschatological." But this too is a fully "Christian attitude and necessary to realize the fullness of the Church's life because the Church is in the world and not for the world and so the role of a contemplative is to witness to what the Church is in the mystery of her inner life,"⁸⁰ In other words, their apostolate, as the *Verbi Sponsa* put it, is to be a 'living memory of the Church's spousal love.'⁸¹

All in all, we can affirm with C.J. Peifer that the apostolate of the contemplatives consists in:

...remaining faithful to the essential features of their vocation, for by sanctifying themselves and joining their prayers to the chorus of praise and thanksgiving which they raise to the Father from the congregation of his holy people, they further the

⁷⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 78.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7.

⁷⁹ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 314.

⁸⁰ Cf. C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 473-474.

⁸¹ Cf. *Verbi Sponsa*, 1.

sanctification of the Church and bring her closer to her eschatological goal of definitive union with her divine spouse.⁸²

Contemplatives, with non-verbal language, want to tell the modern man/woman that everything should not be cut down to the size of "self," but rather that "the self" needs to be expanded to recognize and embrace the glory of God. This is not only a contribution to the apostolate but the primary and essential one.

7. Challenges to the Contemplative Life

7.1 Challenges to the Religious Life in General

Part two of the Instruction *Starting Afresh From Christ*, opens by highlighting and calling to our attention the fact that the relevance of religious life today is being questioned by the society due to the cultural context in which we live. Besides the challenges that come from "outside" the Church, there is also the problem of the decrease in members due to aging in many institutes while few young people join especially in the west.⁸³ Because of this problem, people are wondering whether the consecrated life is still a visible witness capable of attracting new vocations.

Moreover, continues the Instruction, in our contemporary society, there is also a notable decline in the appreciation and proper consideration of the consecrated life in general. This has led to lack of confidence in it even from within some sectors in the Church. This is coupled by a growing attitude of mediocrity in the spiritual life of the members. The consumer mentality has entered in the communities; personal projects

⁸² C.J. PEIFER, *Monastic Spirituality*, 323.

⁸³ Cf. *Starting Afresh From Christ*, 16-17.

tend to prevail over community ideals to the detriment of fraternal life in the community.⁸⁴

7.2 Challenges Facing Specifically the Contemplative Life

Of all forms of religious life, the canonical contemplative life is the most contested by the society and even by some sectors within the ecclesiastical circles. These challenges have been there for centuries only that in our days, they have become more sinister and open.

J. Bielecki suggests that these misconceptions particularly about the contemplative life are due to today's mentality where people want and value only that which is effective, that which brings immediate and visible pleasure and gain with minimum effort.⁸⁵ Therefore, people like the contemplatives, who do not always demonstrate externally their productive capacities, may be seen as parasites and consumers, offering no contribution for the improvement of the society.

T. Merton, answering those who question why the contemplatives do not abandon their silence and solitude in order to be enlisted in the busy army of apostolic workers, reflects deeper and points out that this question is not for the contemplatives only. It is for the whole Church and it shows another aspect of the general crisis of faith. As if speaking on behalf of all contemplatives, he writes:

We [contemplative], know this because we have often searched our hearts and sought to resolve this question for ourselves, fearing that perhaps our call to desert solitude might be an illusion, and dreading that we might be making our silence a pretext for refusing to others a necessary service. Indeed we do realize that we cannot turn our backs to the contemporary man. That is not our intention. We must on the contrary share with others

⁸⁴ Cf. *Starting Afresh From Christ*, 17.

⁸⁵ Cf. J. BIELECKI, *La Vita Contemplativa*, 156.

something of the benefits of our own life of prayer. Nevertheless, it is clear to us that our greatest and most unique service to the Church is precisely our life of contemplation itself.⁸⁶

The absence of external activities and direct involvements is judged by some people as an escape from the responsibility of being involved in the building of the Church. This style of life is taken as a kind of separation from the Church and the society that needs their contribution. It is not rare to hear some religious discouraging candidates to the contemplative life telling them that "those people do nothing" there. The post-modern era that we are living in places huge importance on human relationships. Today people want to have "good time together" in intimate friendships. This is a good thing if properly understood in the context of consecrated life. In such a culture, the contemplatives are seen as strange people who avoid reality by suppressing their need for an intimate friendship that is an aid in living one's celibate commitment. To live in silence and solitude in prayer for some people, is equivalent to loneliness, but the contemplatives can testify that the opposite is true.

Further on, the contemplatives are accused of being egoistic people with a wrong concept of sanctity and prayer.⁸⁷ Some people argue that they monopolize prayer and that their pursuit of sanctity is individualistic. These arguments are based on the fact that contemplatives do not demonstrate actively their love for God by serving their neighbour in active works of charity.

⁸⁶ T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 182.

⁸⁷ Cf. J. BIELECKI, *La Vita Contemplativa*, 40.

8. The Response of the Contemplatives to the Challenges Facing the Contemplative Life

Even if one is highly optimistic, if he/she reflects deeper about what is happening in our society today, he/she will not fail to notice that the world of today is dominated by jealousy, fraud, cut-throat competition, hatred and intrigue. In such a context, the contemplatives are provided with an opportunity to reflect carefully on their response to these challenges in the light of the Gospel. With incisive words, capable of giving new life and light to the consecrated people, and to the contemplatives in particular, the Instruction, *Starting Afresh From Christ* states that: the difficulties and the challenges which religious life is experiencing today "can give rise to a new *kairos*, a time of grace".⁸⁸

The Instruction stresses that in these challenges, "lies hidden an authentic call of the Holy Spirit to rediscover the wealth and the potentialities of this form of life", aware that:

The consecrated life does not seek praise and human appreciation but should enjoy to work untiringly for the Kingdom of God and become a seed of life which grows in secret, without expecting any reward other than that which the Lord will give in the end. It finds its identity in the call of the Lord in following him, in unconditional love and service, which are capable of filling life to the brim and giving it fullness of meaning.⁸⁹

Therefore, the challenges we have discussed in here are a call to the contemplatives to re-affirm their choice, their identity and the validity of their choice.

K.K. Fredette helps us to know exactly what the "reaction" of the contemplatives should be by quoting a twenty-first century hermit. He believes that "the contemplatives

⁸⁸ *Starting Afresh From Christ*, 17.

⁸⁹ *Starting Afresh From Christ*, 17-18.

should be what they are called to be, that is, passionate seekers of God through continual prayer that allows 'no rapine in the holocaust.'⁹⁰

Further on, speaking from my personal experience, I can say that the contemplative life cannot be easily proven relevant by simple philosophical arguments. According to my observation, the contemporary society has a scale of values that does not easily comprehend a style of life that calls for self-discipline and renunciation. Therefore, I may not be wrong to conclude that the existence of the contemplatives can better be explained by faith and not by polemic defensive reactions.

The contemplatives, argues T. Merton, should know that they have "consciously and deliberately adopted a mode of life which is marginal with respect to the rest of the society and they should be free from the society's imperatives and demands but open to its needs in dialogue."⁹¹ What they have to do is to remain faithful to their identity and avoid struggling to be "relevant", because if their life if authentically lived, it is "self-validating" At this point, it is evident that these challenges are based on the "do", "produce", "prove", "appear", "defeat", "win" mentality that gives no room to faith explanations of an existence that is totally dedicated to God for the good of the humanity that many times does not recognize it.

Finally, the challenges facing the contemplative life are an invitation to the contemplatives to be as T. Merton observes:

Christians who are mature enough and resoled to live without the support of a job, family, ambition, social position, or even active mission in the apostolate because their mission is to be people of God and their business is life itself, a life that is completely

⁹⁰ K.K. FREDETTE, "No Rapine in the Holocaust, Eremitical Life Today", 129.

⁹¹ Cf. T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 232.

and totally dedicated to God to love him and neighbor but with a love that is not determined by the requirement of a special task.⁹²

9. Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that a contemplative is a man/woman of prayer who has taken the word of God seriously and has developed a special relationship with Jesus by uniting himself/herself with him through prayer and mortification for the sake of the Kingdom.

Going on in our discussion, we have seen that the Church encourages and appreciates presence of the contemplative life in the world. This is because of the mission that it has; a mission of prayer and witness of authentic Christian life. Whatever is done in the contemplative life is accomplished in an atmosphere of prayer in silence and solitude.

Because of its hidden nature, the contemplative life faces many challenges. Some people consider it irrelevant and anachronistic. Other times, the contemplatives are seen as people who avoid responsibility by hiding themselves in a life that brings no personal fulfilment in terms of developing one's natural talents. In response to these and other similar challenges, the contemplatives are called to be faithful to their identity and to be aware that their existence cannot be proven relevant by mere polemic arguments but by the truthfulness of their commitments in continuing to operate in silence in the heart of the Church for the good of the whole humanity.

⁹² T. MERTON, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, 26-27.

Chapter IV

The Cottolengo Monasteries

1. Introduction

After analysing in a synthesized way the reality of the contemplative life in the Church in the previous two chapters, we shall now focus our attention specifically on the monasteries founded by St. Joseph B. Cottolengo. The Cottolengo Monasteries belong to the Little House of Divine Providence.⁹³

The Little House is composed of two Institutes of consecrated life, that is, the Cottolengo Sisters founded in 1833, the Cottolengo Brothers founded towards the end of 1833 and also a Clerical Society of Apostolic Life, that is, the Cottolengo Fathers that was founded in 1841 and the poor. In 1959, the Cottolengo Sisters were approved by the Holy See as an Institute of Pontifical Right with two branches: the branch

⁹³ C.f. L. PIANO, *San. Giuseppe Benedetto Cottolengo*, 246. Cottolengo called the work that he started Little House of Divine Providence because for him, the whole universe is a big house of Divine Providence and so his project, compared with it, was and still remains a Little house. This is the name that it bears even today. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 42.

of the apostolic life and the branch of the contemplative life.⁹⁴ The two branches live the same Charism, the same spirituality and have the same Constitution but different Directories (see appendix VI).

Before starting the discussion on the Cottolengo monasteries, which is the aim of this chapter, we agree with Rev. Dr L. Piano the historian, who says that it is not easy to give in a synthesised form the ideal of the contemplative life proposed by St. Joseph B. Cottolengo. This is because Cottolengo founded several monasteries within a short period of time, giving each one a specific aim, and partly because he left very little historical documentation on their foundations and organization.⁹⁵

All the same, with the help of the available literature, we will try to explore their historical background starting with a brief life history of the founder and the crucial experience of his Life that took place on the 2nd of September 1827. We shall also try to find out why Cottolengo founded communities of contemplative life within a structure of active charity and then proceed to see the aim and the year of the foundation of each monastery as well as the common principals among them. Finally, we shall briefly discuss the contribution of the contemplative communities to the Little House and to the Church that will take the form of interviews.

⁹⁴ Cf. The Constitutions of the Sisters of St. J. B. Cottolengo, commentary, 11-14.27-28. See also, L. PIANO, *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 30.51.53. I have used the term branch to describe the two components of the Institute of the Sisters of St. Joseph Cottolengo, that is, the apostolic life and the contemplative life, for clarity purposes. The documents of approval by the Holy See used the term family instead of branch.

⁹⁵ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale Cottolenghino della Vita Consacrata Contemplativa, Premessa*, 1.

2. The Historical Background of the Cottolengo Monasteries

2.1 *St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo: A Brief Life History*

St. Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, the founder of the Cottolengo Monasteries, was born on 3rd May 1786, three years before the famous French revolution broke out. This revolution, that had Napoleon Bonaparte as its leader, had disastrous effects on the political, social, economic and religious situation in Europe, particularly in Italy. Cottolengo was the first-born of twelve children but six died at infancy. The remaining six, four boys and two girls, three became priests — himself, and two of his brothers, while his two sisters remained single and the only remaining brother married.⁹⁶

In 1805 Cottolengo went to the seminary and completed his priestly formation getting ordained on 8th June 1811. In 1814 he went for further studies and obtained a doctorate in theology in 1816.⁹⁷ Due to the fame and reputation of this "good priest", as he was known by the people because of his dedication in the pastoral work and love for the poor, Cottolengo was invited by the diocesan congregation of Priest-Theologians of *Corpus Domini* in Turin to join them. He accepted the invitation and continued with his ministry there until the time he received a special grace on the 2nd of September 1827 that made him discover the will of God for him, making him to start a small hospice in order to help the poor.⁹⁸ This hospice is the project that he called Little House of Divine

⁹⁶ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 9-10. Cf. A.B. STRADELLA, *San G.B. Cottolengo*, 11-12.

⁹⁷ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 97-99. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 12-13.

⁹⁸ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 13.

Providence. It is situated in the city of Turin in Italy, from where it grew and spread to Africa, Asia and America,

Besides the special sensitivity to the poor and the suffering that Cottolengo had from his tender age, he also ardently desired to become a saint and was very conscious of the presence of God in his life. He pinned in his room slogans such as "God sees me, with the help of God I will become a saint."⁹⁹

After ten years of intense work of organising and founding different families of consecrated life while serving the poor, Cottolengo died on 30th April 1842 at Chieri far from the Little House.¹⁰⁰ He died at the age of fifty-six years.

2.2 The Grace of 2nd September 1827

On this day, Cottolengo was called as usual to assist a woman by name Maria Gonneti from Lyons in France. This woman was sick and expectant as well. Due to the complication of her case, the public hospitals had refused to admit her for treatment. Cottolengo administered to her the sacraments and she died together with the baby she was delivering, leaving her young husband and children in great sorrow. Cottolengo was deeply moved by this incident and felt that he had to do something so that such a thing may never happen again.¹⁰¹

After this experience, that same evening Cottolengo went, deeply immersed in thought, to the Church of *Corpus Domini* in Turin in front of the statue of our Lady of

⁹⁹ A.B. STRADELLA, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 17.

¹⁰⁰ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G.B. Cottolengo*, 751.

¹⁰¹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 25.27.

Graces to pray. After a brief moment, he rose up and exclaimed: "*the grace is granted, the grace is granted, blessed be the holy Madonna*". Together with a few Christians who were there, he sung the litanies of our Lady while the sacristan who witnessed all this rung the church bells. God had made his plan for him clear. He went back to the community of the canons of *Corpus Domini* and told them that he had only one thing in mind, "to put a few beds aside for the sick people who are not accepted in the city hospitals".¹⁰² He did so and called this small hospice the "Body of Christ Receiving Ward under the protection of St. Vincent de Paul".¹⁰³

3. Cottolengo's Reason for Founding the Monasteries

If one looks at the project that Cottolengo started — the project was for the service to the poor, he or she may ask why he had to start monasteries of contemplative life within a setting where service to the poor was the chief apostolate. During the time of Cottolengo, such a thing as having one founder starting communities of active and contemplative life together, was something rare. V. Di Meo together with L. Piano, have given us some hints that explain why Cottolengo founded the monasteries in the Little House.

First of all, V. Di Meo argues that Cottolengo was a contemplative soul; he loved silence, prayer and solitude and was strongly inclined to the contemplative life. He had

¹⁰² Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 28.

¹⁰³ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 28.32.

an inborn inclination to the hidden life.¹⁰⁴ Cottolengo himself used to say that if he listened to what he felt, he would run away to the desert and hide there in solitude and prayer.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, his contemplative spirit reverberated in the communities of contemplative life that he founded. We can perfectly say that Cottolengo was a non-canonical contemplative who was able to harmonise his deep life of prayer with intense activities of organising the families of consecrated life that he had founded while still being involved in the service to the poor.

The second point that attempts to explain why Cottolengo founded the monasteries in the Little House comes from L. Piano where he says that some of the sisters who had joined him in the service to the poor used to express to him the desire to lead a life of more intense prayer by asking him to permit them to spend some nights in adoration. To their request, Cottolengo refused telling them to wait because within a short period of time, there would be a monastery for them where they would spend all their life in prayer singing praises to God and telling the stories about their experiences in the work.¹⁰⁶

Further on, we can understand better the reason as to why Cottolengo founded the monasteries by reflecting on the passage taken from *The Ark of Charity* where G. Maritati makes this observation:

...Cottolengo offered his entire life to the poor, but he knew that his project would not erase all the misery of the world. He simply realizes that his task is to serve Christ at the table of action with Martha, but also with the oil of adoration together with Mary. The "Ark of Charity" cannot go forward without the prayerful and silent breath of the Spirit.

¹⁰⁴ Cf. V. DI MEO, *La Spiritualita' di San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 242.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. L. PIANO, *Fede ma di Quella*, 36-37.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 558.

He wanted his project, his citadel of unconditional love, to be a second Jerusalem. The Little House is not just a social institution, but also a house of God, a Church, a community...an oasis of poverty, spirituality and service. Prayer and contemplation are perfectly integrated with social assistance and work. Everybody offers what they have to the community, everyone pushes himself/herself to imitate the early Christian Communities of Jerusalem as described in the Acts of the Apostles: in humility, patience and mutual love. Prayer is the foundation and glue of community life. For the founder, prayer makes one dear to God, is the primary bread and is the most important work of the Little House.¹⁰⁷

For Cottolengo, the poor are not only those who lack material resources or are physically and mentally handicapped. He was very conscious of the spiritual and moral problems of the people and so he started communities fully dedicated to prayer in attempt to find remedy for all types of needs, even spiritual ones. That is why he entrusted to each monastery a specific need of the Church and humanity to pray for in a special way.

4. Cottolengo Monasteries: Aim and Year Foundation

4.1 Monastery of the Suffrages (Suffragio)

This monastery, also called of the Suffrages, was founded in 1840.¹⁰⁸ It is the first shoot of contemplative life to sprout in the Little House of Divine Providence.

The aim of this monastery was to pray for the dying and the souls in purgatory in order to shorten their waiting period before entry into eternal bliss. L. Piano notes that near this monastery, there was a cemetery named after St. Peter in Chains. Many people were dying from the Little House and elsewhere and were buried there. In this monastery, there was continuous adoration whereby three sisters took turns day and

¹⁰⁷ G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 88-89.57.

¹⁰⁸ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 561.

night so that there were always three sisters in adoration all the time. Through the prayers of these sisters, the Little House helped its dead by shortening their period of purification in purgatory, hence allowing them entry into eternal life, their true and complete healing.¹⁰⁹

4.2 Divine Mercy Monastery (Figlie della Pietà)

This Monastery was very close to the one mentioned above. It was founded in 1841 and was composed of thirty-three sisters in honour of the thirty-three years of the earthly life of Jesus.¹¹⁰

The goal of this monastery was to honour the Passion of Jesus and to venerate the sorrows of the Blessed Virgin Mary his divine mother. As G. Maritati notes, the Little House was founded exactly for this, "that the pain and abandonment redeemed by Christ becomes transformed into praise to God and hope for humanity."¹¹¹

4.3 Janua Caeli Monastery

In August 1991, the above two monasteries, that is, the one dedicated to the suffrages (*Suffragio*) and the one dedicated to the Divine Mercy (*Pietà*) joined and became one. This was because of the diminution of the vocations and aging of the members. In 1992, the two groups moved to the new building and formed *Janua Caeli* Monastery.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale della Vita Consacrata Contemplativa Cottolenghina*, 6. ID., *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 565. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90.

¹¹⁰ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 584, 586.

¹¹¹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 90-91. See also L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 586.

¹¹² Cf. "Dai Monasteri", 30.

4.4 *The Hermitage of the Holy Rosary (Rosarianti)*

This was the third family of contemplative life and the only one for men that Cottolengo founded. It was founded in 1840. It thrived for ten years and was closed by his immediate successor, Fr. Luigi Anglesio, in 1850.¹¹³

Cottolengo had a particular love for these brothers and took time to give instructions to them. This monastery was under the patronage of St. Rumualdo the hermit. It was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Holy Rosary, hence the name the Hermits of the Holy Rosary (*Rosarianti*).¹¹⁴ They carried the Rosary on their waist.

When Cottolengo founded this monastery, he aimed at establishing a community fully dedicated to the *Laus Perennis*, that is, continuous adoration by day and by night. They also offered prayers for the political leaders and the State to implore peace and prosperity for the country. In the rule for them, Cottolengo indicated that their mind and heart should always be occupied with God and the things concerning the good of souls.¹¹⁵

The attitude of striving to be occupied with God and the things concerning the good of souls is an essential element in every authentic contemplative community. Cottolengo wanted these sons of Divine Providence to shine as authentic monks intent on the things of God and the souls.

¹¹³ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 576-577.583.

¹¹⁴ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 582. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 94-95.

¹¹⁵ Cf. L. PIANO, *San Giuseppe B. Cottolengo*, 579.

4.5 *The Carmel Monastery at Cavoretto (Le Carmelitane)*

This monastery is dedicated to our Lady of mount Carmel, hence the name The Carmelites (*Le Carmelitane*). L. Piano notes that it is not easy to indicate the exact date of its official inauguration but most sources agree on the first months of the year 1841. This monastery, compared with the others, is the one that had the most strict disciplines and observances in the beginning.¹¹⁶

The aim of this monastery is to pray for the Church's triumph, the Pope's needs and intentions and for the sanctification of the clergy and religious.¹¹⁷

4.6 *St. Joseph Monastery (Monastero di San Giuseppe/Le Taidine)*

Originally, this monastery was under the patronage of Saint Taide, a legendary heroin of Greek origin of the fifth century who was a sinner but got converted by the preaching of a monk and embraced a life of penance to make reparation for her sins. Cottolengo himself inaugurated it in June 1841 at Gassino and in 1844 it was transferred to Turin by Fr Anglesio, his immediate successor and given the name the Monastery of St. Joseph, which it bears to our day.¹¹⁸

Initially this monastery received ladies who got converted from immoral lives. Its aim was to pray and offer sacrifice for the conversion of people especially young

¹¹⁶ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 590. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 91.

¹¹⁷ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale Cottolenghino della vita consacrata contemplativa*, 6. ID., *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 46.

¹¹⁸ Cf. L. PIANO, *San G. B. Cottolengo*, 599. 601. See also G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 62.

ladies living in situations of sin. As years passed, anybody could join and in fact it no longer receives people of this category any more.¹¹⁹

4.7 The Monastery of the Sacred Heart (Monastero del Sacro Cuore)

This monastery is at Manziana in Rome. Fr. Anglesio, the first successor of Cottolengo, inaugurated it in 1852.¹²⁰

The specific aim for which it was founded is to honour continuously, day and night, the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus on behalf of the Little House and the whole Church and obtain graces from this divine fountain for the priests and all those involved in active ministry in the Little House and elsewhere.¹²¹

4.8 The Monastery of the Most Precious Blood (Monastero Preziosissimo Sangue)

Fr Luigi Anglesio inaugurated the Monastery of the Adorers of the Most Precious Blood in 1876. According to the historical records, on the day of its inauguration, twelve sisters were solemnly blessed by the Archbishop of Turin and given the religious habit.¹²² The specific aim of this monastery is to venerate the Most Precious Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ according to the mind of the Church.¹²³

¹¹⁹ Cf. G. MARITATI, *The Ark of Charity*, 93.

¹²⁰ Cf. L. PIANO, *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 49.

¹²¹ Cf. L. PIANO, *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 49

¹²² Cf. L. PIANO, *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 49-50.

¹²³ Cf. L. PIANO, *Cottolengo e la sua Opera*, 50. ID., *L'ideale della vita contemplativa*, 6.

4.9 Cottolengo Missionary Monastery –Kenya

This is how in an interview one of the first sisters to come to Kenya from Italy described the beginning of this monastery:

The missionary zeal and desire had always been in all the Cottolengo monasteries and in the heart of each sister. But there had been no chance to materialize it. Finally, there came the opportune moment that was prepared and fixed by the Lord. Already the Little House was established in Kenya at Tuuru from 1972 with the presence of the apostolic life sisters, the Cottolengo Fathers and the Cottolengo Brothers. The bishop of Meru, Monsignor Silas S. Njiru, requested the major superiors of the Little House to send the contemplative sisters because their prayerful presence was needed in the diocese.¹²⁴

On the 14th of July 1979, the first two sisters — Sr. Maria della Passione Mura and Sr. Antonietta Ghalina, left for Kenya and arrived on 20th. They stayed together with the apostolic life sisters since the construction of the monastery was still going on. After almost a year and half, the new monastery building was ready and the bishop of Meru, Monsignor Silas Njiru, together with Bishop Ravasi from the Diocese of Marsabit, numerous priests and religious from different Orders accompanied by throngs of Christians and local people, inaugurated the monastery on 8th December 1981.¹²⁵

The specific aim of this young shoot that sprout from the fertile stock of the monasteries of the Little House of Divine Providence is to pray for the priests all over the world and particularly for those in the Diocese of Meru where it is established. They also intercede for vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life, because the harvest is plenty but the labourers are few (cf. Matt 9: 37-38)¹²⁶

¹²⁴ SR. M. MURA DELLA PASSIONE, "Cottolengo Missionary Monastery", interviewed by author, tape recording, 20 June 2002, Cottolengo Monastery Tuuru, Kenya.

¹²⁵ SR. M. MURA DELLA PASSIONE, "Cottolengo Missionary Monastery", interviewed by author, tape recording, 20th June 2002, Cottolengo Monastery Tuuru, Kenya.

¹²⁶ SR. M. MURA DELLA PASSIONE, "Cottolengo Missionary Monastery", interviewed by author, tape recording, 20 June 2002, Cottolengo Monastery Tuuru, Kenya.

5. Common Principals among the Cottolengo Monasteries

5.1 *The One Aim — to Give Glory to God*

Whatever is done in the Little House, observes L. Piano, has one unique goal: to give glory to God and nothing else. This is the fundamental element of the contemplative life proposed by Cottolengo. For the contemplative sisters, continues L. Piano, this is the essential and unifying principal in all the monasteries because God is the immediate object of their love.¹²⁷ The specific aim of each monastery is the concrete expression of a life that is totally dedicated to God in search of his Kingdom.

5.2 *Deep Union with God*

This is the second principal that characterizes all the Cottolengo monasteries. L. Piano notes that Cottolengo himself recommended this spiritual and interior attitude particularly to the hermits of the Holy Rosary (*Rosarianti*): "their minds and hearts should be as much as possible occupied with God."¹²⁸

The practice of the presence of God is very important for all the Cottolengo monasteries. In fact, it is common to find posters such a "God sees me" and "let us remember that we are in the presence of God", on the walls or corridors in the Cottolengo monasteries that recall this ideal of striving to live in the presence of God. It is Cottolengo himself who inculcated this practice that continues even today.

¹²⁷ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale della Vita Consacrata Contemplativa Cottolenghina*, 24-25.

¹²⁸ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale della Vita Consacrata Contemplativa Cottolenghina*, 24.

5.3 Deep Love for God and Neighbour

The ideal of Cottolengo contemplative life has two dimensions, the vertical and horizontal dimension. The Vertical dimension looks at God and the horizontal one looks at the neighbour. L. Piano tells us that this principal, that is, the call to love God and neighbour is particularly evident in Cottolengo's words to the Hermits of the Holy Rosary where he recommends them to have "their mind and heart occupied with God and the things concerning the good of souls." The phrase "the good of souls," observes L. Piano, refers to the good of one's neighbour. Communion with God aims at obtaining sanctity and salvation for all.¹²⁹

This love for God and neighbour is also evident in the specific aim of each monastery. The specific intentions or aims for which to pray for point at the desire to bring others closer to God by imploring grace from God for them. The Cottolengo motto, *Caritas Christi Urget Nos*, that is, the Love of Christ urges us (1 Cor 5:14), finds its full incarnation in this point.

6. The Contribution of the Cottolengo Contemplatives to the Little House and to the Church

At this point, we may ask this question: what is the contribution of the contemplative sisters to the Little House or what does the Little House and the Church expect from the contemplatives of Cottolengo? Sr. Antonietta, a contemplative sister

¹²⁹ Cf. L. PIANO, *L'ideale della Vita Consacrata Contemplativa Cottolenghina*, 24.

whose sixty years in the monastic life have been spent in Cavoretto, Italy and Tuuru in Kenya, with much simplicity and conviction thus replied to the question:

My work in the Little House is that of perpetuating the *Laus Perennis*, that is, offering prayer and praise day and night to the Most Holy Trinity in adoration and supplication for my brothers and sisters in the Little House and elsewhere. Of course, my spiritual contribution does not exclude material contribution through manual work by repairing and making clothes for the poor and those who serve them. This is my humble way of participating in the service to the poor; otherwise my job is to be "host", "sentinel" and "guard of honour" in front of Jesus in the tabernacle, on behalf of all the members of the Little House and the whole humanity.¹³⁰

The response of this sister reflects what is stated in the first three articles of the Directory for the Monasteries. In these articles the "work" of the Cottolengo contemplatives is defined very clearly.

We are called to be continuous praise to the Most Holy Trinity, at the service of the Church on behalf of our brothers and sisters, in total abandonment to the Divine Providence. Each monastery realizes this unique aim according to its proper characteristics. In the *Laus Perennis*, we carry to the Lord the voice of our brothers and sisters and on behalf of the whole creation, we offer adoration, praise and supplication in order to obtain for the world peace, love and unity.¹³¹

Even if some sisters are involved in different duties such as laundry work for the parish, sacristy management, and welcoming visitors and prayer groups, those who replied to the questionnaire testified that their main contribution to the Little House is prayer (see appendix VII).

While trying to deepen my understanding of what the contemplatives offer to the Little House, I was edified by the reply of Sr. T. Karimi from the family of apostolic life who described the Little House as "one big family where each member has something different to do for the good of the others." For her, the greatest contribution that the

¹³⁰ SR. A. GHALINA, "What is the contribution of the Cottolengo Contemplatives", Interviewed by author, tape recording, June 2002, Cottolengo Missionary Monastery Tuuru, Kenya,

¹³¹ Directory for the Contemplative Life, 1-2.4.

contemplative sisters offer to the Little House is that of continuing with the *Laus Perennis* that our father founder instituted. In this way, the contemplatives carry to the Lord the fatigues and difficulties of all who are directly involved in the service of the poor in the Little House everywhere.

When I have a difficult case in the maternity, I remember that one of our family members is in front of Jesus praying for me to succeed in what I am doing. I feel that when one of them is praying, I am the one who is doing it and I am sure that what I am doing, they too are doing because we are one Cottolengo family. What is done by one member is done for the good of the whole family " ¹³²

Besides the testimony of Sr. T. Karimi above, Sr. C. Gitiri adds that for her, the monasteries are a source of moral support and encouragement in moments of difficulties, together with material contribution in making and repairing clothes for the poor and those who work for them. ¹³³

Finally, what has been said above seems to converge in one point expressed by N. Kirimo below:

The contemplative communities offer to the Little House centers of prayer through their availability to share their experience of God with the rest of their brothers in the active ministry. Since the monastic communities are at the heart of the *Little House*, they offer to the active ministers a constant challenge to put God at the center of their activities. These communities awaken us to prayer, and help us to remember what our founder told us: that "prayer is the first and most important work in the Little House." ¹³⁴

¹³² SR. T. KARIMI, "What is the Contribution of the contemplatives", interviewed by author, tape recording, 12 Dec. 2002, Cottolengo, Nairobi.

¹³³ SR. C. GITIRI, "What is the Contribution of the contemplatives", Interviewed by author, tape recording, 12 Dec. 2002, Cottolengo Centre, Nairobi.

¹³⁴ N. KIRIMO, "What is the Contribution of the contemplatives", interviewed by author, tape recording, 10 Dec. 2002, Cottolengo, Nairobi. Cf. L. PIANO, *Fiori e Profumi*, 128.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen that St. Joseph B. Cottolengo (1786-1842) is the founder of the Little House of Divine providence, which is the Mother House of the Cottolengo monasteries. Between 1840 and 1841, he founded five monasteries, these are: the Monastery of the Suffrages and the Monastery of the Divine Mercy. These two monasteries joined in 1991 and became one with the name *Janua Caeli* Monastery, the Hermits of the Holy Rosary that was closed after ten years, the Monastery of our Lady of Mount Carmel at Cavoretto and the Monastery of St Joseph. Fr. Anglesio, the first successor of Cottolengo, inaugurated the Monastery of the Sacred Heart and the Monastery of the Most Precious Blood. In 1981, the Cottolengo Missionary Monastery in Kenya was inaugurated. Even if each monastery was founded with a specific aim, there are three common principals among them, namely, the one unique aim — to give glory of God, constant search for a deeper union with God and great love for God and neighbour.

Cottolengo was a deeply contemplative soul. He loved solitude and silence and had a contemplative vision of life. Like all saints, he understood well that poverty is both spiritual and material, and so he organised communities dedicated to active service towards the poor and those dedicated to prayer, aware that where human effort cannot reach, God's grace, when invoked unceasingly, can intervene. Lastly,

The contribution of the Cottolengo Monasteries to the Little House and to the Church consists in perpetuating the *Laus Perennis*, that is, continuous adoration by day and by night on behalf of the Little House and the whole humanity.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

We have succinctly developed our topic *The Silent Witnesses: A Contemplative Spirituality in Reference to the Cottolengo Monasteries* with four main themes: first, we began with a clarification of the terms: spirituality, Christian spirituality and contemplative life. Second, we explored the scriptural and historical basis of the contemplative life. Third, we discussed the contemplative life in the economy of salvation and fourth, we have made a historical exploration of the Cottolengo monasteries and their contribution to the Little House and to the Church.

We began by trying to expound the term spirituality and found that it admits of various meanings and is used in different ways. Basically, this term describes the attitudes and practices that animate a person's or group's life, leading them to a supernatural end. Spirituality is concerned with one's relationship with the Supernatural.

When we speak of Christian Spirituality, we mean that concrete way of living one's faith in Jesus Christ. In a word, the term Christian spirituality refers to Christian life or life in the Spirit. Going on, we have seen that the term contemplative life can be used in two ways, first, to describe the form of religious life that is so structured as to favour continuous prayer in silence and solitude — canonical contemplative life, and

second, to describe the Christian existence that harmonises prayer and ministry and is called non-canonical contemplative life.

Focusing on the foundations of the canonical contemplative life, we saw that it has its roots in the scriptures and in the first four centuries of the history of religious life. Research has proved that historically, the canonical contemplative life is the first form of religious life in the Catholic Church. It started in form of hermitic life with the legendary Anthony of Egypt who is considered the father of Christian monasticism. The other two principal founders of Christian monasticism (all Africans) are Pachomius, the initiator of cenobitic life and Augustine of Hippo who brought to Africa from the West a monasticism based not on the Eastern rule.

In explaining who a contemplative is, we saw that he/she is a Christian like any other but has made a radical choice to follow Christ in a life of prayer, penance and mortification in silence, aware that whatever is done for love of God has immense effects on the world and contributes in the spreading of the Kingdom though in an hidden way. A contemplative, as the term implies, is a man/woman of prayer in constant search for God striving to live in his presence. He/she believes deeply that an existence that is totally surrendered to God has effects on the whole humanity. Such an existence reminds people of the need to put God at the centre of their lives. It also challenges the modern man/woman, who is threatened by the culture of materialism and efficiency by witnessing that God is a "reality real enough" to make a person leave everything, even physical encounters with the rest of their brothers/sisters, to be with him in prayer and solitude. A canonical contemplative is one who wants to tell the world with non-verbal

language that it is worth one's total self-gift to God for his glory and for the salvation of the world.

According to the teaching of the Church, the canonical contemplative life is an indispensable treasure for the Church and the world. The canonical contemplatives are silent witnesses of God's presence in the world. The contemplatives give testimony of the Church's undivided spousal love for the Lord. They do this through their mission of prayer and witness of an authentic Christian life.

It has been evident that the contemplative life is facing many more challenges today than in the past. Some people consider it anachronistic and a waste of time and talents. These challenges are a call to the contemplatives to be authentic, to re-affirm their identity and be more radical in living their vocation of being silent witnesses of the love of God for humanity whose anxieties, desires and agonies they carry to God in adoration day and night.

Lastly, we have seen that the Cottolengo monasteries whose Mother House is the Little House of Divine Providence, have a fairly long history of more than one hundred and seventy years. Although each monastery has a specific aim for which to direct the prayers and sacrifices, there are three common principals uniting them. These are: first, the one unique aim: to give glory to God in everything, second, striving to reach an ever deeper union with God by living in his presence, and third, deep love for God and neighbour pushed by the love of Christ. The Cottolengo monasteries offer to the Little House and to the Church the gift of perpetuating the *Laus perennis*, that is, adoration by day and by night as the founder wanted the Little House to have someone in adoration at every moment.

ABBREVIATION

NDCT

New Dictionary of Christian Theology

EDR

Encyclopedic Dictionary of Religion,

HCEC

The Harper Collins Encyclopedia of Catholicism

NCE

The New Catholic Encyclopedia.

RB

Rule of St. Benedict

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Appendix 1: What is Contemplative Life? Interviews

A Response from Living Witnesses from Cottolengo Monastery – Tuur – Kenya

I addressed this question to the contemplative sisters of the Cottolengo Missionary monastery - Kenya. They answered it in written form after some conversations with me as I interviewed them. Their responses were spontaneous, based on personal life experience as reported below.

Sr. Antonietta di Gesu' Ghalina (60 years in the monastery)

For me contemplative life is a life of self-sacrifice for the glory of God and salvation of souls. It is a call from God that can be compared with fire burning in the soul, making it to be inflamed with love for God and for humanity. I entered in the monastery more than sixty years ago to sacrifice my life with Jesus for the glory of God and the salvation of my brothers and sisters. All this is accomplished in a hidden way in an atmosphere of prayer and constant search for God in silence and solitude. I can also say that contemplative life is also a life of total availability to the will of God and all that the providence disposes, doing everything, even the smallest acts of daily life, with great love and one unique aim, that of giving glory to God alone.

Sr. Annarosaria di Pietro (35 years in the monastery)

For me contemplative life is a precious gift that Jesus has given gratuitously to the Church, by calling a weak, fragile and sinful creature like me to such a sublime vocation. Again, contemplative life is a call by Jesus to make a radical and adventurous experience of his love, following him and his plan of salvation at every moment, to the point of losing sight of oneself

and everything that does not lead to him. Certainly all this is realized in silence and anonymity in the monastery.

More to that contemplative life, I am convinced out of my personal experience, is a life of strong and deep experience of falling in love with Jesus who seduces a person and makes him/her to embrace his values and to choose to have only one aim in life: that of giving up one's life for the brethren and living for God alone, because him alone has the right to be served and given a person's life totally.

I have also to say that contemplative life is not a life for the elite or the holy ones. On the contrary, it is a life for sinners who strive day by day to live as authentic Christians taking radically the demands of the Gospel while relying not on one's virtues or capacities but on the mercy of God.

Sr. Immacolata Castiglione (40 years in the monastery)

For me contemplative life is a life of faith because it brings me close to the mystery. It is way of living the most common and significant activities of day-to-day life in a universal and often heroic out look and dimension. Again contemplative life is that form of consecrated life that occupies the place of the heart in the mystical body of Christ.

Sr. Angela Makembo (15 years in the monastery)

For me contemplative life is that form of consecrated life that is lived by those people whom God has chosen from among other Christians and has withdrawn them from the rest of God's people, though still in the world, so that they can bear witness to the whole humanity of the life, death and resurrection of Christ by cooperating in his salvific work in a life of total dedication to him in prayer, self sacrifice and humble work.

Sr. Joan Aurelia Cirindi (13 years in the monastery)

Contemplative life for me is a form of consecrated life that is comparable to being "buried" with Christ in God. I call it "buried" because in the eyes of the society, very few people believe that it is possible for normal human beings to lead a life that has little human satisfaction and does not promise great possibilities of fulfilling one's ambitions in terms of careers so as to be recognized as somebody useful and important in the society.

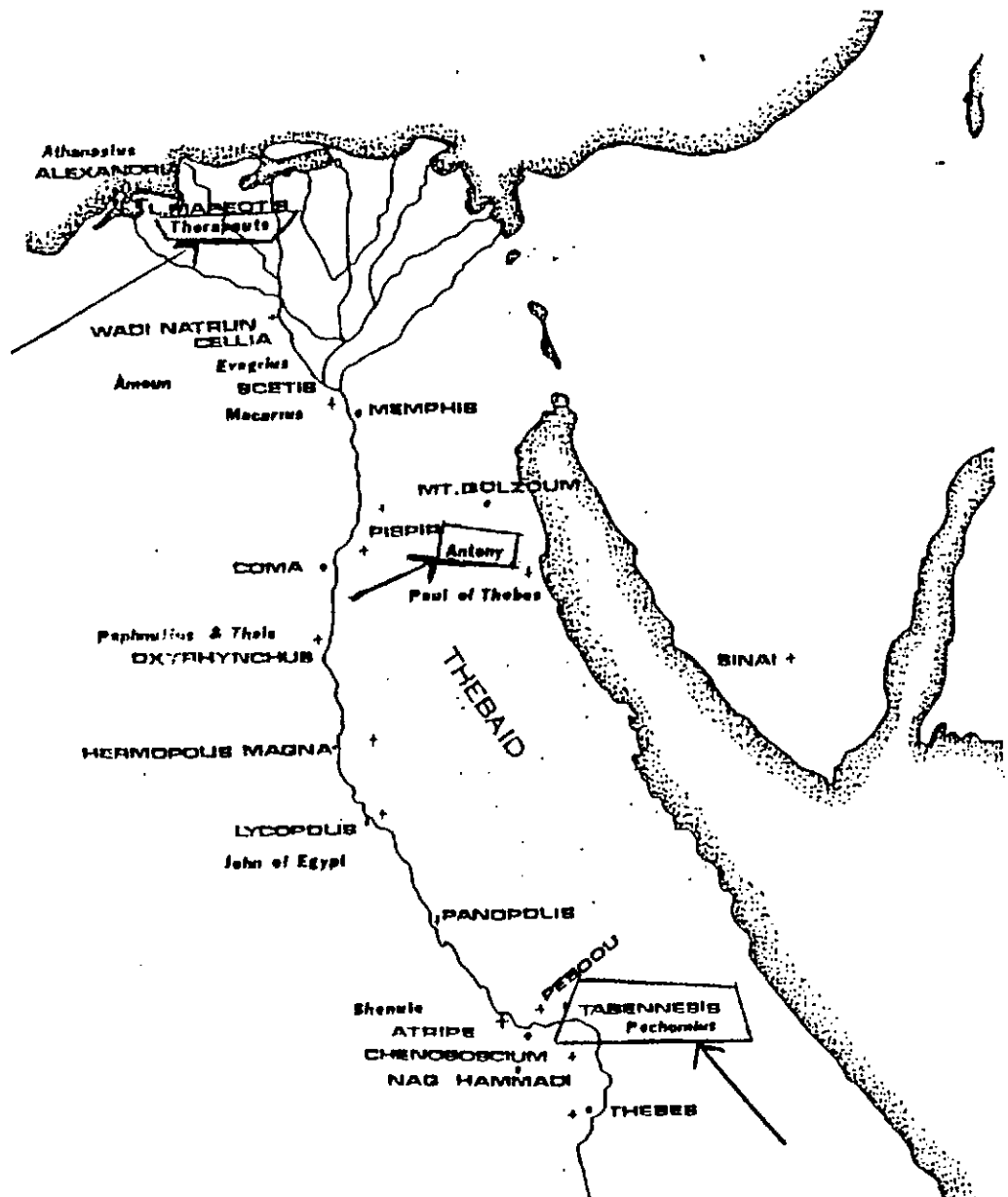
Sr. Hellen Muthoni Njue (10 years in the monastery)

The contemplative life is a call of God to some Christians to withdraw from the world not in order to forget their brothers and sister but in order to establish an intimate relationship with the Triune God and bring to him in prayer all the hopes agonies and aspirations of their people. I highly consider my contemplative vocation as a gift from God. And a pure gift because no effort of mine could make me embrace this life if the grace of God did not aid me.

Further on, contemplative life is a call "to be" for the Lord and not so much "to do" things for him. It is obvious that if I am for the Lord, even whatever I do is for his glory, which is the salvation of my brothers and sisters. Therefore the accent is not on what I do but on what I am in the Lord. This, as we all know, cannot be a selfish individualistic piety that excludes the command of charity, because a person who is for God is also for his brothers and sisters. This communion is actualised in a mysterious way in whatever one does with the unique aim of giving glory to God for their own salvation and the salvation of others.

Appendix II: Fourth Century Monastic Egypt: The Therapeuts

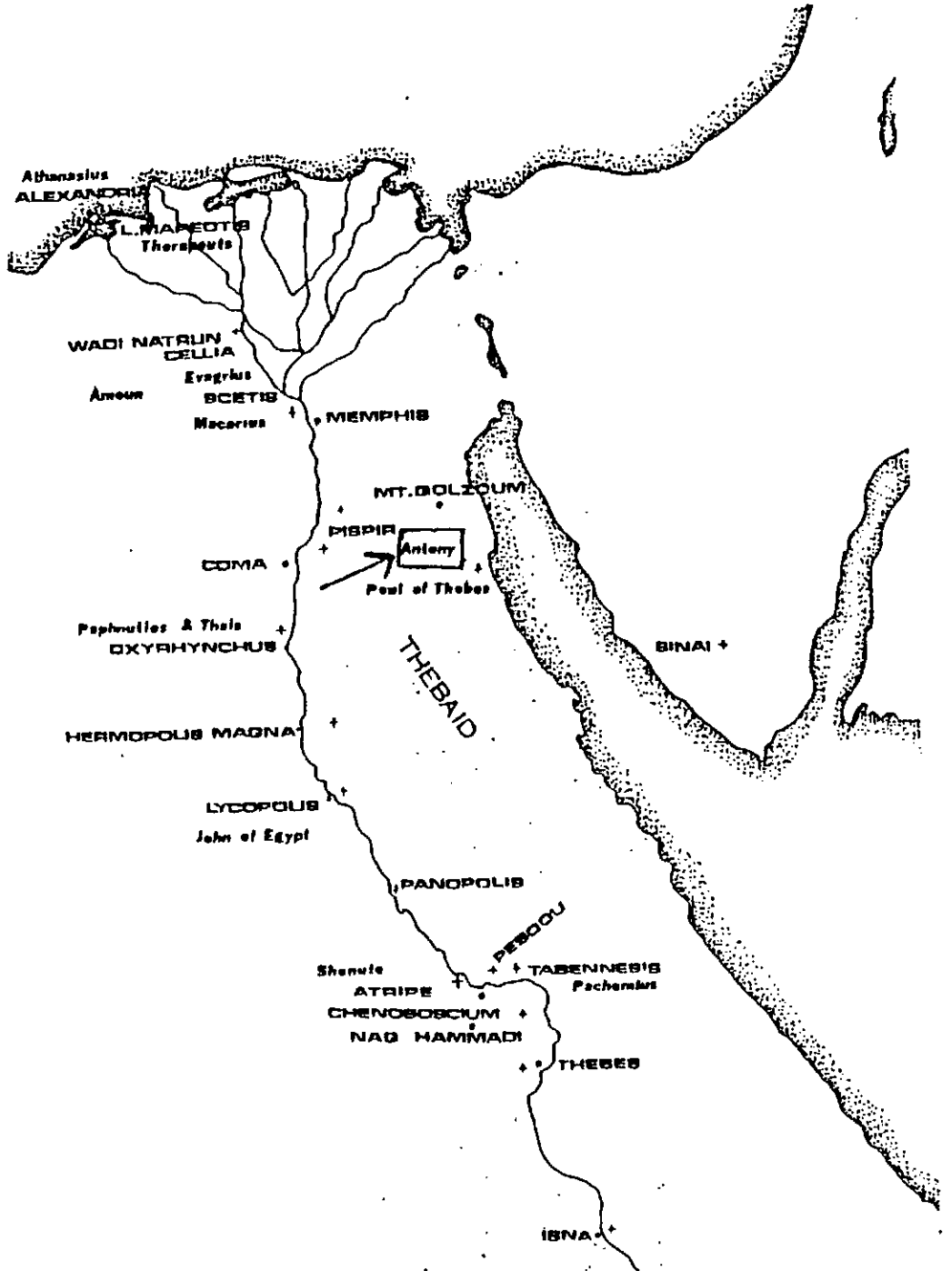
The Map highlight the place where the Therapeuts were found, the place where Anthony settled in the desert and Tabennesis where Pachomius established his first monastery near the banks of R. Nile.¹³⁵



¹³⁵ The maps in appendix II-V are from J.A. MOHLER, *The Heresy of Monasticism, A Historical Survey*, 166.

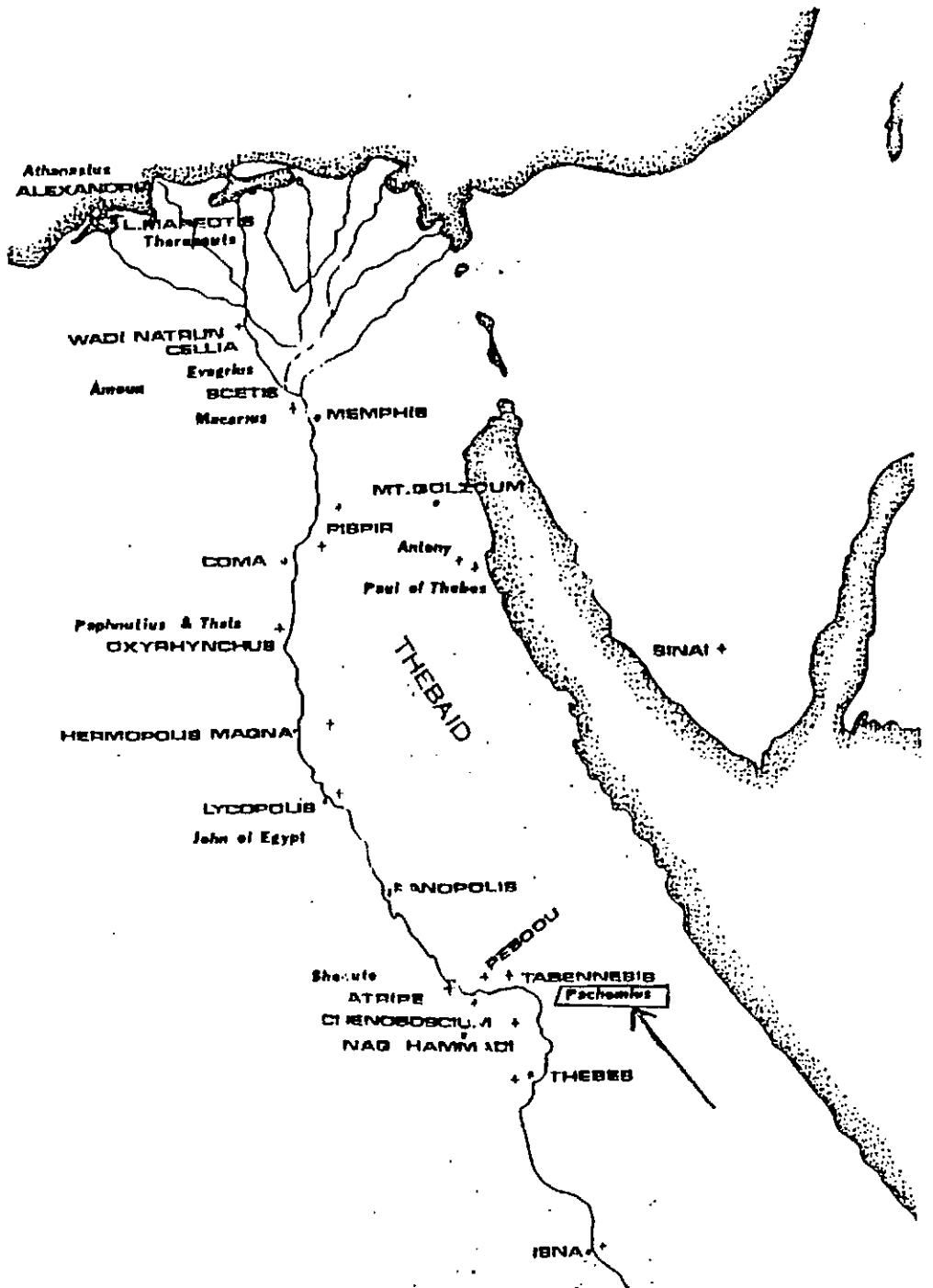
Appendix III: Fourth Century Monastic Egypt: Anthony

Anthony settled in the desert and led a life of prayer, penance and mortification.



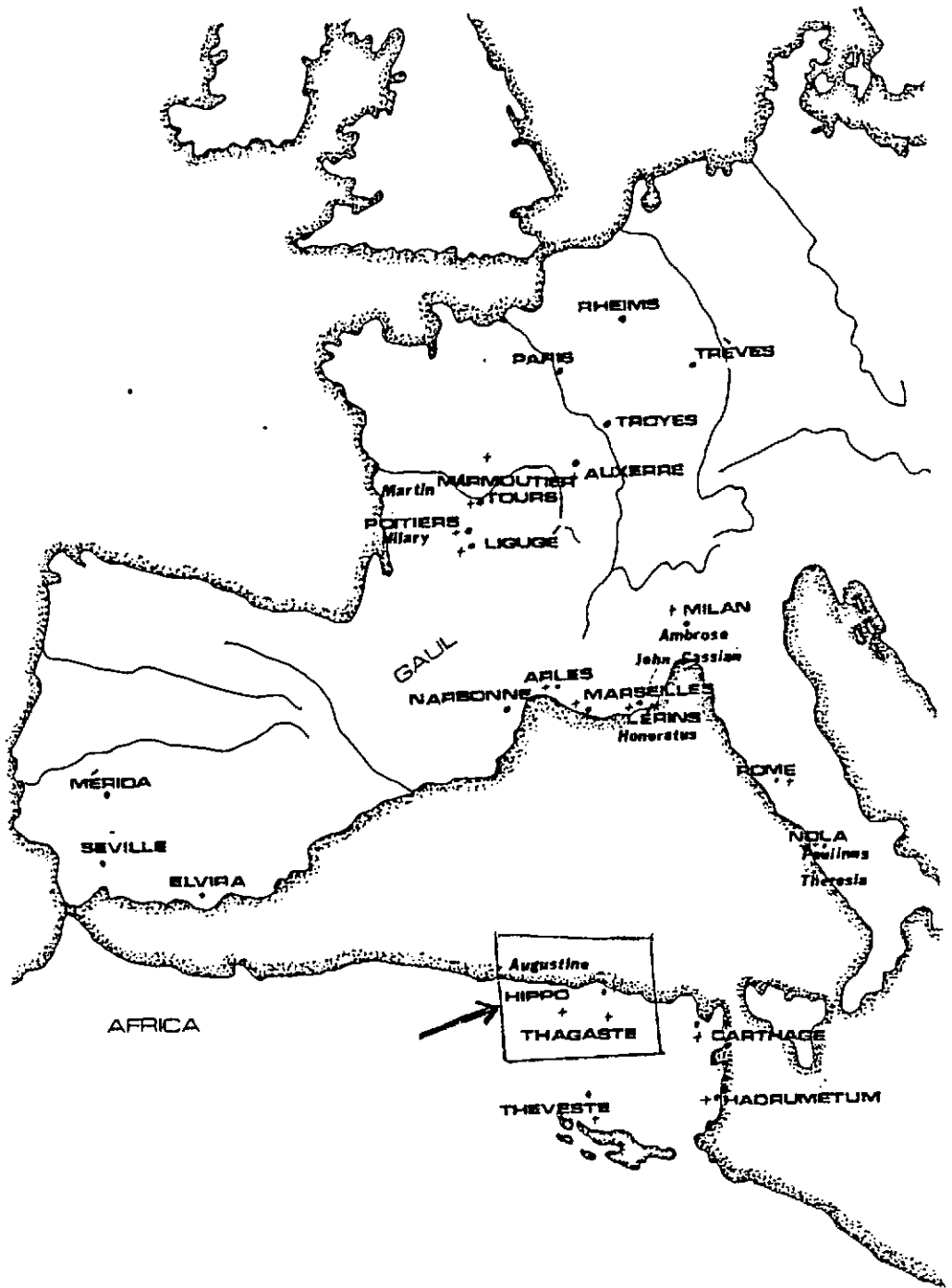
Appendix IV: Fourth Century Monastic Egypt: Pachomius

Pachomius established his first monastery at Tabennesis on the banks of R. Nile north of Thebes.



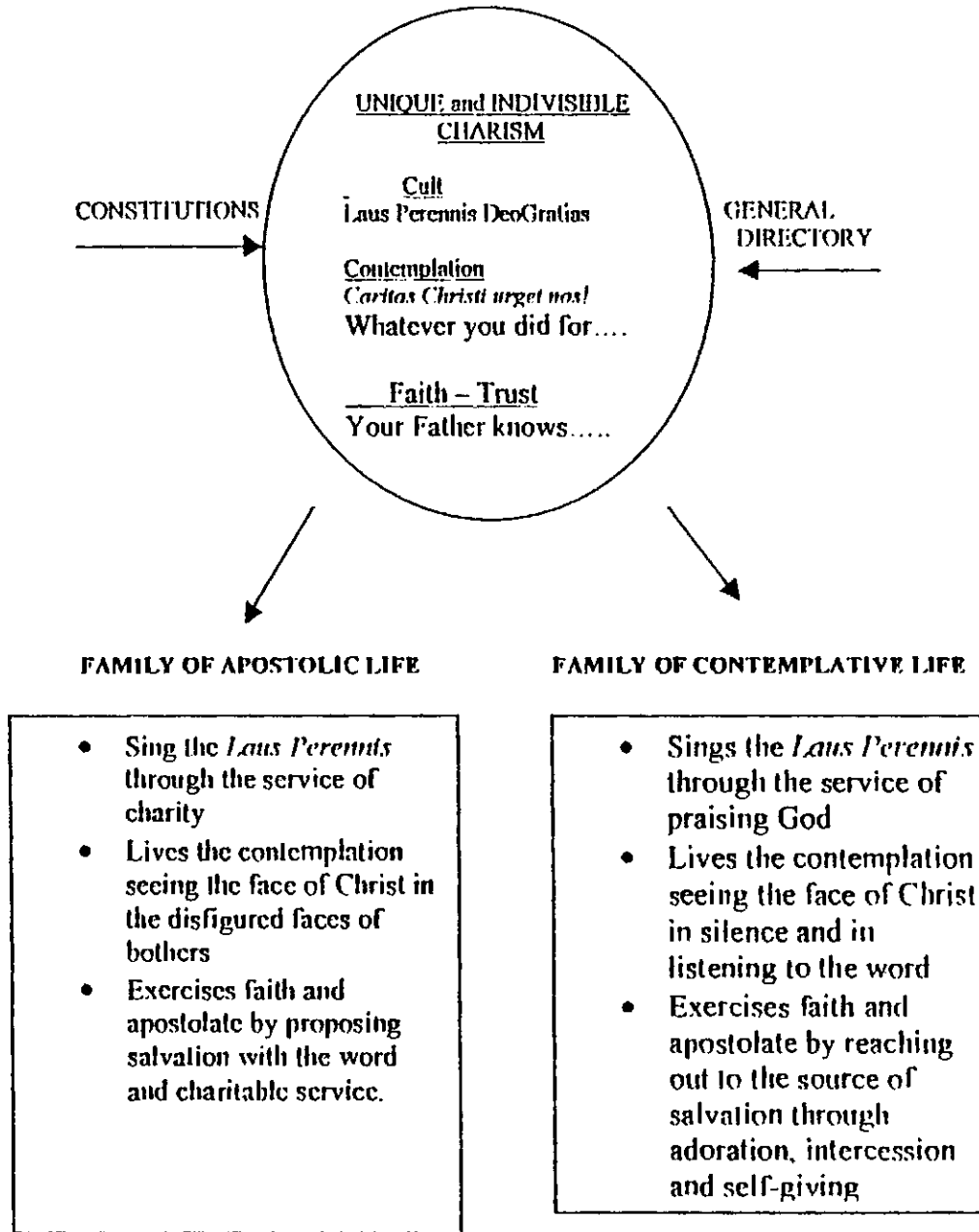
Appendix V: Fourth Century Monastic Egypt: St. Augustine

Augustine founded his first Monastery at Thagaste after being ordained priest in 391.



Appendix VI: Cottolengo Sisters

A graphic representation of the two families showing their unique and indivisible Charism



* Taken from the pamphlet, *Starting Afresh Towards Holiness (back matter)* in preparation for the VIII General Chapter, 2002.

Appendix VII: The contribution of the Cottolengo Monasteries to the Little House and to the Church: Interviews

What is the contribution of the Cottolengo contemplative sisters to the little house and to the church? A response from some contemplative sisters belonging to the Cottolengo monastery – Tuuru, Kenya

Introduction

I conducted these interviews directly and indirectly by putting questions or simply having a conversation with the sisters belonging to Cottolengo Missionary monastery--Kenya. After these conversations, they wrote down their answer to the question "what is the contribution of the Cottolengo contemplatives to the Church and to the Little House?" Here are their replies.

Sr. Antonietta di Gesu' Ghalina

According to me, the main contribution of our monasteries to the Little House, to the Church and to the whole humanity consists of our faithfulness to our call to be "continuous praise to the Most Holy Trinity' bringing to the Lord in adoration the voice of the poor and marginalized"

Sr. Anna Rosaria di Pietro

In articles 4 and 74 of our directory we read:

In continuous praise, we carry to the Lord the voice of all our brethren, we sing praise to him on behalf of all creation, and we adore him, thank him, make reparation and intercede for the Church and the world the gift of peace and unity. Near the tabernacle is our place according to the plan of God, intimately united with Mary the perfect adorer, let us be conscious of our

task of being the representatives of the whole community, the Church and the world as guards of honour to Jesus in the Most Holy Sacrament.

These two articles clearly point out the chief contribution of the Cottolengo contemplatives to the Little House to the Church and to the whole humanity. We are called to be hosts, (Directory Art. 10), like Jesus, which means, living a life of self-offering for our brothers/sisters to the Lord, hence becoming bread broken for all like Him, totally at the service of the Father; being consumed in love, allowing ourselves to be "eaten" by all who are hungry of love, and by living that authentic charity that is drawn from the divine fountain - Jesus Himself.

This is concretised in the day-to-day life of renunciation of all possessiveness, of all inordinate affections that have human motives only. I am fully convinced that only a life of pure self-giving love, a love that shares the salvific sufferings of Christ, helps the souls to reach God.

Sr. Immacolata Castiglione

According to the Charism of St. Joseph Cottolengo, we are called to be continuous praise to the Most Holy Trinity at the service of the Church and our fellow men/women. This is our principle contribution to the Little House, to the Church and to the world. We do this with much simplicity in total abandonment in the Divine Providence

In striving to be continuous praise, we carry to the Lord the needs, hopes, desires, frustrations and agonies of our brothers and sisters especially the poorest and marginalized, aware that we represent the Church and the whole humanity. Our true contribution as a contemplative family consists chiefly in our participation in the salvific work of Christ, something that cannot come about without an intense spirit of prayer and sacrifice.

Sr. Maria Teresa dell'Eucaristia

Our contribution to the Little House and to the Church as Cottolengo contemplatives consists of that particular witness of a life that expresses and manifests the absolute "gratuitousness" and "spousal" dimension of every human existence. We accomplish this sublime task through prayer - continuous praise to the Trinity - in a spirit of gratitude and thanksgiving - *Deo gratias* - that characterizes every authentic Cottolengo sister. I am fully convinced that this is the specific contribution that we make first of all to the Little House, that Cottolengo wanted to be like a family in which the dimension of gratuity and reciprocal acceptance and trust makes possible that genuine sharing and communion to reign between those who "serve" and those who are "served" in a common experience that we are all poor and needy in front of God.

Love demands the lover to stay in the presence of the beloved, in joy, praise and thanksgiving. This is what my life that is hidden in silence – reminder of the essential realities that do not pass but that have already begun to germinate here so as to bloom fully in eternity - wants to express and give witness to the Little House, the Church and the whole humanity.

Our contribution in this sense makes us not be strangers or aliens to the reality of the world in which we live. It is not evasion from our society's story of bloodshed and suffering, but a more intense desire of participating in the silent passion of the Son of God who gave himself for us despite our obstinacy and obtuseness to his love. This spiritual contribution is concretised in the daily experiences of our poverty as community and individuals in the effort to change ourselves and become more Christ like.

Sr. Angela Makembo

The greatest contribution that Cottolengo contemplatives make to the Little House, to the Church and to the whole humanity is the witness of joy and serenity that communicates the Good News that God is our Good and loving Father as our Father founder very clearly indicated to us by inculcating the spirit joy and thanksgiving expressed in the Cottolenghine short *Te Deum*, that is, *Deo gratias* (thanks be to God) at every moment and for everything, together with our continuous adoration of the Blessed Sacrament by day and by night on behalf of our brothers and sisters.

This witness of supernatural joy is the fruit of our total trust and abandonment in the hands of Divine Providence who thinks of us more than we think of ourselves and cares for us more than the birds of the air and the flowers in the field.¹³⁶ We strive to participate in the common task of labour in our work sharing what we get with the poor who may approach us for material help.

¹³⁶ L. PIANO, *Fiori e Profumi*, 335.

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