

Formed After the Heart of Her Who is All Beautiful

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Presentation for Formators

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It is a joy to speak to you who have responsibility for the formation of your young members about a topic so close to my heart, namely, Our Lady, the one who is all beautiful and her role in the formation of young religious. The goal of formation is to assist the young sisters to become ever more fully brides of Christ, that is, those who are wholly given to Him. As Pope Saint John Paul II emphasized on many occasions, each human person is called to make a total gift of himself according to his state of life. A total gift of self is always a spousal gift, because spousal love is but another way of saying “total gift.” In the case of the consecrated religious, the gift of self is a spousal gift to Christ the Bridegroom.¹ The spousal aspect of the consecrated religious life can hardly be separated from beauty and from love, since it is the knowledge of being loved and of giving oneself fully to the Beloved which is the source of spiritual beauty in the religious sister’s life.

In the formation of young religious, Our Lady shows the way, provides the model and serves to mediate all graces. She who is all beautiful leads us by means of beauty (the *via pulchritudinis*) to Him who is all beautiful. I am convinced that beauty must be at the very heart of formation because it draws young hearts most effectively into the very essence of our vocation as brides of Christ. All women long for beauty; all women long to *be* beautiful. Young people today may not explicitly sense their longing for beauty, primarily because our society does not foster or encourage us to consider beauty—just looks at styles of dressing for women!—but instead emphasizes comfort, pleasure, fun. Still, in each woman’s heart there is longing for beauty. Young religious may resist rules and they may struggle with poverty, but they are *attracted* to beauty.

¹ Cf. John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1997), p.282: “[T]he choice of virginity of celibacy for one’s whole life, has become in the experience of Christ’s disciples and followers the act of a particular response of love for the divine Spouse. There it has acquired the significance of an act of nuptial love, that is, nuptial giving of oneself for the purpose of reciprocating in a particular way the nuptial love of the Redeemer.” See especially the General Audiences of Saint Pope John Paul II of March 10, 1982-July 21, 1982 (pages 262-302) about virginity for the sake of the Kingdom.

In this presentation, I would first like to reflect upon the beauty of the life of the consecrated woman, which is seen most perfectly in the life of her who is *Tota Pulchra*, all beautiful². Then, in the most substantial section, I would like to reflect on the manner in which we can form souls to love beauty and to make all things beautiful, and, lastly and perhaps most importantly, I would like to draw out the implications of how having an eye for beauty helps us to live fully our consecration.

I. Beauty in the Consecrated Life

One of the striking features of Saint John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* is its emphasis on the consecrated life as a life dedicated to beauty. The first chapter of *Vita Consecrata* reads almost like an ode to beauty. Saint John Paul II says that “[i]t is the duty of the consecrated life to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal towards which all things tend, the splendour before which every other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart.”³

Given to Him, the consecrated person is transformed by Him. *Vita Consecrata* describes it as follows: “With penetrating insight, the Fathers of the Church have called this spiritual path *philokalia*, or love of the divine beauty, which is the reflection of the divine goodness. Those who by the power of the Holy Spirit are led progressively into full configuration to Christ become ‘a ray of divine beauty,’”⁴ “mirrors of the divine beauty.”⁵ Transformed by Him, the consecrated person becomes an eloquent testimony of what God's goodness can accomplish in the lives of those who give themselves wholly to Him: “The consecrated life thus becomes one of the tangible seals which the Trinity impresses upon history, so that people can sense with longing the attraction of divine beauty.”⁶

The model for every consecrated person is the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, *Tota Pulchra*. *Vita Consecrata* reminds us that “Mary is the one who, from the moment of her Immaculate

² Cf. Song 4:7; Antiphons for 2nd Vespers of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

³ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata* (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996), no. 105 [Hereafter: *VC*], no. 16.

⁴ *VC*, no. 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 111.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 20.

Conception, most perfectly reflects the divine beauty. ‘All beautiful’ is the title with which the Church invokes her.”⁷

II. Formed in the Way of Beauty

How does one form souls to recognize and esteem beauty? In the first place, it will be to bring the young sisters to Our Lady, so that *she* can form them according to her own Heart. In his Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*, Saint John Paul II invited us to *sit at the school of Mary* in order to be “led to contemplate the beauty on the face of Christ and to experience the depths of his love.”⁸ If we draw close to Our Lady with the desire to live in union with her, then “this enables her to train us and to mold us with the same care, until Christ is ‘fully formed’ in us (cf. Gal 4:19).”⁹ Living at the school of Mary, the soul of the young sister “will penetrate into the soul of Mary and there will see and feel vividly what its Mother, lived, worked, and suffered only for Jesus, that Jesus has always been, and continues to be, the sole reason of her being, that He is her all. And, endeavoring to make the dispositions of Mary its own, it will wish, like Mary and with Mary, to live, work, act and suffer only for Jesus.”¹⁰

On the intellectual level, many young persons have been influenced in their thinking by the prevailing relativism and therefore think that beauty exists “only in the eye of the beholder.” It is important to teach them the nature and objective reality of beauty. For this reason, it seems to me that initial formation must include some basic anthropology, philosophy of nature (cosmology) and logic.

Just as in courses of art and music appreciation teachers explain to students how a particular piece of art or music is beautiful, pointing to the harmony among the parts, the order, etc., so it is important for the sister responsible for formation to make explicit in her teachings the reason that something is beautiful, both in the natural order (of art, music, etc.) and the spiritual order (the beauty of holiness, the beauty of love, etc.), in order to awaken in the young ones the sense of wonder and the sensitivity to beauty. Even more important than anything one

⁷ Ibid., no. 28.

⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae* (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2002), no. 1.

⁹ Ibid., no. 15.

¹⁰ Father Emile Neubert, *Life of Union with Mary* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2014), p. 14.

can say or explain is the power of example. Our love for order, our calmness, our making something beautiful of every work we do is the most effective way to impart a love of beauty.

The convent culture also has a strong formative effect on the young religious, whether it is intended to do so or not. If the atmosphere in the convent is peaceful and ordered; if the convent itself is physically clean and beautiful, then the souls inhabiting the external place will be helped to attain the interior dispositions which correspond to the external. I would like to dwell a little bit upon the convent culture.

One of the tendencies of our contemporary society which most opposes the living the *via pulchritudinis*, and which so easily enters even into the convent, is the emphasis on efficiency, utility and productivity. A person who views reality primarily from such a perspective will be blind to beauty. Looking at Saint Peter's Basilica, he may likely comment on all the "wasted space," on the difficulty of having a decent sound system or providing heating or cooling in such a large church, etc., but will miss the beauty. When such an attitude enters the convent, *even* if it is inspired by the love for souls, it will inevitably dim the sisters' vision of the Beautiful One and of all the traces of His beauty in created reality. Apostolic work must be nourished by beauty, and beauty is visible only to one who raises his eyes above "what must be done." With regard to the balance to be maintained in work, Saint Francis of Assisi offers advice which remains timely: "Let them avoid that idleness which is the enemy of the soul. But they should not be so busy that the spirit of holy prayer and devotion, which all earthy goods should foster, is extinguished."¹¹

An atmosphere of haste (which is a close relative to the excessive interest in efficiency and productivity) is particularly detrimental to a life of beauty, because haste impedes one from recognizing beauty—when one is in a hurry, after all, one does not "stop to smell the flowers," as the saying has it. Haste, which agitates the soul, is disastrous to the supernatural life and

¹¹ Rule of the Brothers and Sisters of the Third Order Regular of Saint Francis (8 December 1982), no. 18. Cf.: Congregation of Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Contemplative Dimension of Religious Life*, Plenaria of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes (4-7 March 1980), II. A., no. 4: "In the case of religious of apostolic life, it will be a question of promoting integration between interiority and activity. Their first duty, in fact, is that of being with Christ. A constant danger for apostolic workers is to become so much involved in their work for the Lord, as to forget the Lord of all work" (Pope's message to the *Plenaria*, n. 2).

presents an obstacle to prayer. The opposite of acting hastily is acting calmly, not acting slowly. That is, one can work quickly or hard without being in haste. Haste is an interior disposition (one could even call it a habit, as I think such is often the case), which announces its presence also externally, especially through a certain nervous energy. The supernatural remedy to a habit of haste is the imitation of Our Lady, as Father Emile Neubert observes:

In general we should imitate her modesty—her bearing, her manner of walking, speaking, and working. She certainly must have done much work without ever hurrying.

We should contemplate her, recollected and absorbed in the thought of God whose tabernacle she is, and who dwells in us also. Modesty establishes peace.

We should also imitate her spirit of order. Without the least doubt, there was perfect order and neatness in the home at Nazareth. We lack order because we are too much in a hurry to place objects where they belong. Like modesty, order establishes peace.

Before each action, we should recollect ourselves for a moment close to our Mother, to see how, with her, we can give the greatest possible joy to Jesus. We should not yield to that feverish impulse which prompts us to begin something before receiving her approval. No matter how holy the action, we must not throw ourselves blindly into it, but we should talk about it for a moment with our heavenly councilor.¹²

When we act with feverish haste, we not only miss beauty, but we also miss the other, because our mind and heart is fixed on some future purpose which blinds us to the present. Haste is nearly the contrary of living in the present moment. Since God grants His grace only in the present, living by haste in the future, one is likely to miss His gifts. When we are full of haste, we cannot attune what Saint Benedict calls the “ear of the heart” to the gentle inspirations of Our Lord.¹³

The physical aspect of the convent—the building with its rooms—can be said to be an incarnation of the convent culture. True, the sisters oftentimes do not choose the physical dwelling or even the chapel, but the way that they arrange the spaces, even if they do not choose

¹² Father Emile Neubert, *Life of Union with Mary* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2014), p. 122.

¹³ Cf. *Rule of Saint Benedict, Prologue*, in Dom Paul Delatte, *Commentary on the Rule of Saint Benedict*, trans. Dom Justin McCann (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2000), p. 1: “Obsculta, o fili, præcepta magistri, et inclina aurem cordis tui et admonitionem pii patris libenter excipe et efficaciter comple, ut ad eum per oboedientiæ laborem redeas, a quo per inoboedientiæ desidiam recesseras”; “Hearken, O my son, to the precept of your master, and incline the ear of your heart: willingly receive and faithfully fulfil the admonition of your loving father, that you may return by the labour of obedience to Him from whom you had departed through the sloth of disobedience.”

or design them, both reveals who they are and forms them. A dwelling of those who imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary in their consecrated lives should be poor yet beautiful. A convent is not beautiful in the same way as a family home is beautiful. The beauty of a convent has its own quality, marked by a certain austerity and simplicity. Beauty is fully compatible with holy poverty, and it is for this reason that Saint Francis of Assisi said that poverty itself is of noble extraction, referring to her as “Lady Poverty.”

III. Making All Things Beautiful

One dedicated to Beauty recognizes beauty wherever it is found and seeks to make beautiful all things. Those in formation need to learn to *make all things beautiful* and to *keep all things beautiful*. People often remark to His Eminence Raymond Leo Cardinal Burke, who founded the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe at La Crosse, Wisconsin, that the Shrine is beautiful. His response is that it is true that the Shrine is beautiful, but that the first day we do not care for it attentively, it becomes less beautiful. Commitment and work are needed to maintain beauty. A young sister must learn to give expression to her attentiveness to beauty by caring for the materials entrusted to her use, to keeping them beautiful, intact, without damage. Her love for beauty will show itself in her care to maintain the prayerful atmosphere of her convent by making every effort to avoid making disrupting noises by banging doors, dropping things, etc. It will show itself in the manifold ways she can create beauty: in the care taken to arrange flowers; in writing a letter neatly, without blots and wrinkles; in presenting the prepared food in an attractive way; in keeping everything about her own person neat and clean, even if poor.

The consecrated religious must develop an eye for the beauty which “hides beneath the surface” of our everyday experience. It is essential that the young religious learn to penetrate everyday realities and recognize the meaning of things which lends harmony to the external and interior. The religious life is characterized by many rituals and ceremonies, even if they are fewer today than they were during the time which preceded the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. Frequent repetition can become tedious, were it not the case that these rituals and prayers are so many expressions of love. The consecrated religious is called to plumb the depths of seemingly ordinary events to discover beauty, meaning.

IV. The Beauty of the Sacred Liturgy

The consecrated religious' attentiveness to beauty will find its highest expression in the Sacred Liturgy, first of all, in appreciating ever more deeply the beauty of the supreme Sacrifice of the Altar. The Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is at the heart of each Catholic's life, but it is, in a preeminent way, the heart of the life of the consecrated religious.¹⁴ With what love will she surround the Liturgy with beauty—first of all by the beauty of her own life, and her prayers and by her evident reverence. Her whole comportment in the Real Presence of her Spouse will speak of His beauty. “Honor and majesty are before him; strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.”¹⁵ Pope Benedict XVI reflected upon beauty and the liturgy in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis*. He wrote:

The truest beauty is the love of God, who definitively revealed himself to us in the paschal mystery. The beauty of the liturgy is part of this mystery; it is a sublime expression of God's glory and, in a certain sense, a glimpse of heaven on earth. The memorial of Jesus' redemptive sacrifice contains something of that beauty which Peter, James and John beheld when the Master, making his way to Jerusalem, was transfigured before their eyes (cf. *Mk* 9:2). Beauty, then, is not mere decoration, but rather an essential element of the liturgical action, since it is an attribute of God himself and his revelation. These considerations should make us realize the care which is needed, if the liturgical action is to reflect its innate splendour.¹⁶

The religious will also devote special care to the appointments of the church or chapel, the altar linens, the flowers and candles. Saint Francis was deeply saddened to note that churches and the sacred linens and vessels were often dirty. He considered “how very dirty are the chalices, corporals and altar-linens upon which HIS Body and Blood are sacrificed. It is placed and left in many dirty places, carried about unbecomingly, received unworthily, and

¹⁴ Cf., CCC 1324.

¹⁵ Ps 96:6

¹⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2007, no. 35. Cf. the whole of paragraph number 35. Cf. Joseph Ratzinger with Vittorio Messori, *The Ratzinger Report: An Exclusive Interview on the State of the Church*, trans. Salvator Attanasio and Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), p. 130: “If the Church is to continue to transform and humanize the world, how can she dispense with beauty in her liturgies, that beauty which is so closely connected with love and with the radiance of the Resurrection? No. Christians must not be too easily satisfied. They must make their Church into a place where beauty—hence truth—is at home. Without this the world will become the first circle of Hell.”

administered to others without discernment.”¹⁷ The Poverello repeatedly admonished his followers in these and similar words: “Because *whoever belongs to God hears the words of God*, we who are more especially charged with divine responsibilities must not only listen to and do what the Lord says but also care for the vessels and other liturgical objects that contain His holy words in order to impress on ourselves the sublimity of our Creator and our subjection to Him.”¹⁸

Sacred Music will have a special place in the consecrated person’s heart which exclaims, “My heart overflows with noble words. To the king I must speak the song I have made; my tongue as nimble as the pen of a scribe.”¹⁹ Perhaps more easily than others, the consecrated religious will recognize that only truly beautiful music befits the King of kings, and will not spare the efforts and time needed to become proficient in the Sacred Music of the Church’s repertoire, particularly Gregorian Chant and sacred polyphony, which Holy Mother the Church has repeatedly encouraged for the use in the Sacred Liturgy. Then-Cardinal Ratzinger described the detrimental effect which so-called “‘utility music’, songs, easy melodies, catchy tunes”²⁰ have on the Sacred Liturgy. He wrote:

A Church which only makes use of “utility music” has fallen for what is, in fact, useless and becomes useless herself. For her mission is a far higher one. As the Old Testament speaks of the Temple, the Church is to be the place of “glory” and, as such, too, the place where mankind’s cry of distress is brought to the ear of God. The Church must not settle down with what is merely comfortable and serviceable at the parish level; she must arouse the voice of the cosmos and, by glorifying the Creator, elicit the glory of the cosmos itself, making it too glorious, beautiful, habitable and beloved.²¹

Religious sisters sometimes have fallen, sadly, into a mentality which settles for “songs, easy melodies, catchy tunes” in the Sacred Liturgy, but in their use of Sacred Music, consecrated religious are called to be a “ray of the divine beauty”; to reveal an aspect of the Beauty of God. Since young persons may not have much familiarity with Gregorian Chant and other forms of

¹⁷ Saint Francis of Assisi, “Exhortations to the Clergy (Letters to the Clergy) Earlier Edition (before 1219),” in *Francis of Assisi the Saint: Early Documents*, vol. I, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 52.

¹⁸ Saint Francis of Assisi, “A Letter to the Entire Order (1225-1226),” in *Francis of Assisi the Saint: Early Documents*, vol. I, ed. Regis J. Armstrong, O.F.M. Cap., J.A. Wayne Hellmann, O.F.M. Conv., and William J. Short, O.F.M. (New York: New City Press, 1999), p. 119.

¹⁹Ps 45:1. Translation: *The Psalms: A New Translation* (England: The Grail, 1963).

²⁰ Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 124.

²¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Fest des Glaubens*, p. 108, in Ratzinger, *The Ratzinger Report*, p. 125.

Sacred Music, teaching them to appreciate Sacred Music and to help to attune their ears to its beauty is an essential element of initial formation.

The Divine Office, as *Sacrosantum Concilium* teaches us, “is truly the voice of the bride addressed to her bridegroom; it is the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his body, addresses to the Father.”²² Those who pray the Divine Office “are sharing in the greatest honor of Christ’s spouse.”²³ In his work *Christ, the Ideal of the Monk*, Blessed Columba Marmion, O.S.B., devotes two chapters to the Divine Office. If you are not familiar with the work, I highly recommend it, also as spiritual reading for those in formation. He writes:

The Father sees us, during these hours of the Divine Office, no longer as souls coming before Him with their private interests and personal merits, but as ambassadors of the Bride of His Well-Beloved Son, treating of the cause of souls with every right to do so; we are officially invested with the dignity and power of the Bride of Jesus, and with those of Jesus Himself. Moreover, Christ Himself is in the midst of us; He has formally promised to be so; He is the supreme Hierarchy Who receives our prayers and gathers up our praises to bear them to the throne of God: *Ad thronum gratiae* (Heb 4:16). Therefore, in God’s sight, this praise surpasses, in value and efficacy, all other praise, all other prayer, all other work. This truth is absolute beyond doubt, and the saints, who lived in God’s light, so understood it.²⁴

Not only is it our joyful duty to pray the very prayer of Christ, but the choral praying of the Divine Office is also important in attuning the ears of the hearts of young sisters to beauty, to the Divine beauty. As Dom Mark Daniel Kirby, O.S.B., explains:

The discipline of liturgical psalmody participates in the wise ordering of things that produces the peace. Saint Thomas Aquinas calls this peace *tranquillitas ordinis*, “a tranquility of order.” *Tranquillitas ordinis*, psalmody’s most necessary quality, fosters profound recollection, and so disposes the soul to an unimpeded operation of the Gifts of the Holy Spirit in contemplative prayer.

²² “tunc vere vox est ipsius Sponsae, quae Sponsum alloquitur, immo etiam oratio Christi cum ipsius Corpore ad Patrem.” Sacrosantum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio *Sacrosantum Concilium*, “De Sacra Liturgia,” 4 decembris 1963, *Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 56 (1964), n. 84. English translation: *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, O.P. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975), p. 24, no. 84.

²³ “tum summum Sponsae Christi honorem participant” *Ibid.*, n. 85. English translation: *Ibid.*, p. 25, n. 85.

²⁴ Blessed Columba Marmion, O.S.B., *Christ, The Ideal of the Monk* (Ridgefield, CT: Roger A. McCaffrey Publishing, 1926), pp. 299-300.

When the psalmody of the Divine Office is executed with a gentle discipline and a joyful élan, it generates a healing experience of the tranquility of order.²⁵

In the same presentation, Dom Mark Daniel Kirby quotes a remarkable address which Pope Benedict XVI gave at the Abbey of Heiligenkreuz in Austria in 2007. Pope Benedict XVI said:

Your primary service to this world must therefore be your prayer and the celebration of the Divine Office. The interior disposition of each priest, and of each consecrated person, must be that of “putting nothing before the Divine Office.” The beauty of this inner attitude will find expression in the beauty of the liturgy, so that wherever we join in singing, praising, exalting and worshipping God, a little bit of heaven will become present on earth.²⁶

Pope Benedict XVI is issuing the challenging but beautiful invitation of “putting nothing before the Divine Office” to “*each* consecrated person,” not only to contemplatives. I think that the appeal, in the concrete, to us who are apostolic consecrated religious, is to devote ourselves to the praying of the *entire* Divine Office, that is, to praying *all* the canonical hours. If we are praying the Divine Office according to the reformed Breviary promulgated by Blessed Paul VI in 1970, then even the praying of *all* the hours is compatible with apostolic work, even if some of the minor hours (Terce, Sext and None) may need to be prayed in private. Yes, we will have a little less time for the works of the apostolate, but, as Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, our praying *is* an apostolate and is, in fact, our “primary service to the world.”

V. From the Perspective of Beauty

I have insisted upon the importance of beauty in the consecrated life because I am convinced that when the eyes of our hearts are open to beauty, then we have the appropriate disposition for living to the full our consecration. In order to recognize beauty, we need to have

²⁵ Dom Mark Daniel Kirby, O.S.B., Presentation given at the Assembly of the Council of Major Superiors of Women Religious (Belleville, Illinois: 23 October 2010).

²⁶ “Euer erster Dienst für diese Welt muß daher Euer Gebet un die Feier des Gottesdienstes sein. Die Gesinnung eines jeden Priesters, eines jeden gottgeweihten Menschen muß es sein, »dem Gottesdienst nichts vorzuziehen«. Die Schönheit einer solchen Gesinnung wird sich in der Schönheit der Liturgie ausdrücken, sodaß dort, wo wir miteinander singen, Gott preisen, feiern und anbeten, ein Stück Himmel auf Erden andwesend wird.” Pope Benedict XVI, “Il vostro servizio primario per il mondo deve essere la preghiera e la celebrazione del Divino Officio,” *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI*, III: 2, 2007 (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), p. 276. English translation: *L'Osservatore Romano Weekly Edition in English* 37 (12 September 2007), p.10. In the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano* the editor, perhaps sensing the true challenge His Holiness was offering to all consecrated persons, selected as the title of the Papal Address: “Your primary service: prayer and the Divine Office.”

a contemplative gaze which is unhurried, receptive, quiet—all feminine qualities which make us, as women, beautiful.²⁷

The disposition of soul which attunes us to beauty is the very disposition which prepares our heart to receive the gift of contemplative prayer. The life of contemplation is the highest expression of our consecration. Our self-gift finds expression in prayer, for prayer *is* self-gift and the fullest gift of self is simply the “being with” the Beloved.²⁸ As canon 663 reminds us, “The first and foremost duty of all religious is to be the contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer.” Note that the canon speaks of *all* religious, not only those who are cloistered. Contemplation is primary....always, and this requires an investment, on our part, of discipline and time. Here, too, I think there is a *most* important invitation for us, namely, that of providing sufficient time to gaze unhurriedly upon our Bridegroom. The half an hour of mental prayer which is part of the horarium of many religious congregations and the few minutes a sister may find before common prayers are important, but *not sufficient*. It is essential of the spiritual life that each sister daily devote substantial time to the Divine Bridegroom alone.

Our contemplation, while perhaps seemingly ineffective, is, in fact, the most useful thing we can do for others, as the lives of so many saints attest. The anonymous author of the *Cloud of Unknowing* reminds us: “For I tell you this, one loving blind desire for God alone is more valuable in itself, more pleasing to God and to the saints, more beneficial to your own growth, and more helpful to your friends, both living and dead, than anything else you could do.”²⁹ Our apostolate flows from the contemplative gift, which our attention to beauty prepares us well to receive.

²⁷ For a beautiful description of woman’s soul, see St. Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, O.C.D., “Principles of Women’s Education,” in *Essays on Woman*, trans. Freda Mary Oben, ed. L. Gelber and Romaeus Leuven, O.C.D., 2nd ed., *The Collected Works of Edith Stein*, vol. 2 (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1996), pp. 132-133: “The soul of woman must therefore be *expansive* and open to all human beings; it must be *quiet* so that no small weak flame will be extinguished by stormy winds; *warm* so as not to benumb fragile buds; *clear*, so that no vermin will settle in dark corners and recesses; *self-contained*, so that no invasions from without can imperil the inner life; *empty of itself*, in order that extraneous life may have room in it; finally, *mistress of itself* and also of its body, so that the entire person is readily at the disposal of every call.”

²⁸ CCC, no. 2605: “prayer and the gift of self are but one”.

²⁹ *The Cloud of Unknowing* (New York: Image Doubleday, 1973), p.60.

Since beauty always comes to us as a gift, the gaze which permits us to see beauty also fosters the dispositions of humility, of gratitude and of selflessness. When we notice something beautiful, we recognize that the beauty comes from outside of ourselves. We are grateful to have noticed! Even when we ourselves create the beauty, it seems that the resultant beauty is often a gift. We do our best to make something beautiful and when it actually turns out that way, we are grateful! Having our eyes on beauty also keeps us focused firmly *outside* of ourselves, which is always a good place to have our focus.

From the perspective of beauty, too, many of the rules and regulations of religious life which, insofar as they are commands are often in some sense repulsive to our fallen human nature, can begin to shine with a new radiance as aids to maintaining the beauty of our life. The rule of silence, for example, viewed from the perspective the sister's spousal relationship with Christ, is the gift, given to her by her co-sisters, which permits her to abide with Him. Silence is the language of love. The keeping of silence is an expression of reverence for her co-sisters, of reverence for their spousal relationship with Christ, and it is a concrete act of charity towards them.

VI. Conclusion

Beauty is not an embellishment or accessory to the consecrated life or the life of the Church in general. No, it is an integral part of the life of the Church, and an integral part of the consecrated life. By keeping her eye focused on the Beautiful One, by seeking to make her own life "something beautiful for God,"³⁰ by drinking beauty at the Sacred Liturgy, and offering her hymn of gratitude and petition to our Lord in the Divine Office, the consecrated religious finds deep and abiding peace and joy, and serves the salvation of souls and the glory of God. When our hearts are attuned to beauty, they are naturally prepared to receive also the gift of the greatest beauty, namely, union with the Beloved in contemplative prayer. The One who can best help us to live the way of beauty is Our Lady, the one who is all beautiful. May she help to form all the young religious in your care in the way of beauty which leads them, at her hand, to the Heart of her Son.

³⁰ Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, Niagara University Commencement Address (May 30, 1982).
<http://www.niagara.edu/assets/Uploads/MotherTeresaofCalcutta.doc>