

UNIVERSITY OF MALTA

Faculty of Theology

Anthony Caruana

**AN INQUIRY INTO THE
MONASTIC ELEMENTS
PERTAINING
THE SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE**

A thesis submitted

In part fulfilment of the requirements for the

Degree of MA in Spirituality

MALTA
2019



L-Università
ta' Malta

University of Malta Library – Electronic Thesis & Dissertations (ETD) Repository

The copyright of this thesis/dissertation belongs to the author. The author's rights in respect of this work are as defined by the Copyright Act (Chapter 415) of the Laws of Malta or as modified by any successive legislation.

Users may access this full-text thesis/dissertation and can make use of the information contained in accordance with the Copyright Act provided that the author must be properly acknowledged. Further distribution or reproduction in any format is prohibited without the prior permission of the copyright holder.

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines to what degree the SDC charisma (founded by St George Preca in the early years of the 20th Century) can be considered as a continuing expression of a new form of monasticism.

Monasticism pre-dates Christianity and the life of the Church. Christian monasticism was with Anthony of Egypt's move from city to desert. Like all other forms of spirituality, monasticism developed and took new forms to respond to the needs of the times.

This research aims to examine the extent to which the Society of Christian Doctrine may be said to be an expression of the New Monasticism, which is being lived today in different groups of lay people around the world.

Suggestions of a concrete number of proposals that can stimulate further discussion and critical analysis as a way for living the SDC charism more effectively will be offered.

Tutor: Rev. Dr Charló Camilleri O. Carm

Anthony Caruana
M.A. Spirituality 2019

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	viii
DECLARATION.....	x
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS.....	xi
INTRODUCION.....	13
CHAPTER 1: CORE ELEMENTS OF MONASTICISM.....	22
1.1 Eastern and Western Christian Monastics	22
1.1.1 A New kind of Martyrdom	23
1.1.2 New Forms of Ascetism in the Early Church.....	26
1.2 The Ethos of Monastic Life	30
1.2.1 Single-mindedness.....	301
1.2.2 <i>Fuga Mundi</i>	31
1.2.3 Metanoia and <i>Ascēsis</i>	34
1.3 Core Elements of Monasticism.....	35
1.3.1 Monasticism: A Response to a Decadent Society	36
1.4 Monasticism as a Lay Movement	37
1.4.1 Prophetic Witness.....	39
1.4.2 Intentional Living	40
1.5 Following Christ in the Monastic Way: A Universal Call.....	41
1.5.1 The White Habit	42
1.5.2 The Urban Monk	43

CHAPTER 2: A RE-APPROPRIATION OF MONASTICISM AS A WAY OF LIFE FOR THE SDC MEMBER	48
2.1 The Religious, Ecclesial and Socio-Cultural context of the SDC Foundation	48
2.1.1 Rapid Change and Turbulent Times	49
2.2 The Novelty of the SDC in the Early Twentieth Century Church in Malta	50
2.2.1 A New Catechetical Vision	52
2.2.2 A Concrete Response to <i>Acerbo Nimis</i>	55
2.3 George Preca’s Proposal to the Group: An altogether New Phenomenon	57
2.3.1 A Mystery of Paradox.....	58
2.3.2 Closer to Those at the Fringes of Society.....	59
2.3.3 Hints of Transformation	60
2.4 Characteristics of the Monastic Life in George Preca’s Prophetic Vision	61
2.4.1 Verba Volant, Scripta Manet	62
2.4.2 New Wine in New Wineskins	64
2.4.3 A Counter Proposition	65
2.5 Major Themes in the Life and Writings of George Preca.....	67
2.5.1 Self-denial.....	68
2.5.2 <i>Kenosis</i>	69
2.5.3 Put on the New Man	70
2.6 Correlations Between Monastic structure and the Early Constitutions of the SDC	72
2.6.1 The Core of the Inspiration.....	73
2.6.2 Learn to Teach	75
2.7 Characteristics of the SDC Monastic ethos as Identified by Non-members.....	77
2.7.1 <i>Verbum Dei</i>	79
2.7.2 The Final Aim of every SDC Member	81
2.7.3 Chosen to Teach	833
2.7.4 Jesus Christ: The Great Book	84

2.7.5 Monastic Wisdom.....	85
2.7.6 Lay and Celibate.....	86
2.7.7 The SDC Centre: A School for Intentional Living.....	88

CHAPTER 3: ‘SOLI DEO’ – GOD ALONE92

3.1 The SDC’s particular ethos: “a Monk is a True Christian and a Christian is a True Monk”	92
3.1.1 Obedience that Leads to Holiness	93
3.2 A Correlation Between Elements Within Monasticism and the SDC	94
3.2.1 A Learning Community.....	95
3.2.2 Internal Membership.....	97
3.2.3 Pray Without Ceasing.....	99
3.2.4 Humility and Meekness	102
3.2.5 Simplicity.....	104
3.2.6 Silence	104
3.2.7 Virginity.....	106
3.2.8 Spiritual Formation and Direction	107
3.3 The SDC: Being Regarded as “Fools for Christ”	109
3.3.1 The SDC as a Radical Option.....	110
3.3.2 Meekness as the Highest Grade of Discipleship	111
3.4 Counter-cultural to Contemporary Society in Malta	113
3.4.1 Lay Spiritual Accompaniment.....	114
3.4.2 The Engagement of Women in the SDC	116

CHAPTER 4: THE SDC AS A NEW PHENOMENON: PAST AND PRESENT119

4.1 A Universal Call to Holiness: the SDC way.....	119
4.1.1 A Radical Way of Life.....	120
4.2 The Church’s Reaction Towards the Early Members.....	121

4.2.1 The Years of the Inquiry	122
4.3 The Maltese Society’s Reaction Towards the Early Members	123
4.3.1 The Seed Starts to Germinate	123
4.3.2 Years of Misjudgement and Misunderstanding.....	124
4.4 Challenges to Be Resolved by the SDC today	125
4.4.1 Internal and External Tensions	126
4.1.2 Trapped in Mundanity	127
4.4.3 Ministering in The Global Village.....	129
4.5 The Call to the Radical Christian Living: Basic to the SDC Foundation	130
4.5.1 Faithful and Orthodox	132
4.6 Faithful to the Original Spirit of SDC: Rethinking and Reinventing	133
4.6.1 An Ongoing Process of Renewal and Reinterpretation	134
4.6.2 What to Shed and What to Keep: An Ongoing Process of Discernment	135
CONCLUSION	138
BIBLIOGRAPHY	145

**Et quæ audisti a me per multos testes,
hæc commenda fidelibus hominibus
qui idonei erunt et alios docere.
(2Timothy 2:2)**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been accomplished had it not been for the invaluable help of my tutor, Rev. Dr Charló Camilleri O Carm., spirituality lecturer at the Faculty of Theology. His observations, corrections and insights have helped me to organize my thoughts and structure my work in a coherent manner.

I would also like to thank Mr Natalino Camilleri, Superior General of the Society of Christian Doctrine M.U.S.E.U.M. for helping me choose the theme of my research, for providing most of the books and documents that were instrumental in accomplishing the task at hand and for being there whenever I needed a second opinion or a clarification.

Sincere thanks are also due to Ms Ruth D Lasseter for encouraging me along the way and for helping me in proof reading and the editing of this work.

Finally I would also like to acknowledge the encouragement I received from my family, the support given to me by Mr Nicholas Balzan, the SDC librarian, who was always ready to make available the books I needed to consult and fellow SDC Member John Formosa on everything related to the writings of St George Preca.

Anthony Caruana

April 2019

TO MY DEAR PARENTS

Alfred and Pauline

IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS

AND

SDC FRIENDS

DECLARATION

I, Anthony Caruana, hereby declare that this thesis entitled “An Inquiry into the Monastic elements pertaining the Society of Christian Doctrine” is the outcome of my own study undertaken under the guidance and supervision of Rev. Dr Charló Camilleri O. Carm, Faculty of Theology, University of Malta, Malta. It has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma, or certificate of this Faculty or of any other institute or university. I have duly acknowledge all the sources used by me in the preparation of this thesis.

Anthony Caruana

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AN	Acerbo Nimis
c.	Circa
ch.	Chapter
cf.	Confer
ES	E Supremi
GB	The Great Book
p.	Page
PC	Perfectæ Caritatis
PG	Patrologia Graeca
pp.	Pages
RB	Rule of St Benedict
RM	Rule of the Master
SCS	Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit
SDC Rule C	Society of Christian Doctrine Rule Constitution
SDC Rule GD	Society of Christian Doctrine Rule General Direcotry
SDC	<i>SOCIETAS DOCTRINÆ CHRISTIANÆ</i>

INTRODUCTION

Introduction

“Monasteries are necessary because the world is not Christian.
Let it be converted, and the need for a monastic separation will disappear.”¹

Jesus didn't preach a two-tier Gospel, one for his immediate enthusiasts and one for the lukewarm. It is true that there were times when his apostles, especially Peter (Luke 12:41) asked him if the teaching he was giving was addressed only to them or for everyone to adhere. Jesus was clear that everyone is entrusted with a number of gifts, with the only difference being how much will be asked in return: “from everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required; and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded”² (Luke 12:48). It is important here to note that at the beginning of this chapter, Luke indicates that “the crowd gathered by the thousands” (Luke 12:1) to listen to Jesus, who was telling them that their behaviour should be better than the holiest among the people of God at that time, the Scribes and the Pharisees.

Neither Jesus nor the Church have ever distinguished between social statuses; every baptised person become a co-equal child of God. Jesus assigned his Apostles to preach the Good News to the whole world, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19), thus, every creature of every time, race or place is invited to become “of-Christ” - both Christian and Christ-like. Again, when

1. John Chrysostom qtd., in Paul Evdokimov *Ages of the Spiritual Life* (NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 145.

2. All biblical quotes are taken from the *New Revised Standard Catholic Edition* <https://www.biblegateway.com>.

Jesus talks about those who want to follow him, He does not give options; instead, He specifies His one condition for all: “let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me” (Mark 8:34). Even in this instance, the Evangelist specifies that Jesus “called the crowd with his disciples” (Mark 8:34), thus making it clear that following him did not have a superficial and a radical version attached to it, but one and the same for every disciple.

Throughout Christian history from Patristic writings to medieval movements such as those forming part of the *Devotio Moderna*³, and from Papal documents to present day theological reflections, we find affirmations that every Christian could equally lead a life of prayer and devotion as much as a cleric, monk or religious could. If we were to cast out our historical nets to the beginnings of the lived Christian experience of the first centuries, we find records of people who sought to anchor⁴ their lives in a remote place to seek the sole object of their love. Among the early Christians, there were those who opted to live apart from a city, leading either a solitary or a communal life, either as hermits or monks gathered together⁵ to support each other in this sole quest to love God above everything else.

In this same period, we also find individuals who while equally dedicated to live solely for God opted to remain within the confines of their cities, living a life of love, mercy and service towards their families, friends and neighbours, and these were commonly referred to as ‘Covenanters’.⁶ In his book, *Desert Christians*, Harmless (24) corrects the idea that in the early Christian era, monks were only men, but states that there were also women and that monks were not necessary and

3. A late fourteenth-century movement in Europe, largely spearheaded by the writings of the Dutch preacher and founder, Gerard Groote.

4. St Athanasius portrays St Antony as an “anchorite,” that is a hermit. The term ‘anachōresis,’ “fleeing,” would come to mean “fleeing the world to become a monk.” William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. (USA: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10.

5. Pachomius is often singled out as the founder of coenobitic monasticism.

6. G. Nedungatt, *The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church*. (Orientalia Christiana Periodica 39, 1973), 192-199 qtd., in Edward Farrugia, *Aħna min Aħna* (Malta: Sensiela SDC 2009), 60.

always people who left the city and dwelled in solitary or communal habitats but lived more or less an ordinary city life.

Monasticism does not proclaim a different Christian morality or theology, but only the universal call to a faithful living of the Baptismal promises. The basis of this universal call is found in the Sermon of the Mount, when Jesus asks all to "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48). Jesus is not in any way addressing this to any particular category of Christians, but to the whole Church, for every baptised soul in the Church is called to perfection.

In the Acts of Apostles (Acts 2:42-47 & Acts 4), one finds an eloquent description of a united community living the fundamental principles of the Christian life, mainly: prayer, obedience, love of neighbour, almsgiving, the breaking of the bread, simplicity, and humility. While these qualities constitute the main trust of a monk's aspirations, in truth, this is a description of the life of virtue which every Christian is called to mature into. This beautiful description of the early Christian community predates monasticism.

John Chrysostom (†407), the early Church Father of the Fifth Century, wrote to emphatically correct erroneous ideas about what is and is not expected from the laity as juxtaposed with what is expected from a monk: "You greatly delude yourself and err, if you think that one thing is demanded from the layman and another from the monk; since the difference between them is in that whether one is married or not, while in everything else they have the same responsibilities... [b]ecause all must rise to the same height; and what has turned the world upside down is that we think only the monk must live rigorously, while the rest are allowed to live a life of indolence."⁷ John Chrysostom drives this point further home in his commentary on the Gospel of Matthew, when he observes that: "Whoever is angry with his brother without cause, regardless of whether he is a layman or a monk, opposes God in the same way. And whoever looks at a woman lustfully,

7. John Chrysostom, *Pros piston patera* (To the faithful father) 3, 14, PG47, 372-74.

regardless of his status, commits the same sin.”⁸ The “Golden Tongue” says that when Jesus gave these principles, He did not distinguish between His followers: “a man is not defined by whether he is a layman or a monk, but by the way he thinks.”⁹ Similar admonishments to those of John Chrysostom were echoed in the seventh century by Theodore of Studion (†826), who wrote to a Byzantine dignitary in clarification of the “Studite Rule.” Theodore wrote that the government of the monastic life was not intended for monks only but “entirely and equally for a lay person.”¹⁰ In the Lesson for Eternal Life George Preca (1880 – 1962) writes, “God wills that we all become saints,”¹¹ echoing what John Chrysostom understood well when he said that, “Christ did not make a difference. He has not invented the expressions “layman” and “monk.” It is our human way of thinking which has made us draw this distinction, but it is not found in Scripture.”¹²

In talking about the love of God, nothing changes throughout the ages. Closer to the present era, one comes across another author who again stresses that there is no difference whatsoever in what is asked from the monk and from the lay person when considering one’s love for God. Tikhon of Zadonsk (†1783), a Russian Orthodox bishop and spiritual writer who was canonized as saint of the Orthodox Church, wrote: “Do not be in a hurry to multiply the monks. The black habit does not save. The one who wears a white habit and has a spirit of obedience, humility, and purity, is a true monk of interiorized monasticism.”¹³ Tikhon’s statement contrasts with those who uphold the view that clerics or monks have some higher saintly entitlement or access to holiness than what a lay person would have. Tikhon is said to have inspired the Russian novelist, Fyodor Dostoevsky; elements of Tikhon’s life and character are reflected in *Demons* (in the character of a bishop by the same name, Bishop Tikhon) and in the characters of Alyosha Karamazov and the Elder Zosima

8. *Ibid.*, 373.

9. See Paul Evdokimov *Ages of Spiritual Life*, 137.

10., *Ibid.*

11. Assignment Manual, 59.

12. Edward Farrugia “Monasticism as a Bridge between East and West”. *Melita Theologica* Volume 44 (1993): 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 139.

in “The Brothers Karamazov.”¹⁴ George Preca conceived a way of life that mirrors the virtues of those who in Tikhon’s mind wear the “white habit;” these are the people who live their lives in the spirit of obedience, humility and purity of heart.

The first Constitutions, written circa 1917, spells out unequivocally that the sole aim and objective of the Society was none other than God, *Soli Deo*, and that this interior disposition was to be having the members live with four conscious intentions:

One scope: Jesus who is to be known and loved;

One faith: Union with the Pope;

One spirit: Humility and Meekness;

One heart: Helping one another.

The chapters that follow in this research intends to explore elements akin to monasticism that are present in the core elements of the Society of Christian Doctrine (SDC): principles, character, spirit, global perspective and the lived way of life of the Members since the Society’s foundation 112 years ago. The research will first present an overview of the different forms of monasticism, both in the Eastern and the Western traditions, and seek to highlight the essential ethos and basic elements of monasticism with the intention of generating a profile and generic portrait of the monk as the true Christian.

This work will then look at a number of primary sources and elicit from them the related foundational material that supports the subject of the thesis and its conclusion. These primary sources are the first two SDC Constitutions: that of 1915 written by George Preca, the Founder himself, and the Constitution of 1933, which he approved and the Rule as revised in 1999 and 2013. Two additional important documents make up a second group of primary sources. Written

14. “The Brothers Karamazov – Characters by Fyodor Dostoevsky,” Spark Notes, accessed April 4, 2019, <https://www.sparknotes.com/lit/brothersk/characters>.

after the 1962 death of the Founder, these foundational documents continue to reflect the constitutive elements of the SDC; these were approved and promulgated by the General Chapters of 2000 and 2003.

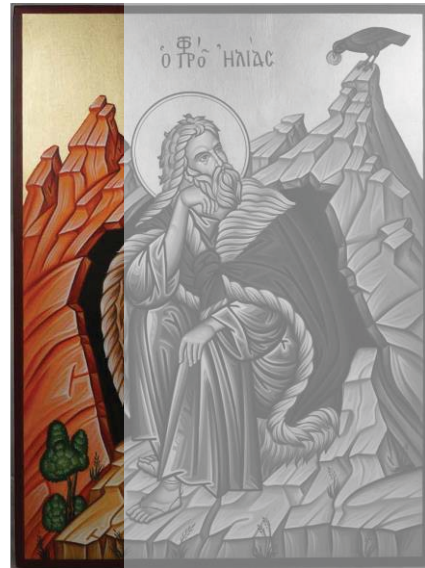
Secondary sources for supporting the thesis are those that record the history of the Society's foundation and the original inspiration. These sources are best found in the Founder's biography by Alexander Bonnici and the Acts of every General Chapter. The Acts, together with the official documents that each Chapter approved and presented to its members, encapsulate the official reflections that the Society undertook regarding its very nature over the last fifty years, thus reflecting a transformation of the particular worldview and ethos of the SDC. Other sources that shed light on the thesis include: the reflection and directions written by the present Superior General and articles written by both members and non-members, on elements of monastic spirituality in the Constitutions and in the life of the SDC members.

The research will also seek to analyse Preca's original inspiration for founding the SDC in the light of what was happening in the Church as it responded to Vatican II universal call for holiness. In a nutshell, the research will explore the traditional monastic elements and see how many of these are found within the SDC Constitution and General Directory, including the SDC prayer life, poverty and virginity; humility; simplicity (right intention); perpetual formation; the sharing of the faith; and, above all, the exclusive desire for God. Other elements in the lifestyle of the SDC members that may serve as pointers towards the theme of this research will be those related to the daily practices of the SDC, such as: fasting, silence and constant prayer, guided by the prayer book entitled *The Watch*. Finally, each SDC member has spiritual direction during which the manifestation of one's conscience is exposed to enable discernment and meditation, and where the SDC member recalls the transient reality of life as well as being reminded of the eschaton as the true home of the believer and follower of Jesus Christ.

The method used in this research is that akin to David Tracy's "revisionist method." Thus after examining a body of specific literature - books, documents, Constitutions and articles - the research aims to show whether there exists a basis for a critical correlation between the core elements of Monasticism, and what one finds in the SDC Constitutions and the present-day lived experience of the Society's Members.

CHAPTER ONE

CHAPTER ONE



Chapter 1

CORE ELEMENTS OF MONASTICISM

1.1 Eastern and Western Christian Monastics

The prophet Elijah was moved by the word of Yahweh to depart from his familiar surroundings and “go east and hide by the torrent of Cherith, east of the Jordan” (1 Kings 17:3). Many¹ look at this passage from Old Testament Scripture as depicting the eremitic prototype for all monks and nuns that followed throughout the ages. Elijah “[w]as revered in the Old Testament as the great prophet, the man of God, the living witness of God’s reality, the fearless champion of true belief and worship. John the Baptist is introduced as coming in the spirit of the power of Elijah, and then the prophet is mentioned twenty-nine times more in the pages of the New Testament. And in his most impressive moment, he appeared at the transfiguration of Jesus, together with Moses, giving witness that Christ was the fulfilment of the law and the prophets. Veneration for Elijah, continued in the early Christian Church, and he is mentioned frequently in the patristic literature. The church Fathers wrote extensively about Elijah, examining his life, proposing him as a model of virtue and

1. Historian Andrew Jotischkey says that “there were many patristic and medieval monks who considered Elijah to be a preeminent example of monastic life: “Patristic and medieval commentary celebrated Elijah as the Old Testament ‘type’ of the hermit. Jerome discussed the respective claims of Elijah and John the Baptist to the title of ‘the first monk’, alongside the Egyptian desert fathers Anthony and Paul of Thebes. Rupert of Dentz, in the twelfth century, described Elijah as the ‘author and initiator’ of monasticism. To Peter Damian, Elijah was the originator of the eremitical life. Monks themselves, like the Egyptian Onuphrius, were aware of following the example of Elijah; Peter the Venerable, looking back at the generation of Onuphrius as founders, saw Elijah as the ultimate monastic founder-figure. ... Gerard of Nazareth prefaced his biographical collection of hermits by appealing to the example of Elijah.” “Monasticism in Scripture” The Orthodox Life, accessed December 27, 2018, <https://theorthodoxlife.wordpress.com/monasticism-in-scripture>.

source of inspiration, and several of them – notably Basil, John Chrysostom, Gregory Nazianzus, and Jerome (†420) – present him as the model of religious perfection and the patron of hermits and monks. And even today he survives as a particularly appealing ecumenical figure, in that he is revered by Christians, Jews, and Moslems.”²

1.1.1 A New kind of Martyrdom

In the early Church, Origen (†c253),³ spoke of asceticism as a way of preparing oneself for martyrdom. This exhortation ushered in a new concept within the early Christian community. The primitive Christians wondered: “Could asceticism be regarded as the equivalent of martyrdom?” Inspired by this particular way of life, many men and women who, like Origen himself, grieved for not receiving martyrdom during the time of persecution, were now eager to demonstrate their exclusive love for God in a new kind of martyrdom. We read in Athanasius’s (†296) biography of Abba Antony (†c251) that by withdrawing into his cell, “Antony was inventing a new style of martyrdom, the “daily” martyrdom of asceticism.”⁴ Antony himself was one of those who “grieved” over having been spared physical martyrdom, but he was consoled through understanding the benefits of spiritual martyrdom, which was to become central to all later monastic life. Those who followed the examples of the first *abbas* (fathers) and *ammās* (mothers) sought to separate themselves from all worldly temptations, material objects, and people – from anything which would distract them from loving God above all other things.

Much has been written about monasticism in Syria and Egypt, the Greek East and the Latin West. What can be discerned as a common thread imbuing each and every community, both past and present, is that whenever or wherever it took roots, this ascetic way of life intended nothing other

2. Peter-Thomas Rohrbach, *The Journey to Carith - The Sources and Story of the Discalced Carmelites* (ICS Publication: 2015), 2-3.

3. Origen of Alexandria (c. 184 – c. 253), also known as Origen Adamantius, was an early Christian writer and scholar, ascetic and theologian who was born in Alexandria, Egypt.

4. Greg Peters, *The Story of Monasticism* (USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2015), 66.

than living Christian discipleship in its most faithful, simple, frugal and radical way possible: in silence,⁵ work⁶ and prayer. Monastic life is one that above all seeks God; a life that has died to self in order to live, fully alive, in Christ. For these, “God Alone,”⁷ became the only thing necessary in life. In a very concrete way, these early adherents of asceticism were defining “the stock motif of monasticism: that monks were the successors of the martyrs.”⁸

The early Christians lived within their respective Jewish communities, prayed in the same synagogues and worked among their fellow brethren. Yet, once this small community of “those who believed” and that “had everything in common” (Acts 4:32) started to grow and get noticed, it began to suffer severe persecution; first, from the elders within the Jewish community, spearheaded mainly by Saul of Tarsus, and soon afterwards from the pagan Roman Empire. As the open persecution began to subside, other enemies emerged, subtler and less obvious; the surrounding pagan culture was materialistic and mundane. It attracted those lukewarm Christians, who had become impatient in waiting for the end of the world and became attracted towards the prevailing culture’s worldly way of life. This lukewarm Christianity was not shared by all, and certainly not by the first, zealous Christians, who looked on the world as transitory. The affluent, hectic and chaotic life of the city in juxtaposition with the proclamation that “the end is near” invariably resulted in creating within the early Christian community a feeling of disengagement. They had been directed by Christ through Paul to become counter-cultural people: “Those who deal with the world as though they had no dealings with it, for the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Corinthians 7:31).

5. From earliest monastic practice, silence was always prized above ostentation and gregariousness.

6. Manual work was considered as a means to an end only to earn enough money to live modestly and be able to give to the poor.

7. ‘God Alone’ is what is posted at the entrance to every Trappist monastery. It is also the motto and the title of the collected writings of Louis de Montfort, one of the leading figures in the French school of spirituality.

8. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 66.

The tension we find in the Bible between the “garden” that is synonymous with God’s peaceful creation and the “city” as a noisy place of mankind’s invention, continues to echo throughout history. It was evident for the early Christian community that the ideal of the *Pax Romana*⁹ was not a definitive model for the followers of Jesus Christ; the imposed order of the Roman Empire was nothing but an illusion of the true peace that only Jesus could guarantee. This worldly utopian way of life only brought about a sense of *penthos*,¹⁰ a godly sorrow produced by the sting of compunction for one’s own and others’ sins.¹¹ This is tied closely to Jesus’s words, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4) and “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled” (Matthew 5:6). If one wanted to preserve true peace, live righteously and protect a pure heart, one had to seek this outside the cities of Rome and Alexandria. The Old Testament prophet, Micah, seemed to be speaking to this tension between garden and city when he wrote: “He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Micah 6:8)

In the first century of the Church, persecution was considered the means by which the followers of Jesus Christ could show their authentic Christian faith and love for Jesus by being ready to “drink the cup” in the same way their Divine Master did. Origen lamented the time of no persecution, for “peace is propitious to Satan, who steals from Christ his martyrs”¹² and Polycarp (†155) adds that martyrs were “images of true charity... jewels of the veritable elect of God.”¹³ Thus if all the baptised in the early church were expected to give witness to their love for Jesus by giving up their very lives for Him, the peaceful existence granted to the Church in the fourth

9. *Pax Romana* literally means ‘Roman peace’ the period between 27 BC and 180 AD when relative stability existed among the nationalities of the Roman Empire.

10. From the Greek meaning tears of grief.

11. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 43.

12. Origen, qtd. in Paul Evdokimov, *Age of the Spiritual Life* (NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 133.

13. Ibid.

century created a kind of vacuum of opportunity to show one's love for Christ. The absence of persecution, was in a way preventing Christians from showing their true mettle as followers of Jesus. How could one answer to this dilemma?

It could be rightly said that one particular response to show that one was still ready to opt for “the one thing necessary” (Luke 10:42) that Jesus speaks of to Mary, Martha's sister was by leaving the city to live in the arid surroundings of the desert. This way of life started to be considered as a kind of white martyrdom; a dying for self to live entirely for Christ. Others found in the flight to the desert an answer to live according to the “narrow path” (Matthew 7:13) focused only on God by leading a life devoid from every worldly pleasure. Yet this option to leave the city and seek the desert started to create a kind of “two-weights, two-measures”; one which was holier than the other. This was not in line with Jesus' teaching, and many of the early Church Fathers and Mothers sought to correct this misnomer through their writings and sermons. Nilus the Elder of Sinai (†430), speaks of the practices of monastic living as required from all lay Christians¹⁴ and John Chrysostom reminded his community that those: “who live in the world, even though married, ought to resemble the monks in everything else. You are entirely mistaken if you think that there are some things required of ordinary people, and other of monks...they will have the same account to render.”¹⁵

1.1.2 New Forms of Ascetism in the Early Church

A keen desire to follow Jesus beyond the precepts of ordinary life was growing among the ardent believers. It was because of this disillusion with the material world, and its accompanying sense of fragmentation, that groups of people were re-orienting their lives and choosing a number of different ascetical paths. By the second and third centuries, two groups stood out as the privileged representatives of the ascetical life: the Apostles and those who clustered around the ideal of

14. *The Philokalia, Vol 1. 200-250.* qtd., in Evdokimov, *Ages of Spiritual Life*, 137.

15. *Ibid.*, 41.

renouncing marriage.¹⁶ The early Church sanctioned this way of asceticism and the virgin life because it reflected the eschatological hopes of every Christian. This endorsement was aided by both the preaching and the writings of many of the Church leaders or important figures of the time. For example, Cyprian (†258) called the state of virginity “the more illustrious part of Christ’s flock”¹⁷ and Shepherd of Hermas (†c160) encouraged the ascetics, for they were doing “something good beyond the commandment of God.”¹⁸

Different forms of asceticism started spreading rapidly throughout North Africa, Asia Minor and the Syrian and Greek Christian communities. This new way was perceived to be parallel in merit with that of martyrdom in that both gave complete and total witness to belief in Jesus Christ. The extreme witness of both was considered to be the surest way to eternal salvation. This particular *sequela* was also thought of as a harbinger of the life to come, and it started attracting followers in unprecedented numbers. Records show that by the year 388, the monastic village of Nitria alone had some 5,000 monks.¹⁹ These monks were turning the deserts of Egypt -- which in those days were regarded as the edge of the world -- into places “buzzing with activity as if they were great cities.”²⁰

One very early particular type of what can be considered as pre-monastic Christian way of life found in Syria in the early Third century is commonly referred to as: “*Bjaj i Bnat Qyama*,”²¹ (children of the Covenant). These communities consisted mainly of newly-baptised adults who, on appropriating the Christian faith, promised to live a celibate way of life dedicating themselves entirely to God. Some of the members within this group, *Bjaj i Bnat Qyama*, opted to live within

16. Karl Frank Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, (USA: Cistercian Publications, 1993), 26.

17. *The Philokalia, Cyprian, De habitu virginum* Vol 1. 200-250. 3. qtd., in Evdokimov, *Ages of Spiritual Life*, 28.

18. *Hermas Similitude 5.3.3.* qtd., in Evdokimov, *Ages of Spiritual Life*, 26.

19. Kauffman, *Follow Me – A History of Christian Intentionality*, (USA: Cascade Books, 2009), 7.

20. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 3

21. G Nedungatt. *The Covenanters of the Early Syriac-Speaking Church.* (Orientalia Christiana Periodica 39,1973), 443, qtd., in Farrugia E, *Aħna min Aħna*, 60.

their families; yet, others formed communities of men and women living together as brethren without binding themselves to a rule of life. The men within this pre-monastic community called themselves “*Ihidajja*,” while the women were called “*btula*.” By the proper choice of these words, the *Bjaj i Bnat Qyama* wanted to demonstrate that they were not only choosing not to marry by remaining celibate, but that they wanted to live in the state of virginity. The Semitic word *Ihidajja* have the root of *h* and *d* from which the word one (*wahid*) is derived, meaning that they wanted to be one with God. The word “*btula*” refers to empty, as in virginity: an empty womb. This is also the name given to Mary the Mother of God in the Quran: *Mariam Al-Batool* (the Virgin Mary - *مريم مسجد*), for these women were intentionally opting for the state of virginity. The Children of the Covenant, the *Bjaj i Bnat Qyama*, wanted to live in the spirit of original grace and integrity, which was enjoyed by the prelapsarian Adam in the garden before the Fall as narrated in the Book of Genesis, which sundered him from God and fragmented him. Weren’t these Children of the Covenant living that way of life which Jesus refers to when he speaks about how we shall live in the *parusia*? Heaven is the place where we all shall live as brothers and sisters, similar to the way of life Jesus adopted for himself here on earth, being Himself known as the “Second Adam.”²² It may also be true to say that this early Syrian-based Christian community was influenced by similar Jewish communities which were concerned with their salvation and, like the Essenes²³ of Qumran: “Led to ascetical practices, and these practices led to building a closely-knit community.”²⁴

Contemporary with the *Bjaj i Bnat Qyama* -- if not earlier than the Children of the Covenant -- we find the *therapeutai*²⁵, people who opted to lead a secluded way of life and “pledged themselves to ascetical renunciation... making contemplation their main goal in life.”²⁶ This early ascetical Christian movement was definitely influenced not only by Jewish traditions but even more so by

22. Farrugia E, *Ahna min Ahna*, 42.

23. This was a Jewish ascetical group of the Second Temple period (515-70 BC).

24. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 19.

25. ‘*Therapeutai*’ is a word that means ‘worshippers’.

26. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 18.

the numerous heretical movements of the time, which tried vigorously to “reduce the teaching of the apostles to a call for a resolutely ascetical life,”²⁷ and presenting asceticism as the only way of true discipleship, portraying the ascetic as “the Christian hero par excellence.”²⁸

This movement, marked by self-abnegation, continued to grow rapidly in the early Church. Egypt was the first cradle for the ascetical hermits and later for the coenobitic monks; by the fourth century, Palestine was beginning to replace Egypt “as the centre of Christian monasticism.”²⁹ In the Latin West, monasticism would don a different dress and manifest a different character from that in the Greek-speaking world. There seems to be an ongoing controversy as to the question: “Did monasticism developed on its own in the Church of the Western Roman Empire or was it only an offshoot of eastern monasticism?” Whatever the case might be, admittedly, the East played a decisive role for Latin monasticism to take shape.³⁰ As the movement grew in the West, it diversified and took new expression. The eastern monasticism, shaped and organized as it was by Basil the Great (†379) – the Father of Eastern Monasticism – also influenced and nurtured the eremite life in the West by Benedict of Nursia, (†c547) known as the Father of Western Monasticism.

With the growing number of monasteries for both men and women in Palestine, new forms of monasticism started to emerge. In a development from the anchorite hermits living on their own in solitary huts, caves, abandoned forts or open tombs,³¹ we find in the West, “novices, newly professed monks, and the more experienced monks ... coming together for worship and communion on Sunday, who brought their work to be sold”³² to visitors.

27. Ibid., 25.

28. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 25.

29. Kauffman. *Follow Me*, 13.

30. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 53.

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.

It was a time when monasticism was becoming so popular and growing so fast that violent opposition against it developed, involving both Christians and non-Christians. This opposition was “so strong that it verged on persecution”³³, to the point that the whole idea of monasticism as a viable concept for Christians had to be defended. John Chrysostom, who lived as a monk in his mother’s house until she died, is credited with writing a treatise defending the new monastic movement,³⁴ against those who were disclaiming it – including his own mother. Eventually, these persecutions subsided, and by the 500s one of the monks from a monastery in Rome was elected pope.³⁵ Pope Gregory (†604) received his formation in the Benedictine community in Rome, one of the first to be established, which shaped him as a Christian, and which in turn shaped his papacy.³⁶ Monasticism was by now not only tolerated but accepted and appreciated both in the East and the West.

1.2 The Ethos of Monastic Life

In the early history of the Church, many lay people began to seek refuge in solitary places to be alone with God. Large groups of like-minded men and women wanted to create such communities in the hope of acquiring *puritas cordis* (purity of heart). This *fuga mundi* (fleeing from the world) to become a monk ushered in a new Christian ethos among the disciples of Jesus: *anachōresi*³⁷ for men and *monachia apotaktikai*³⁸ for women. These were people who longed for God. They wanted to know more than simply what one must do to become a Christian; they wanted to be fully alive and more zealous as a Christian. The newly-baptised rightly understood that what in Scripture Jesus asked from the rich young man (Matthew 19:21) was being asked from them, too. In seeking

33. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 13.

34. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 13.

35. Pope Gregory was elected Pope on 3rd September 590 and died on 12th March 604.

36. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 20.

37. The Greek word for withdrawal.

38. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 11.

purity of heart, they hoped to acquire the needed clear-sightedness that enabled them to see “God rightly and desire only heavenly things.”³⁹ Did these *anachōres* and *monachia* withdraw from the city to seek some form of self-denial simply to cause purposeless self-inflicted pain? Not at all! On the contrary, it was all about becoming one with Jesus, the servant of Yahweh (Isaiah 53), who became obedient unto death for the salvation of all people. The monastic life looked to Jesus, who was himself the suffering servant of God, to the point of having “no place where to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20); it was this model, given by the author and perfecter of Christian Faith, that the *anachōres* and *monachia* strove to imitate as followers of Jesus Christ.

1.2.1 Single-mindedness

This quest for clear-sightedness and single-mindedness constitute the very heart of the monastic ethos. This is evidently clear in the saying of the early monastic fathers and mothers – Abba Antony, Pachomius, (†c292) Theodora and Tauris. Pachomius is considered one of the forefathers of Monasticism and the one who deeply influenced the coenobitic (communal) monastic way of life that followed him;⁴⁰ he simply calls the hermit as the one seeking “single-minded devotion to God.”⁴¹ Leaving the city and heading alone towards some remote place was a kind of tangible proof for what a person was seeking inwardly: a *metanoia*, or spiritual conversion of life, in a new orientation that acknowledged God above anything and everything else. Abba Antony’s “*magnum opus*” was to “place one’s guilt for sins upon himself alone before God.”⁴²

1.2.2 *Fuga Mundi*

From the time of Abba Antony in the Egyptian desert up to the modern-day solitary and fraternal hermits, monks and nuns have but one ideal in mind: oneness with God. They understood that, by distancing themselves from all social and worldly bonds and obligations, they would be free to

39. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 39.

40. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 45.

41. *Ibid.*, 46.

42. *Ibid.*, 240.

focus on God. This *fuga mundi* did not mean that those who embraced a monastic way of life were thinking only of their own selfish will or escaping their familial responsibilities. On the contrary, it was the ‘white’ martyrdom for the love of the Kingdom of God that they undertook in their hermetic quest. It was because of their separation from the city that enabled them to gain the needed clarity to prophesize to their fellow brethren the will of God, and the strength to teach, heal, love and serve others, still living in community. This journey of withdrawal from the city and retiring into the wilderness was not necessarily always a physical journey, at times this spiritual retreating was “into the self,”⁴³ the dwelling place of God. Thus, every retreat – whether physical or spiritual – is a repetition of the earliest spiritual striving through asceticism; there is a single goal of restoration and rest. In *exitus* and *retibus*,⁴⁴ one retired in order to be strengthened by God, so as to “return to the world and love one’s neighbour properly.”⁴⁵

The people who started creating these communities within the desert were ordinary men and women, whose hearts longed for God above all else. With hearts on fire, they sought refuge in the quiet peripheries of the ancient cities, for it was here that true peace, as promised by Jesus, could be experienced. John Cassian⁴⁶ asserted this when he wrote: “Whatever therefore can direct us to this *scopos*, which is purity of heart, is to be pursued with all our strength, but whatever deters us from this is to be avoided as dangerous and harmful.”⁴⁷ Here Cassian is presenting purity of heart, the avoidance of evil and the pursuit of righteousness as the most basic of monastic jewels for every Christian who sought salvation. The layman Abba Antony concurred with John Cassian. Abba Antony lived his total assent to that which Jesus demands from every Christian. After

43. Bernard McGinn, *Withdrawal and Return: Reflections on Monastic Retreat from the World*, *Spiritus: A journal of Christian Spirituality* No. 6 (2006) 39. Quoted in Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 151.

44. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 39.

45. *Ibid.*

46. John Cassian was very influential in Christianity of both East and West; he lived c. 360 – c. 435.

47. John Cassian, *The Conferences* 1.7.2. Boniface Ramsey, Trans., *John Cassian: the Conferences* (NY: Paulist Press, 1997), 44.

listening to a homily at his village church, he withdrew to a solitary place to create the necessary space for God to purify his soul. Abba Antony, who can rightly be considered as a pioneer of monasticism, wanted a very ascetic way of life because in his own words this could make him to be “ready to appear before God.”⁴⁸

Abba Antony wanted to imitate the life of the Prophet Elijah, the founder of the Hebrew prophetic tradition. He took Elijah as his model and judged himself each day by the great prophet’s example.⁴⁹ What could be more fundamental for every Christian than to live fully in Jesus and be always prepared for the personal encounter in His second coming? Scripture and the wisdom tradition tell us that the one who keeps constantly in mind “The Last Things” – death, judgment, heaven and hell – will not sin and is saved on the Day of Judgment. The promise of heaven is the sole desire of one whose heart has been purified and who seeks always to obey God’s will in everything, as Jesus himself taught in the sixth Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure of heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).

We read in the *Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites*,⁵⁰ that the goal of the monastic and prophetic eremitical life is twofold: “To offer God a pure and holy heart, free from all stain of sin⁵¹ ... [and] to taste somewhat in the heart and experience in the mind the power of the divine presence and the sweetness of heavenly glory, not only after death but already in this moral life.”⁵²

48. John Cassian, *The Conferences* 1.7.2. Boniface Ramsey, Trans., *John Cassian: the Conferences* (NY: Paulist Press, 1997), 44.

49. John Cassian: *The Conferences*, 44.

50. Filip Ribot, *A Medieval History of the Carmelites*. Written c 1385. Edited and Translated by Richard Copsey. (Kent: St Albert’s Press, 2005).

51. Ribot, *A Medieval History of the Carmelites*, 9.

52. *Ibid.*

Why would anyone choose to turn his back on comfort and security to seek a new life of privation in a hut in the desert? Such drastic action could only be taken up by one who understood the teachings and way of life of Jesus: that eternal salvation is the real and true meaning of one's life.

1.2.3 Metanoia and *Ascēsis*

Closer to our days we find a profile of the monk's ethos in the writings of Thomas Merton (†1968). He refers to this calling as a life of "self-obligation to God," and "a life of asceticism that must seek God alone."⁵³ Merton says that this purity of heart is achieved "by way of prayer, praise, and labour"⁵⁴ In his spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, Merton writes that "The monk is a Christian who has responded to a special call from God, and has withdrawn from the more active concerns of a worldly life, in order to devote himself completely to repentance, *metanoia*, renunciation and prayer."⁵⁵ Thus, asceticism is what monasticism aspires for. This is the term that Athanasius uses in his *Life of Antony* and he uses this term in relation to physical exercise similar to that we commonly associate with sports. In fact, Athanasius describe the typical day in the life of Abba Antony as a day of *ascēsis*, divided into five disciplines: manual labour, watchfulness, fasting, single-mindedness and unceasing prayer.⁵⁶ These five disciplines are in themselves the very rule that regulates the life of a monk up to the present day. Therefore, one can also say that what defines a monk are not the typical vows that a Religious makes,⁵⁷ but the faithful living of "peace, prayer and work and lection"⁵⁸ – precepts by the Rule of Benedict that galvanized later generations of monks. Thus, desire for purity of heart and oneness with God – in other words

53. Merton, *Basic Principles of Monastic Spirituality*. (Springfield, Il: Templegate, 1996), 7.

54. Patrick Hart, ed., *The Monastic Journey of Thomas Merton* (Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and Mc Meel, 1977), 5-6.

55. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, 417.

56. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 61.

57. Religious take three vows: Poverty, chastity and obedience.

58. The spirit of Benedict's Rule is summed up in the motto of the Benedictine Confederation: *ora* (pray) *et labora* (work) together with *lectio* sacred reading.

asceticism – are nothing other than what we can rightly refer to as the ethos of Christian Monasticism.⁵⁹

1.3 Core Elements of Monasticism

“From the time I came to this pace in the desert, and built me a cell, and dwelt here, I do not remember eating bread that was not earned by the work of my own hands, nor do I remember saying anything for which I was sorry even until this hour.”⁶⁰

This quotation is attributed to Abba Pambo, and it sums up two of the most basic elements of monasticism: work and silence. The same Spirit that during the Apostolic times called the earliest believers to be apostles, prophets or teachers was now calling others to a new, different way of life – one that consisted primarily of seeking spiritual intimacy with God in silence and solitude.

The love of silence and desire for solitude – indispensable for monastic living, continue to be basic elements to the present. Those who opted for the *fuga mundi*, those who left the city behind, did so in order to seek silence and solitude; only these elements provide that needed environment for human receptivity, where God can reveal Himself to those who seek him. The monks understood that the spiritual fruits of asceticism were not possible without these essential elements chosen by the lonely soul that seeks God in silence; as Scripture states: “for God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation” (Psalm 61:1). When later, especially in the West, hermits grouped together and merged into communities, they arranged themselves in obedience to a Rule of Life, and a Superior also became one of the most important core elements for ensuring good order and protection of charity within a monastery. Humility, simplicity, meekness, patience, poverty and love for neighbour came to be recognized and established as foundational hallmarks of monasticism.

59. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 17.

60. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, (UK: Burns & Oates 2002), 30.

1.3.1 Monasticism: A Response to a Decadent Society

To leave the security of family, friends and an affluent society and head off without possessions towards the desert was not only unheard of, but considered pure madness, foolish and unnatural folly. This is echoed by Paul when he writes about how authentic Christian living is judged: “We have become like the rubbish of the world, the dregs of all things, to this very day” (1 Corinthians 4:13). Yet, foolish and hollow as they might have seemed or been labelled, monasticism sprang up spontaneously and independently becoming a phenomenon to be reckoned with and, ultimately, accepted.⁶¹ Everywhere, different monastic movements began to appear – first in Egypt, as early as the year 200, and soon after, by the beginning of the Fourth century, throughout the Roman Empire.

In the post-persecution era, Christians started to realise that the pagan society in which they were living was endangering this eternal promise; the decadent world they were born into was similar to a “shipwreck from which each single individual had to swim for his life.”⁶² Authentic Christianity derived no consolation from the fact that the Emperor himself was now Christian and no joy at all that the Church was mingling with temporal power. On the contrary, the fact that the State and the institutional Church became like two sides of the same coin strengthened their resolve to run away from this unholy union, a state of affairs that was drenched in worldly might and corruption. This “escape” from the mundane world ushered (as already stated) the first core element of monasticism, that of ascēsis, by which the monk sought only to be one with God. Thus, from the very beginning, there was a stark disparity between those who lived the Christian faith as an addendum – in the same way as if sporting a “spirit gear” badge of a favourite team – and the one who seeks a wholeness in Faith, which defines “[e]verything he does – mentally or physically, politically or personally ... because he believes being a Christian requires that action.

61. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 3.

62. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 11.

Their religion is not a part of their life, it is their life.”⁶³ Thus, “The first commandment was the monk’s concern for eternal salvation, and it controlled the whole of his life and actions.”⁶⁴

1.4 Monasticism as a Lay Movement

Another core element that appeared in the earliest way of life of monasticism was that of monks as laity, as opposed to consecrated or ordained people; monks did not “seek ordination or any other mark of validation from the institutional Church.”⁶⁵ In fact, the monastic movement was from the very beginning a lay movement to the point of “often forbidding its members from being ordained;”⁶⁶ never did monks seek in any way to set themselves apart from the community.

When one reads Jesus’s admonishments to his listeners (as found especially in Matthew 5-7), one immediately realises that chastity, prudence, obedience, humility, authenticity, justice, forgiveness and total dependence on God’s providence are the sine qua non for every disciple, whether living a state of virginity, celibacy or conjugal. Therefore if a monk finds himself compelled to live a virtuous life, he is not aspiring to anything different from what Jesus asks from every baptised person, for every baptised is up to a certain degree a *monachos* – “one who lives alone”⁶⁷ – not by virtue of the literal meaning of the word, but *monachos* in that each and every Christian is to live exclusively focused on one over-arching purpose in life, and this sole purpose is God.

Like many of the Old Testament prophets,⁶⁸ the earliest monks emerged from humble and ordinary backgrounds. Once chosen, the prophets, through their prophetic gestures, worked hard to call the

63. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, xvii.

64. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 38.

65. *Ibid.*

66. Suso, *With Greater Liberty*, 38.

67. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 18.

68. The word ‘prophet’ originates in a combination of Latin and Greek: *prophētēs*, meaning ‘spokesman’.

greater community of the Jewish people back to righteousness, asking the people chosen by Yahweh to realize that in turning their backs on the one, true God would eventually result in spiritual bondage and in the wretchedness of grave injustices. Prophets – who were spokesmen and emissaries of God, as their very name implies – invariably served as uncomfortable signs to their own people, who, in turn, invariably despised the prophets and their message. Nevertheless, the prophets pointed towards the truth that, while it could be denied, could not be escaped. Denied it was as we learn from Jeremiah:

“For in the day that I brought your ancestors out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to them or command, them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this command I gave them, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people; and walk only in the way that I command you, so that it may be well with you. Yet they did not obey or incline their ear, but, in the stubbornness of their evil will, they walked in their own counsels, and looked backward rather than forward (Jeremiah 7:22-24).”

In this prophetic sense, the monk also served – and continues to serve today – as a prophet to his society. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, even though small in number, their impact on their society – indeed, the whole world – is huge. Similar to the prophets of old, the monk can be looked upon as eccentrically strange within a given society; yet, strange and exotic as they might seem, the monk (or the nun) is known to be a catalyst for “worldly outsiders” to desire conversion and to long for the peace that comes only from God. Many people admit that, on looking closer at the life of the monk, they can rightly appropriate for themselves elements from the monk’s particular way of life.

As we read in the early history of monasticism, many people flocked from their homes in the cities to visit monasteries, to talk to monks and to be guided by their words. Even today, monasteries

continue to attract huge numbers of visitors, both believers and non-believers. Although the reasons behind each and every visitor definitely varies, yet what seems to be constant is that, through their radical choices, monks continue to challenge every secular society and spur individuals to review the purpose and direction of their lives and to take stock of their behaviour, through the measure of loving kindness and even of holiness.

1.4.1 Prophetic Witness

Throughout the ages, monasticism has served every society by presenting it with a type of “prophecy of behaviour.”⁶⁹ Through the life and work of the monk, the lay person continues to find a radically authentic way of life; a glimpse is given of the possibility for living out fair and chaste love that comes across as ideal for recreating a more perfectly harmonious world. Irrespective of time and place, monks continue to stand and serve as catalysts both for those who desire to live the Christian ideal. The rhythm innate within the life of a monk points definitively to that kind of “model of living that does not hinge itself on one’s social status,”⁷⁰ but is a life freely-chosen by ordinary people, “whatever their social class or background.”⁷¹ Thus, the monk – contrary to those caught in the madness of ambition, power and status enthralling the world around them – live a kindly and peaceful existence, based on free choices. The monk lives under a Rule, but is made of but a few rules for the preservation of love; he enjoys a kind of liberty that can’t be experienced from those living slavishly under the conventional rules imposed by status in a materialistic society, driven through advertisements and the love of money.

Early monasticism showed that people could choose freely how to live rather than be governed by fashion and norms imposed by societal convention. The lay aspect of the monk’s life showed that it was possible to respectfully and peacefully transcend age-old customs and enter by free choice

69. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 12.

70. *Ibid.*, 11.

71. *Ibid.*

into new relationships under providence rather than simply being submissive to fate. The monks' ability to "order their days, to choose what to do and when, meant that other humans could do the same – that they did not need to live by impulse, that they too could make plans and act on them."⁷² Living out of one's choice by the precepts of a Rule of life was very different from living by the expectations and taboos of society's imposition. Such intentional living was a whole life, striving towards holiness; it had no place for compartmentalisation. Indeed, a monk's life included all aspects of the individual's human life – sexuality, finances, rest and recreation, eating, praying and work. To take but one example, the valuation of the virgin life, and with virginity a monk's free choice of celibacy, was to the ordinary Christian, a sign that "sex was an option, not an obligation laid on humans by biological necessity."⁷³ Virginity became in itself a sign of wholeness; what family or society expected was no longer the ultimate authority when the celibate's choice not to marry was a beautiful indicator of completeness – through loving spiritual union with God. Thus, as time progressed, what at first glance was regarded by many as strange or exclusive, started to gain a completely new understanding that such a life was "as relevant as their own."⁷⁴ On the other hand, even though these early communities of monks earned the reputation of being exceptionally good Christians, even the highest expression within Christian society, only a relative few held the view that "to be an exceptional good Christian one needed to become a monk."⁷⁵ Most Christian people lived their lives in the world, but strived not to be conformed to it, as Paul had instructed in his letter to the Romans (Romans 12:1-2); in this holy effort, the laity were assisted by the example of those who chose the monastic life.

1.4.2 Intentional Living

Keeping the eyes of their hearts and the intentions of their way of life on Christ crucified, these monks were showing what Socrates (†399 B.C.) is credited with when he said that "the

72. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 22.

73. *Ibid.*

74. *Ibid.*, 8.

75. *Ibid.*

unexamined life is not worth living.” By living “intentionally” as opposed to “aimlessly” or “conditionally,” the monks were witnessing that one can live what he freely chooses. Living intentionally is that ability to think in a free and critical manner, showing to one and all that it is possible to see through the emptiness of Satan’s illusory promises; instead of submitting to the misery and bondage of evil, one can choose to live in that perfect freedom of Jesus Christ, open to us by, first, obeying God’s will in peace and harmony.

1.5 Following Christ in the Monastic Way: A Universal Call

What was later crystallised by Thomas Aquinas’s (†1274) maxim, “Grace does not remove nature, but perfects it,”^{76 77} lay Christians found that they “[c]ould live as devoutly as monks, not by trying to imitate the monastic life but by the way they lived in the world.”⁷⁸ Without negating the mystery of the Church, which was born of Jesus Christ as he hung dead on the Cross, the community of the believers came to include another dimension of the mystery of Divine Revelation: the interior life of the soul in personal relationship between God and the individual. In this, Divine Revelation became a quiet revolution against the horizontal expectations of the world and society. This robust vision of lay spirituality aimed to empower lay people towards a completely new understanding of their status within the Church. This was given great impetus in the Fourteenth century, especially through the teachings and writings of Walter Hilton (†1396)⁷⁹ and Richard Rolle, (†1349)⁸⁰ among other theologians. Hilton asserted that lay people could reach “divine contemplation” through the rigours of their ordinary life, and he stressed that, “[p]eople who are not called to enter the monastic life should mix the works of active life with spiritual works of the

76. *Summa Theologiae* I, I, 8 ad. 2.

77. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 70.

78. *Ibid.*

79. Walter Hilton an English Augustinian mystic.

80. Richard Rolle an English hermit, mystic, and religious writer.

contemplative life.”⁸¹ Hilton presented a completely new vision for the lay person when he rejected the false idea that the contemplative life lived within the confines of the monastery was in any way superior or distinct from that lived with fidelity by lay people in the secular world. Hilton implicitly rejects this division; instead, he sees in the life of Christ a model for the mixed life,⁸² where a contemplative attention to God was integrated with a life of service to others. People began to find that, without entering the cloister or the desert hermitage, they could live joyfully and peacefully, in detachment from the world’s charms, by bringing the love of God into the community of families – birth, school, marriage, work, duty and death – lived out in Christian ethos.

1.5.1 The White Habit

In the writings of the eighteenth-century Russian monk, Tikhon of Zadonsk, we read: “The one who wears a white habit (the clothing of ordinary people) and who is clothed in obedience, humility and purity, such a one is a true monk, though untensured.”⁸³ This same idea is also reinforced in the work of the French Orthodox theologian Paul Evdokimov (†1970);⁸⁴ in his theology, he suggests that, in a very real sense, all Christians are monks and nuns through their baptismal vows.⁸⁵ In the arguments of both Eighteenth century monk and Nineteenth century theologian, there is a thread that weaves specific monastic spirituality to lay Christian spirituality. In reality, one can say that these two theologians are showing that basic elements of monastic spirituality can be lived by lay people, too, because all Christians are invited to the same *telos* of the spiritual life, as we read in the New Testament: “Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when

81. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 198.

82. *Ibid.*

83. *Ibid.*, 200.

84. Paul Nikolaevich Evdokimov was an Orthodox Christian theologian.

85. Michel Plekon, *Interiorized Monasticism: Paul Evdokimov on the Spiritual Life*, (American Benedictine Review 48 No. 3, 1997), 227, qtd., in Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 200.

he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy” (1 Peter 1:14-16).

We can thus conclude that the distinction between the way of life of monks and laity is clearly to be found in the means and not in the end; the end is the same for all believers, but the means of becoming holy is different: “Men and women become monks and nuns because they are called by God to be monks and nuns, not because they are joining an institution that is inherently more holy or a surer guarantor of holiness.”⁸⁶ Monks are like beacons who can shine the way forward for lay people to imitate, whatever their particular spiritual journey might be; laity, in trying to live fully within the faith, share the joy and peace that all can have in reflecting the Holy Spirit, who is within all baptised people.

1.5.2 The Urban Monk

The universal call to holiness, to follow Christ in the spirit of the monastic movement, received a great impetus in the 1300s with the birth of *Devotio Moderna*. Geert Grote chose to become what can be referred to as “urban monk,” a monk without monastery and Rule of Life. Grote inspired many followers and created a new and unique “monastic” movement. Professor Van Engen, a historian, identifies seven general characteristics of this unique movement: 1) form communities of both lay and ordained persons; 2) worshipped in their local church; 3) very orthodox in doctrine and practice; 4) combined spirituality and morality to an exceptional degree; 5) profoundly devoted to Scripture; 6) met privately in what today would be called small groups; 7) engaged in what they called “fraternal correction.”⁸⁷

This particular Christian way of life is an ideal model that is open to one and all, irrespective of education, cultural background, age or time. Even the very young can live the basic spirit and

86. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 201.

87. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 152-4.

ethos of monasticism, if they understand that God is love, that friendship means loyalty, and that family is meant to be a nurturing community; thus, they can grow in training themselves towards love and understanding their life, whether long or short, as lived entirely within God. Throughout the history of the Church, one finds plentiful examples of children and youth living in the spirit of this way of life. There are also stories about children and adolescents who sought to love God through their ordinary day-to-day, lives – including even extraordinary events, which sometimes involved martyrdom. Take, for example, Tarsicius,⁸⁸ Pancras⁸⁹ and Agnes;⁹⁰ all three children are examples from the early Church of young martyrs who chose Christ and lived in courageously heroic virtue in the face of their early deaths at the hands of pagans. More recently, we find great examples in the likes of Domenico Savio,⁹¹ Maria Goretti⁹² and the three young Portuguese children from Fatima – Lúcia, Francesco and Jacinta.⁹³ Could any monk be more Christian than these children, who exhibited in their single-mindedness, their love and desire to give God preference in all things and before all people? Domenico Savio gave a tangible example of single-mindedness when he answered the one who asked him during playtime, “What would you do if you knew that you would soon die?” Domenico Savio responded that he would continue playing, because it was the time allocated for recreation and that he was ready to meet God! This demonstrates that the very ethos of monasticism is a Christian ideal for everyone, everywhere and

88. Tarsicius was a martyr of the early Christian church who lived in the 3rd century.

89. Pancras was beheaded for his faith at the age of fourteen, around the year 304.

90. Agnes of Rome (c. 291 – c. 304) is a virgin martyr, venerated as a saint in the Roman Catholic Church, Eastern Orthodox Church, the Anglican Communion, and Lutheranism.

91. Dominic Savio (2 April 1842 – 9 March 1857) became ill and died at the age of 14.

92. Maria Goretti (October 16, 1890 – July 6, 1902) died as martyr at the age of 12.

93. Francisco de Jesus Marto (1908 – 1919), his sister Jacinta de Jesus Marto (1910 – 1920) and Lúcia dos Santos (1907–2005), their cousin were children from Aljustrel, a small homestead close to Fátima, Portugal, who witnessed three apparitions of the Angel of Peace in 1916 and several apparitions of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Cova da Iria in 1917. Lúcia entered the convent several years after the deaths of Francisco and Jacinta, but all three children endured a spiritual martyrdom at the hands of harsh Masonic civil authorities and even of their parents and neighbours at the time of the Fatima apparitions.

of every age. The beauty of holiness can be lived by devotion to God, even within a secular environment, as well as within the boundaries of the physical walls of a monastery.

CHAPTER TWO

CHAPTER TWO



Chapter 2

A Re-appropriation of Monasticism as a Way of life for the SDC Member

2.1 The Religious, Ecclesial and Socio-Cultural context of the SDC Foundation

The SDC was founded in the years when Malta was coming of age and when the Church herself was being asked to respond to the many emerging ideologies resulting from a number of political and economic revolutions that shaped the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

For many centuries, because of its size and geographical position, Malta had been insulated from what was happening, both on the continent of Europe and internationally. Colonised for centuries by numerous powers and empires, Malta was a jig-saw of imprints left behind from the first recorded foreign colonial power, the Phoenicians in Carthage (c. 400 BC), up to the last colonizing power, Great Britain, from which Malta gained its independence in 1964.

In the absence of a national identity, which Malta lacked (mainly due to its history of external rulers), the most influential and overarching common factor for the Maltese people was the Catholic Church. The Maltese identified themselves as Catholics as much as Maltese; as George

Vella wrote, “It is an irrefutable historical fact that the Catholic Church in Malta had uncontested, uncriticised, supreme moral, as well as physical authority and power everywhere.”¹

2.1.1 Rapid Change and Turbulent Times

In the early years of the twentieth century, Malta had not yet been hit by the rapid change that came after having obtained independence. Having said that, however, the country’s political and ecclesiastical establishments sensed that the turn of the century and the approaching end of the second millennium would undoubtedly bring about some form of change, for good or ill. Solitary voices and newly organised social and political groups were becoming more and more vociferous, clearly stating that the status quo needed to be challenged. In fact, this brewing political restlessness and social tensions erupted in the riots of 1919.²

Economically, many Maltese were living in abject poverty; full-time jobs were scarce, and many men worked on jobs offered to them on a daily basis. This pushed many thousands of Maltese young people, especially men, to immigrate, primarily to the USA or to Australia; both were new worlds that promised prosperity. “Over 10,000 Maltese settled in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States between 1918 and 1920, followed by another 90,000 – or 30 percent of the population of Malta – between 1948 and 1967.”³

Poverty brings with it a number of related illnesses. By the turn of the Twentieth Century the mortality rate of the newly-born was very high. In 1966 infant mortality rate in Malta was 24.66 deaths per thousand live births;⁴ only a small percentage of children attended elementary school and higher education was restricted and limited to the very few, who could put off gainful

1. George Vella, *Defining Identity: The Role of the Catholic Church in Malta in the Discovery and Formation of Maltese Youth’s Identity*, (Malta: Għaqda Studenti Teoloġija, 2018), 101.

2. These are referred to as the “Sette Giugno” riots because they happened on 7 June 1919.

3. “Maltese Migration”, SS Asturias, accessed August 20, 2018, <http://www.ssasturias.net/maltesemigration.html>.

4. “Infant Mortality Rate”, Statista, accessed August 20, 2018, <https://knoema.com/atlas/Malta/topics/Demographics/Mortality/Infant-mortality-rate>.

employment and who were able to afford schooling. During the years between the two world wars, widespread poverty in Malta prevented the children of the lower classes from pursuing basic education in favour of staying home to assist parents with agricultural work and other income earning activities.

On the social level, the life of the Maltese revolved around the parish church and the local band clubs. Many of the inhabitants could not afford to attend any performances of the opera, carried out mainly by Italian singers, and staged at the only two theatres in Valletta. In general, what the Maltese could enjoy, which came close to such operatic treats, was the music played in the local Catholic Church during the week of the village feast.

At the turn of the century, the Church in Malta was looking forward to a celebration of its nineteenth century anniversary since the Shipwreck of Paul in AD 60.⁵ It can rightly be said that these two events, Independence and 1900 years of Christianity, gave the people of Malta a “[t]aste of freedom, the first introducing us to the community of nations, the second into the community of Churches.”⁶

Thus, the SDC was founded practically in years of upheaval and transition, when Malta was being inundated with foreign influences and when the Church herself was being asked to respond to unbridled materialism and Secular humanism, both characteristic of the New World Order that was emerging as a result of a number of political clashes and economic revolutions that had shaped the previous two centuries.

2.2 The Novelty of the SDC in the Early Twentieth Century Church in Malta

5. As recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, chapters 27-28.

6. Farrugia E, “Dun Ġorġ, The man and the saint”, *The Times* May 9, 2001.

The Society of Christian Doctrine was founded in 1907 by a young Maltese diocesan priest George Preca who was Beatified in Malta by John Paul II on the May 9, 2001 and Canonized in Rome by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI on June 3, 2007.

When George Preca was still a seminarian, he was known to visit the Grand Harbour area on a regular basis. His intention was to engage the sailors, both domestic and foreign, on matters concerning the faith. He also sought to befriend a number of young men who used to spend time playing and socialising in front of the parish church of his own town; as with the sailors, his intention was get these young men talking about matters concerning religion. While George Preca's approach to faith formation was more nuanced than most, it was by no means exclusive. Catechetical initiatives among the Maltese were neither rare nor unique; many other priests, nuns, pious women, parish sacristans and clerics used to teach catechism to children – mainly to prepare them to receive the Sacraments of Holy Communion and Chrismation.

It was still at this time of his formation in the seminarian, when George Preca started befriending a group of young men who used to spend time playing football and socialising in front of St Cajetan of Thiene Parish church in Ħamrun; this was some time in 1906. Early Members recall that shortly after his ordination, after celebrating Mass at the parish church, George Preca used to recollect himself in his room at his parents' home; in that time of solitary prayer, the young priest sought to discern God's will for him in a specific ministry emanating from the Holy Orders he had just recently received. It was during one of these days of prayer that he felt inspired by what Paul wrote to Timothy, "...and what you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well" (2 Timothy 2:2). The insight he got from this Scripture verse was both an inspiration and also a confirmation of all the initiatives he was undertaking during his years in the seminary.

A generation before George Preca, most prominent among the clerics who used to do this kind of teaching ministry was Blessed Ignatius Falzon.⁷ He was remembered as having taught catechism to children; he helped them financially, as well. Blessed Ignatius was also known for his work in the mid-nineteenth century among the British soldiers and sailors stationed on Malta. Like George Preca, he used to meet them by lingering around the docks and other places where they were assigned.⁸ Therefore, the fact that George Preca aspired to dedicate his priesthood to teaching and to faith instruction could not be regarded as a novelty; Blessed Ignatius Falzon had already set a precedent for the Church in Malta.

2.2.1 A New Catechetical Vision

The SDC was founded just four years into the Pontificate of Pope Pius X,⁹ who was elected Pope in 1903. Like any other seminarian and priest of his time, Preca, was eager to see the direction towards which this new Pope would lead the Church. Through his motto, *Instaurare Omnia in Christo* (“To Restore All Things in Christ”), the new pope was clear about the need for renewal within the Roman Catholic Church, a renewal that would eventually make the Church better prepared to address the many pressing issues that were of concern for the world, fast approaching a world war.

The Pope presented his vision for the Church and the world through his first encyclical letter, *E Supremi* (“On High”), in which he showed that the teaching of the Church – especially with regards to marriage, education and respect for personal property – gave a valid and godly response to counter balance the spreading ideological errors and tyrannical ills of the day. In a way, *E Supremi* was a formula which, above all else, proposed good order and justice to a world that was

7. Blessed Nazju Falzon (1 July 1813 – 1 July 1865) was a Maltese cleric and a professed member from the Secular Franciscan Order.

8. “Catholic Saints Information,” Nazju Falzon, accessed November 2, 2018, <http://catholicsaints.info/blessed-nazju-falzon>.

9. Giuseppe Melchiorre Sarto became Pope on August 1903 and served the Church until his death in 1914. He chose the name Pius and was the 10th Pope with this name.

experiencing chaotic upheaval and irreconcilable tensions. What in *ES* was even more directly important for the Christian was that Pope Pius X did not stop with what the world at large needed; he emphasised what the Church herself needed, especially the strengthening of the moral standards among priests and seminarians, which would eventually result in a better educated and holier clergy.¹⁰

Not long after the promulgation of *E Supremi*, Pius X ushered in another strengthening reformation: a process of simplification of the Church's liturgy. In addition, he promoted the daily reception of Holy Communion among the laity and encouraged the frequent reception of the Sacrament of Penance as well. It was in 1910 when the Pope decreed that "young children, who had reached the age of discretion,"¹¹ could receive their first Holy Communion. All these reforms were the result of another very important Encyclical Letter, *Acerbo Nimis* (1905), in which the Pope, wrote that the most essential duty of each and every pastor of the soul, was to teach the Gospel and fullness of faith to the people entrusted to his care. In *AN*, Pius X insisted that parish pastors were obliged to organise catechism classes to give young children sound catechetical instruction, instruction that could truly lead to a life-long embrace of authentic discipleship.¹² The Holy Father himself issued a catechism, commonly known as *The Catechism of Pius X*,¹³ purposely intended to serve all parish pastors as a manual for practical religious and catechetical instruction. In *AN*, the Pope exhorted all pastors to avoid conducting their teaching ministry in an erudite and unnecessarily elaborate style but, instead, to impart the basics of the faith in simple, plain and brief expositions.

10. Pope Pius X, *Acerbo Nimis*, para. 7-9.

11. In 1910, Pope Pius X issued the decree *Quam Singulari*, which changed the age at which communion could be received from 12 to 7 years old, the age of discretion.

12. Pope Pius X, *AN*, para. 25.

13. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI comments on the characteristics of this catechism when he refers to it by saying that Pius X's catechism continues to have friends up to the present because of its "simplicity of exposition and depth of content".

It is difficult to assess to what extent the wishes of Pope Pius X were being followed in the Archdiocese of Malta and the diocese of Gozo. While impossible to say with accuracy who of the parish pastors felt compelled to put into practice this papal vision for renewal of “All Things in Christ,” one priest definitely tuned in to the Pope’s directive, young George Preca. *Acerbo Nimis*, caught the imagination and had an enormous impact on Preca as a seminarian; he was scheduled to receive Holy Orders in just three months’ time. This postulation can be corroborated by Alexander Bonnici who recorded George Preca’s biography; Bonnici wrote that George Preca was still a seminarian when he wrote the *Regula Eptangelorum*¹⁴ – “The Rule for the Seven Angels.” The *Regula Eptangelorum* was intended to serve as a “Rule of Life” for those who would join and become incorporated into a society of permanent deacons. However, the founding at that time of an Order of Permanent Deacons would have been unheard of – a complete novelty for the Church in Malta. Had George Preca’s vision been implemented, the permanent deacons were to be called “*Petridi*” (sons of Peter, the first Pope); these *Petridi* would reside in groups of seven at different parishes. Holiness was to be their first and main objective; their active mission was to be obedient adjutants, helping the parish priest, especially in the sound teaching of the faith to the people of God. This Rule was intended to be sent to the Pope; it was addressed to H.H. Pope Pius X as an answer to his motto *Instaurare Omnia in Christo*.¹⁵ George Preca knew that the Pope would not be inclined to approve any new and untried religious orders; even so, his courage remained, and he prayed through the intercession of Cajetan of Thiene.¹⁶

14. A hand written copy of this Constitution is preserved in the archives of the SDC and for some reason that is not known, this Constitution was never sent by the young seminarian Preca to H.H. Pope Pius X.

15. It was written in Latin and it reads as follows: *Beatissime Pater, Initio Summi Pontificatus tui proncipium tuum “Instaurare omnia in Christo” quod extraxisti de corde tuo, oppresso a statu tepido ultarum ovium gregis Sancti Christi et a ruina anorum, et imulso necessitate ponendi remedium, mihi filio tuo animum da tut offeram humiliter legendum Institutum hoc et adprobandum, si illud iudicas de coeli essa: et reiciendum, si de meia superbia.*

16. Cajetan of Thiene, Italian San Gaetano da Tiene, was born in October 1480, Vicenza, Republic of Venice and died August 7, 1547 in Naples. He was canonized in 1671. Cajetan was a Venetian priest who co-founded the Theatine order and became an important figure of the

After George had become a priest, the youths in front of the parish church did not expect him to continue with his frequent visits to the field, but they were both elated and surprised to see the newly ordained priest continuing to sit with them as before, ready to strengthen the friendship. It was now winter of 1907 and the group, with rising fervour to know more about Jesus, searched for a place where they could meet indoors. A chapel, which was in walking distance from the field, proved ideal for them, and they were granted permission to meet there. But after a while they were asked to make way for other groups or even found the chapel closed; they thought it would be better if they forked out some money from their own earnings and rented their own place. This they did, and their first meeting in the newly rented house took place on March 7, 1907.

The novelty of the SDC in the Church in Malta at the beginning of the Twentieth Century cannot be judged so much by its ministry as by its nonconventional character. At this point in time, there were in Malta many serving diocesan priests, religious men and women, churches, chapels, convents and nunneries. Looking at the figures, and knowing the small size of the island and the number of its inhabitants, one would doubt if there was any space or need for any new religious organisation. Undoubtedly, the newly ordained priest, George Preca, was aware of this glut on priests, meant to be servants of the Lord at His altar. Maybe because of this (and the widespread disconnect between the entitlement of the clerical “class” and the ordinary laity, for whose sake the priests were ordained) we find him in the weeks after his ordination, praying and discerning about his particular ministry.

2.2.2 A Concrete Response to *Acerbo Nimis*

So, how much more of an unlikely novelty was the proposal for the formation of a lay Catholic society, in answer to Pope Pius X’s call in *Acerbo Nimis*! This society expected itself to be

Catholic Counter-Reformation. George Preca had a special devotion for the saint because the parish he grew up in and was serving as a priest was dedicated to this saint.

composed mainly of rugged men (the majority of whom were Dockyard workers), and it aimed to respond to the Pope's call? To even begin to think thus was by far more courageous, and definitely unprecedented in the Maltese Church, at the beginning of the twentieth century. George Preca was not simply inviting these young men to take up a ministry within the established local church; he was intent on founding an autonomous group of laymen, independent in its administration and living the maxims of the Gospel! The youthful George Preca was proposing that for which there was no precedent at the time; he was definitely not copying anything similar that he might have come across, either at home or abroad.

The novelty of the SDC was highlighted by Edward Farrugia (1947) in an article published on the day that George Preca was canonised in Rome; he states: "By the instinct of genius, George Preca felt attracted to strands of the wide Christian tradition which had as yet not found adequate expression here in Malta, but which nonetheless expressed what was latently present, he combined what seems to the superficial observer egalitarian eccentricity with a hugely popular approach is much to his credit." Farrugia continues, "Precisely this combination of the repulsive and the attractive in a highly original synthesis eventually won national, diocesan—and now Church-wide—approval."¹⁷

Edward Farrugia attests that George Preca was thinking in a creative and lateral way when he observes: "Creative people are few and far between ... Even at the one level where Malta excelled—religious vocations—she seems to have had a rather restricted horizon. We have had no hermits and we have had no strong tradition of monasticism. It was therefore like an unexpected shot in the arm—like the sudden turning of the tide—that the appearance of *Dun Ġorġ* affected the home market."¹⁸ Farrugia also remarks that what George Preca did was because of his "passion for orthodoxy which must amaze us in one who had to bear up with so many years of

17. Farrugia E, "Dun Ġorġ, The man and the saint", *The Times* May 9, 2001.

18. Ibid.

incomprehension from the official Church.”¹⁹ And yet, “In spite of so much opposition he managed to insinuate himself into the heart of both the Maltese Church and Maltese society.”²⁰ Preca also managed to “persuaded parents to send their children for catechism several times a week long after first communion and the SDC Members were to give these classes without remuneration”²¹ Furthermore, George Preca, managed to create a learning community within the SDC by asking the Members to gather for their daily Assignment: an hour long learning session held after the catechetical and teaching session with the junior members every day of the week.²² Farrugia concludes that George Preca “managed not only to penetrate into the heart of Maltese culture, but also to contribute handsomely to shape its contemporary face.” Thus, one can conclude that the SDC was a novelty for the Maltese Church and to some extent also for the entire Catholic Church.

Even though this was just a cursory look at the fundamental values and virtues of what is expected from the SDC member, as found in the first Constitution, it is obvious that all is akin to the life of a typical monk. If the hallmark of the life of a monk is his sole purpose of living entirely for God – through virginity and celibacy, fasting, study, meditation, the life of virtue (especially humility and single mindedness – i.e., simplicity), prayer and service – these signatures are equally important and considered as the backbone of what makes an SDC member today, just as much as in the early years of the Society.

2.3 George Preca’s Proposal to the Group: An altogether New Phenomenon

By human standards, George Preca had no natural gifts that could single him out as someone destined to cause any deep sea changes, or even make small waves around him. Although he

19. Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

proved to have aptitude for language, he lacked consistency in school work. When he was twelve years of age and just completed primary school, he did not manage to pass the Lyceum entrance examination; he had to sit for the exam a second time before he finally succeeded in securing a place in the one of the only four secondary school available in Malta at the time.²³ As far as his sports-ability, he had little to none. It is known that whenever his boyhood friends decided to play football, young George was always the last to be picked (usually he was offered as a give-away to the other team since he was considered to be good for nothing in sports).

2.3.1 A Mystery of Paradox

There is a mystery of paradox here. If this is a faithful portrait of George Preca, how could the young men, who first came to know him when he was still a seminarian, wanted to be in his company so much that after his ordination to the priesthood they sought ways to be near him? It was definitely the work of the Holy Spirit that prompted these youths to see in George Preca something deeper than the eye could see. By way of comparison, it seems that the same Spirit that drove the early Christian men and women into the desert to seek guidance from monks and hermits was the same Spirit that led the young men of Hamrun to seek from George Preca that same kind of guidance that they were sure was coming from the indwelling Spirit the priest enjoyed.

One can also say that as much as the early eremitical life was looked upon by many as enigmatic, the humble beginnings of the SDC intrigued many as to what it was that could have drawn the first members; what did they find in the young priest? The answer to this question is found in the testimony of the early members themselves, especially Eugene Borg,²⁴ who testifies that he would experience so much joy that it was nearly impossible for him to sleep, he would spend time gazing

23. Ronald G Sultana, “Dun Ġorġ and the Democratisation of Knowledge”, *Rivista Dun Ġorġ*, No 40 (2000), 469.

24. Eugene Borg was a dockyard worker and the first Superior General; his holiness and exemplary life has been recognized in his being named Servant of God.

at the night sky savouring the God's beauty and benevolence.²⁵ What George Preca did then was very similar to what happens in the early days of every new Religious Order, if it is authentically from God.

2.3.2 Closer to Those at the Fringes of Society

The Founder willingly associated with those who were living at the fringes of the society – the impoverished, the marginalized and the neglected.²⁶ George Preca was also able to associate with those who the upper class of his days referred to as *bifolchi* (the underclass) but who for him were potential saints. It seems that people from within the Church also used to refer to the early Members as *bifolchi* for George Preca himself referred to this word when reminiscing on the days of the enquiry.²⁷ He had no love of money, and therefore he was not motivated by money in his ability to draw and associate with all people. He did not seek to know anything about their cultural, political or social status in society, and by being so he was able to create a new Gospel-based culture within the existing Maltese culture. Or as one leading Maltese politician puts it: “the SDC resembles the Low Church within the Protestant movement where the emphasis is not on rituals, structures, hierarchy and liturgical complexities but popular and participative.”²⁸

The role George Preca had in mind for his young followers was surely not that of bystanders or of a spectator. As we have mentioned previously, when he was a cleric he had dreamt of sending Pius X a draft for an association of permanent deacons who, forming a team with the parish-priest, would bring Christ to the people. His plan, for some reason or another, changed into a more radical proposal: preparing ordinary, sometimes illiterate lay men, who would seek to live in holiness and

25. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. I.* (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 164.

26. Psalm 72: 12-14 “For he delivers the needy when they call,/the poor and those who have no helper./He has pity on the weak and the needy,/and saves the lives of the needy./From oppression and violence he redeems their life;/and precious is their blood in his sight.”

27. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. II.* (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 170.

28. Alfred Sant, “Ħsibijiet profani dwar il-ħidma ta’ Dun Ġorġ Preca fis-sena meta ġie kkanonizzat”. *Rivista Dun Ġorġ*, No 46 (2010), 23.

humility and would spread around them – in family, work and parish – the Good News of the Gospel. The first step to prepare these young men to become, literally, apostles was by introducing them to the study of Scriptures, especially the New Testament. This was both new and dangerous. New in the sense that there wasn't even a copy of Sacred Scriptures in the Maltese language, and dangerous because it was “In an age when urging the constant use of the Bible could easily smack of Protestant proselytism,”²⁹ to which Malta as one of the most vital ports in the British Commonwealth was exposed. On his part, George Preca convinced adults to have a Bible ready at hand and wanted Members and children alike to learn passages of it by heart.

2.3.3 Hints of Transformation

The spirit and enthusiasm with which these young members embraced the challenges that George Preca presented to them was astonishing. People of the time, who knew these young men, testified that they were completely transformed; this was evident not only because the young men were more rigorous in their church attendance but also in their outward appearance, especially in the modest way they dressed and in their short hair-cuts; even more radical were the facts that they all gave up smoking cigarettes and did away with wearing neckties and gold chains, a custom that was much in vogue in those days.

Anything that is new stirs up reactions, and while some admired the new-found society, others looked on them with scorn and ridicule. Whatever the reaction, the young members caused quite a stir; they came across as a new phenomenon, for they resembled no other Maltese or Catholic group, but they were more exotic in that they looked unfamiliar, unconventional and all-around different. In an article entitled “The M.U.S.E.U.M., Faith and Culture”,³⁰ Mario Farrugia, reflects on the great change and the impact George Preca had on the youth who befriended him.

29. Farrugia E, “St George Preca, Second Father in the Faith - History repeats itself only once—the second time!” *The Times* May 9, 2004.

30. Mario Farrugia, “Il-MUSEUM - il-Fidi u l-Kultura”, *Rivista Dun Ġorg*, No 40 (2000), 26.

In their great majority, the early Members were dockyard workers and the first few Centres were situated in close proximity of the harbours, and although they were good tradesman they still lacked that formal education which in those days very few could afford. Yet for the start, George Preca, wanted these youth to learn how to read and write, as stipulated in the first Constitutions. He wanted them to buy books and have their own library so that they can learn on different subjects and in turn be able to teach the others. Mario Farrugia writes that while their contemporaries spent their evenings around a glass of wine at some bar or kill time around the village square, the SDC Members turned the SDC Centres into cultural hubs where they met daily and grew in knowledge. As the Society grew and other villages were eager to have their own SDC Centre, men from all walks of life started to join and during the Assignment, the farmer, businessman, tradesman, fisherman, teacher, civil servant ... would meet and in turn teach each other. Keeping in mind that at this time the Maltese were in general illiterate and uneducated to stimulate such a desire for learning was by far a phenomenon to be reckoned with.

2.4 Characteristics of the Monastic Life in George Preca's Prophetic Vision

In his priestly ministry, George Preca was an inspired innovator in every dimension of faith-formation of his own people, beginning with their vernacular language. In the early years of the twentieth century, the Maltese language was regarded as a dead language, considered to be good only "for the kitchen." No educated person of that time thought of conveying his thoughts by writing in Maltese;³¹ the prospect of publishing instructive or religious books in Maltese was unthinkable. The British political rulers of the islands were pushing to establish the English language as the sole language of the indigenous people, and the old guard (including the church)

31. The Maltese language is Semitic. It developed from several ancient tongues, mainly Arabic, and it is the only Arabic dialect that uses a Latin alphabet; Maltese also incorporates words from other cultures: Sicilian, Italian, Spanish, French, and English.

were four-square adamant about keeping Italian as the nation's *lingua franca*. Despite such towering opposition, Preca, wrote in Maltese. He understood that the Maltese vernacular was the only language the people in general understood, showing that his heart was rooted where the common people were.

2.4.1 Verba Volant, Scripta Manet

George Preca can be considered as a prolific writer; he wrote numerable books, leaflets and one-page treatises on many themes concerning the spiritual life. George Preca started writing when he was still relatively young; one can find his writings bearing an *imprimatur* as early as 1909.³² Many of his early writings were intended solely for the dogmatic, theological and spiritual growth of the SDC members; these books had *ad usum privatum* (for private use) printed on the front cover. However, as a wider interest spread in these first publications, and his writings started to become popular, many encouraged Preca to make them available to a wider audience. It is evident that George Preca came to understand the enormity of the task before him: if he was to contribute something substantial that could elevate his people from their religious ignorance, he could not continue teaching in the usual and expected way. He came to the knowledge that he could reach the people, not by preaching in Latin within the confines of the church building, as many other priests did, but by going to where the people were, in the squares and in the SDC centres that were located next door to where the common people lived. Knowing that *verba volant* but *scripta manet*³³ he availed himself of a formidable medium – the printed word – with which he could convey his teaching and reach out to many people in their own mother tongue.

While it was undeniable that the great majority of Maltese islanders were practicing Catholics, with their daily lives centred on and around the church, George Preca knew that this could not

32. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. III*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1989), 293.

33. *Verba Volant, scripta manet* loosely means: 'words get lost, while writing lasts'.

continue to be taken for granted, as he was aware of the disruptive ideologies inserted into Maltese society by individuals such as Mikiel Anton Vassalli,³⁴ Manuel Dimech and Manwel Camilleri also known as Violi.³⁵ Vassalli strived hard, “[t]o apply to the Maltese context the philosophical doctrines of the illuminists;”³⁶ Dimech, indisputably wanted and worked for, “an overhaul of the social system ... aiming to pull the carpet from under the structures of oppression, whether they were maintained by the British colonial government, the Catholic Church, the privileged classes, or whoever.”³⁷ George Preca felt compelled to do something to counter the enlightenment teachings of these utopian reformers; he considered them as *heretics*³⁸ and in danger of misleading and leaving an indelible mark on the Maltese society.

Intelligently reading the signs of the times, George Preca employed as tools the same practical means that were used as weapons against the “establishment” by these radical social and political reformers. Preca was not naïve; he understood the implications of such revolutionary ideas. He knew that the Church was herself looked upon as part and parcel of the “establishment”; thus, he opted to create his own “school” in the form of the SDC centres and his own “newspaper” in the form of printed treatises and pamphlets he was issuing regularly. Alexander Bonnici cites in his biography of George Preca that the young priest routinely sought the help of at least three SDC Members to copy, transcribe and edit the work he intended to print.³⁹ It is also recorded that practically every surplus of money that he saved was all invested in printing.⁴⁰

34. Mikiel Anton Vassalli (1764 - 1829) was a Maltese writer and a philosopher, who was profoundly influenced by the tumult in Malta and the ideology of the French Revolution of the time.

35. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. I.* (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 239.

36. “Mikiel Anton Vassalli,” Bijografiji – Akkademja tal-Malti, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://akkademjatalmalti.org/bijografiji/mikiel-anton-vassalli>.

37. “Manuel Dimech’s political programme” Bijografiji – Akkademja tal-Malti, accessed November 2, 2018, <https://akkademjatalmalti.org/bijografiji/mikiel-anton-vassalli>.

38. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. II.* (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 255.

39. Bonnici, *f’Dun Ġorġ Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti*, Vol. II. (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 290.

40. *Ibid.*, 293.

Of the openly heretical social reformers of his days, many of whom were convicted criminals, Manuel Dimech⁴¹ was maybe the most notable of all. There was anger with the country's present state of affairs, and these "zealots" worked hard to bring change by attacking and undermining the political and religious establishment. George Preca, too, had his own saintly "rage" but he had a different answer to the injustice: to reinvent a new way, both of teaching the Good News of the Gospel, and of presenting it to his people that he loved so dearly.

2.4.2 New Wine in New Wineskins

There is a striking parallelism between the action taken by the early movement of monasticism in the West and what George Preca was doing in Malta. In the same way that the monasteries were creating a new way of life designed to offer an oasis to those who "hunger and thirst for righteousness" (Matthew 5:6), the SDC Centres were to serve as a hub of life-long learning for those who were eager to pour "the new wine into new wine skins" (Luke 5:37). Preca knew that one could not use outdated tools for modern realities; he wanted the church to face the future, not by polishing the past, but by reinventing the present. George Preca came to the conclusion that this could be done through a new way, which originated not through human intuition, but was a divine inspiration speaking to him through sacred scripture: "What you have heard from me through many witnesses entrust to faithful people who will be able to teach others as well" (2 Timothy 2:2). This was the path into which Preca found himself drawn, for this was the way by which he could enable the people of his time to find adequate answers for their present dilemma of ignorance of the Bible and blindness to Divine Revelation in Jesus Christ. He wanted his people to rediscover the eternal truths not by remaining passive receptors but by becoming engaged protagonists.

41. Manuel Dimech was in prison many times throughout his life. On January 5, 1891 he was convicted for the 10th time for a crime related to counterfeit of false money and was sentenced to 9 years imprisonment with hard labour. "Manuel Dimech's prison experience," Revolvly, accessed February 2, 2019, <https://www.revolvly.com/page/Manwel-Dimech>.

Knowing that he could not fulfil this mission alone or answer this vocation on his own, he invested the lay young people with his trust and enabled them to become the teachers and the spiritual directors of others, imitating Jesus who taught and healed those who came to him. By choosing such a small and simple way of contributing to the proper mission of the Church, he achieved one of the most effective and robust apostolates in the Church, capable of sustainability into a future of hope.

2.4.3 A Counter Proposition

George Preca's response was not a reaction intended to sustain some form of *status quo*, but his was an action that sought to address the intellectual, humanistic and spiritual formation of those who were most forsaken. If the monastic movement created a *locus* for study with a set curriculum suitable for ordination,⁴² Preca opened similar *loci*: houses where people of all ages and background can form learning communities.

Two books, *The Great Book* (GB) and *The Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit* (SCS), both convey the salient characteristics of the monastic life, as manifest in the SDC. As identified earlier, the core and essential elements of monasticism include: love of God, peace, work, prayer, simplicity, humility and community, the latter is more related to the coenobitic ascetism. There are ample references in both the *GB* and the *SCS* that corroborate with these core elements. If peace is the gift bestowed by God on all people of good will (Luke 2:14), and peace is the perennial gift that Jesus gave to those who follow him (John 14:27), peace is also what George Preca promises in the opening quote of *The Great Book*: "Let me hear what God the LORD will speak, for he will speak peace to his people" (Psalm 85:8).

42. Novices for the Religious life had two main courses: *Studium particulare* and *studium general* and (unlike that held in universities which consisted of four courses of the *quadrivium*: arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy) the *scualisticum* was a basic *tridium* course that comprised: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric apart from Scripture and dogma.

As testified in Holy Scripture and found in every Rule of Life that guides those who seek God above all else, obedience is central to the spiritual life. The word obedience comes from the Latin *obedire*, which taken literally means “listen to.” In the biblical sense, the person who obeys God is the one who listens the Voice of God and submits to His will.⁴³

In Orthodox monasticism, obedience is the foundational stone on which peace and liberty are built: “obedience is the first and foremost rule ... and when a monk or a nun lives in voluntary obedience, he or she experiences more and greater freedom than a person in society who must live by the rules of society, whether he wishes it or not.”⁴⁴ Moreover, in the Benedictine tradition, obedience is the virtue that enables the monk to become one with Christ. Benedict teaches that obeying the Rule and one’s superior is equivalent to obeying God; in the twelve steps of the ladder of humility, Benedict writes: “the third step of humility is, for the love of God, to submit to one’s superior in all obedience, imitating the Lord of whom the apostle says, “He became obedient unto death”⁴⁵ (Philippians 2:8).

George Preca, follows this teaching of living “in ALL obedience” when he asks the Member to start the day by holding to the cross of resignation,⁴⁶ kissing it, and reciting the words: “If any

152. In his thesis, ‘Love of Friendship’ in the Christian Life’, *Master’s thesis, University of Malta, 2016, 99-104*, Jonathan Sammut shows that, in the Fourth Gospel the disciples’ obedience to Jesus’s commands (John 15: 10) is embodied in the loving relationship between the Father and the Son. Thus, “when readers hear that Jesus’ disciples are his friends if they obey his commands, they are to understand that Jesus’ obedience to the Father functions as an expression of his love for the Father: ‘I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father’ (John 14:31).” It is true that the Father-Son relationship appears to require such obedience: “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:10). However, Jesus’ affirmation that both relationships require the keeping of commandments (cf. John 15:10) suggests that the disciples’ obedience to Jesus commands does not dampen the level of intimacy that their friendship brings. For this reason, Sammut concludes that, friendship and obedience do not cancel each other out, but “exist in dialectical relationship, both equally necessary in defining the profound relationship between disciples and the one who is their Lord and Friend.”

44. “Monastic Obedience,” Korennaya (Kursk Root) Hermitage, accessed December 28, 2018, http://www.kurskroot.com/monastic_obedience.html.

45. RB 7.34.

46. Constitutions 80.

want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9:23). Therefore, in the mind of the Founder, the SDC Member becomes a true disciple of Jesus when he conforms to and abides in the will of God, accepting all the joys and sorrows that Divine Providence permits. George Preca himself gave full example of this kind of obedience when he submitted to the will of God by obeying the Archbishop’s Vicar General, Salvatore Grech, who ordered him to close all the SDC Centres; Preca obeyed, without any rebuttal or protest.⁴⁷

Benedict refers to this kind of obedience as the “second step of humility,” which is realised, “When someone who does not love his own will does not delight in fulfilling his own desires, but imitates with his deeds the saying of the Lord: ‘I have not come to do my own will, but the will of him who sent me’ (John 6:38).”⁴⁸

2.5 Major Themes in the Life and Writings of George Preca

George Preca can be seen both from his life and his writings as having offered his life entirely to the praise and adoration of God. He is accredited with having written one hundred and forty books, and many of these books were intended to be used for the practical, theological and spiritual formation of the SDC Members. A number of his books became classics, as they were recognised for what they were: a path towards holiness and even sainthood. Through his abundant writings, Preca shared his prayer life and showed how in the same spirit of monasticism, it is possible to live a life of praise and adoration towards God. In fact, all the spiritual basic elements of the monastic living can be found in the writings of George Preca, especially in *The Watch* (which is

47. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. I*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 210.

48. Hugh Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life*. (NY: Harper San Francisco, 2000), 154.

the SDC prayer book), the *Gymnasium for the Spiritual Life* (which encapsulates the SDC spirituality), *The Great Book* (the depth of Divine Love revealed in the passion of Christ) and *The Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit* (which reflects union with Christ in His Sacred Heart). There is also one particular writing that the Founder himself distributed in 1945,⁴⁹ in which he spells out the manifold dimensions that the spirit of the SDC Member should embody.

2.5.1 Self-denial

The objective of the monk's aspiration is salvation. Similarly, salvation is what George Preca asks the SDC Member to train his mind for and to set his heart on. The SDC Member must be: "Convinced that he is going to work for his salvation and the salvation of others by teaching, by prayer, by self-denial and by sufferings."⁵⁰ In this same writing, the Founder lists a number of virtues, attitudes and qualities to which the Member must constantly adhere, which include the following: "God alone be the witness of his deeds; walk continuously in God's presence; constantly examines himself to avoid the deceptions of his own temperaments, his fellows or those of Satan; call on God to deliver him in times of trouble, confusion, or agitation; train himself in the practice of meekness, which is the Society's priceless virtue; treasure sound teaching; consider nothing precious on earth next to the grace of keeping away from himself and from others mortal sin; abhor any kind of remuneration or thanksgiving for his apostolate; fixes his eyes on Christ Jesus, the only centre of his heart's love; have true devotion to Our Lady the Mother of Jesus Christ; and spread devotion towards the holy sentence: *Verbum Dei caro factum est*. In so doing the Member is to be rest assured that he will enjoy peace: *Pax Domini nostri Jesu Christi sit semper in cordibus nostris. Amen* – the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be always in our hearts. Amen."⁵¹

49. Preca, *The Watch*, "The Spirit of the SDC Member According to the Founder", 142.

50. Ibid. para. 2.

51. Preca, *The Watch*, "The Spirit of the SDC Member According to the Founder", 142.

2.5.2 *Kenosis*

George Preca's life and writings suggest that what he desired most was nothing other than the emptying of himself – *kenosis* – to allow God to pour out His spirit, transforming his whole life into a school of spiritual wisdom. The word *kenosis*, which is derived from the Greek word *kenoo* (translated as “emptied”), is a Pauline teaching that was the catalyst in what is more commonly referred to as “kenotic theology.” One way of postulating on the Incarnation of *Logos* is by reflecting on Jesus who, “Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied* [*ekenōsen*] himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (Philippians 2:6-7).

The desire to live only for God – and to make God known and loved – became evident from the early days of the Foundation. Saviour Muscat, one of the first members, suggested that the group should be called *Museum*, for what they were preserving in the Society of Christian Doctrine. In the same way that other countries hold their treasures in museums, the SDC held the Word of God, Divine Revelation and the teachings of the Catholic Church as their treasures. The Founder constructed from M.U.S.E.U.M. the most fascinating and original acronym: *Magister Utinam Sequatur Evangelium Universus Mundus* – (Master, may the whole world follow the Gospel). This interpretation became both a motto and a prayer for the SDC; at the same time it gave evidence to the Founder's fervent desire that all the people of the whole world would come to know God more and so love Him better. This was the culmination of both the inspiration Preca received on reading 2 Timothy 2:2 and the confirmation he experienced in the vision of the Child Jesus commanding him to help him pull a cart full of manure. It also confirmed what his confessor once told him: “Preca, God has chosen you to teach his people.” Far from a bookish concept or second-hand theory, Preca's personal love for God and his desire to live a life of praise and adoration towards God was an outburst of his yearning to impart sound knowledge that could result in true discipleship.

2.5.3 Put on the New Man

The Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit (SCS) starts and ends by echoing Galatians: "Cast away the old man and put on the new man," so that, like Paul, who stated, "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me," (Galatians 2:20) every person can become Christ-like. George Preca knew that if one wills to adore and glorify God to merit eternal life, then one needs to, "Pray to God to grant him the sublime grace to imitate perfectly this one and only model Master of all those who want" (SCS chapter 6). Preca believed that when one is pregnant with this desire he then strives to instil it in others, "Through instruction, prayer and good example" and to imitate Christ who, "Never taught anything without first setting the example Himself" (SCS chapter 5). This analogy is similar to Basil's commentary on Philippians 1:21: "Truly my words ought to be about Christ, my every thought and deed ought to depend upon His commandments, and my soul to be fashioned after His."⁵²

One particular ascetical writing, found in the *Apophthegmata*,⁵³ ascribed to Abba John the Little, portrays a compendium of the essential virtues that a monk was expected to integrate. If we compare this writing with the writings of George Preca, one cannot fail to recognise a number of similarities. John writes: "I think it best that a man should have a little bit of all the virtues. Therefore, get up early every day and acquire the beginning of every virtue and every commandment of God."⁵⁴ John then urges the monks to practice patience: "Use great patience, with fear and long-suffering, in the love of God, with all the fervour of your soul and body."⁵⁵ For the virtue of meekness, Abba John recommends: "When you are despised, do not get angry; be at peace, and do not render evil for evil."⁵⁶ He asks the monks to be humble and compassionate with

52. "St Basil of Caesarea's Letter 159," New Advent, accessed on December 28, 2018, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3202159.htm>

53. *The Apophthegmata Patrum* (lit. *Sayings of the Fathers*).

54. William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 199-200.

55. *Ibid.*

56. William Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 199-200.

one another: “Do not pay attention to the faults of others, and do not try to compare yourself with others, knowing you are less than every created thing.”⁵⁷ John then reminds the monk that he should lead a life of virtue animated by renunciation and mortification: “Renounce everything material and that which is of the flesh. Live by the Cross, in warfare, in poverty of spirit, in voluntary spiritual asceticism, in fasting, penitence and tears, in discernment, in purity of soul, taking hold of that which is good.”⁵⁸ In Preca’s book, *Guide to the Sons and Daughters in the Way of Peace*, we find great similarities to John the Little’s blue print to the monastic way of living.

George Preca wrote, “Whoever you are, when you wake up talk to God who created you and tell him: ‘Lord God, we all need your help both for the temporal and the spiritual; for without you we can do nothing, give us your help for the merits of the divine wounds of our Master Jesus Christ’.”⁵⁹ The Monk is urged to practice patience. Likewise, in *The Discipleship*, Preca lists “Mortification and Patience” as the first lesson the disciple learns as he enters the School of the Divine Master, Jesus Christ,⁶⁰ and in the *Gymnasium for the Spiritual Life*, the Founder lists “silence and patience” as the “two oars” that enable the soul “to reach the eternal heavenly haven” (Instruction 3). Preca writes: “The wise, prudent and saintly person is recognized by his patience;”⁶¹ referring to Sacred Scripture, he insists that the Holy Spirit declares that the one who is not patient, “[a]cts foolishly and have to sustain hardship and pain, for the virtue of patience is to be exercised through trials, tribulations and all that is against one’s nature, in other words in suffering.”⁶² He then continues to exhort the reader to, “Practice humility, bear with interior distress; be vigilant and pray often with reverence and groaning, with purity of speech and control of your eyes.”⁶³

57., Ibid.

58., Ibid.

59. Preca, *Guide to the Sons and Daughters in the Way of Peace*, Guide no. 100.

60. Preca, *The Discipleship*, 59

61. Preca, *The Convent of the Crusaders*, Cell no. 98.

62. Ibid.

63. Preca, *The Convent of the Crusaders*, Cell no. 98.

The monk strives to praise and adore God through a life lived with right-intention, simplicity, single-mindedness, mortification of the senses and a readiness to serve the others. In a similar way, the SDC Member after receiving Holy Communion prays:

“Lord God, I need you: grant me the grace of overcoming every occasion of human respect so that I may prefer you above all people and above all things; grant me the grace of refusing nothing to my neighbour in need; grant me the grace of never putting aside the thought of your presence, for you are always a witness to all I think, all I say, and all I do; grant me the grace that I may give you all my heart by mortifying anything that pleases my fallen human nature, especially my sense of sight; grant me the grace of working for the salvation of souls, so precious because they are created in your own likeness.”⁶⁴

2.6 Correlations Between Monastic structure and the Early Constitutions of the SDC

When in the early years of the SDC George Preca started writing the first rules, his intention was to guide the youths in their first steps of Christian discipleship; he definitely wasn't thinking of creating either a monastic order or religious community. His *utinam* (deep desire) was a result of his certainty that, if a person comes to know more about Jesus, he will be induced to love Him. Sometimes he would pretend to be drawing a “big zero” in the air, and with a broken heart and a shrill voice, George Preca used to say that for many, God was neither missed nor missing. Having said that, he strongly believed that this form of indifference did not result from hatred for God but, a natural consequence of religious ignorance, which he felt compelled to address by sound instruction. He would often quote Paul: “How are they to call on one in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard? And how are they

64. Preca, *The Watch* ‘Prayer of God’s Servant after Communion as found in the SDC’.

to hear without someone to proclaim him? And how are they to proclaim him unless they are sent? As it is written, ‘How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!’ (Isaiah 52:7) (Romans 10:14-15).”

So full of zeal was he to bring the Word of God to all! He spoke with such ardency of heart that the minds and hearts of the youth around him were set on fire and with great enthusiasm embraced the two foundational rules he set before them in the first Constitution;⁶⁵ “learn to teach” and “be holy, for I am holy” (Leviticus 11:44).

The first Constitutions were a collection of 227 rules that George Preca himself wrote into a copybook. The Archbishop had ordered that the SDC undergo a scrutiny, and these 227 rules were intended to be passed on in this copybook to the Archbishop’s enquiring commission. It is very obvious from the handwritten copy of this Constitution that there was no time for editing or corrections, as the rules are written without any logical or coherent order. Yet, when one reads through these Constitutions, one can easily conclude which rules were essential in encapsulating the spirit and backbone of the SDC and which were merely intended to help in the administration and discipline of the newly-founded Society.

2.6.1 The Core of the Inspiration

However, the rules that George Preca regarded as vital in capturing the fundamental inspiration⁶⁶ and the aims of the SDC are seven constitutions that are found at the inside back cover of the copybook. These seven rules implored the SDC Members to:

- i) pray the *Mons Domini* (the Beatitudes) in a meditative and contemplative manner every day;
- ii) cultivate a culture of meekness;

65. The Founder wrote *The First Constitutions* on a copy book and presented the hand written copy to the Commission which was tasked by the Bishop to enquire about the new foundation.

66. Constitutions 90.

- iii) grow into a learning community through the study of dogmatic theology, moral theology, and ascetical and mystical spirituality;
- iv) be respectful (venerate) of the Pope, the bishop and all the priests;
- v) segregate themselves from all outsiders and be attentive of the dynamics of the relationships among the members themselves;
- vi) regard Jesus Christ as their only teacher; and
- vii) sustain the spirit of the SDC through the daily Assignment.⁶⁷

These seven rules served both as summary and distillation of the spiritual path the Founder was proposing to the youth who befriended him. This path demanded nothing short of a personal transformation, a transformation that was spreading its roots and taking hold of the minds and hearts of these first members of the Society and becoming evident enough to be noticed by the parish community. In fact, when the ecclesial authority deemed it necessary to put an end to the SDC endeavour, the parish priest, Joseph Muscat,⁶⁸ defended the SDC and testified that the parish community were amazed by the youths' positive change in behaviour and church attendance.

If one were to juxtapose the seven basic rules of the SDC with the cumulative rules of Basil, Augustine, *The Rule of the Master* (RM) and Benedict, one finds a number of similarities. All these rules point to the first commandment of the Lord: to love God, followed by love for neighbour. When Basil lists the fundamental motivations one must have before seeking to become a monk, "love of God and neighbour," "separation from the world," "engagement in ascetic activity" and "prayer"⁶⁹ are what he demands. Augustine too asks the brothers to "Love God above

67. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. II*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 325.

68. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. I*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 211.

69. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 55.

all else,”⁷⁰ and the nuns to “be of one heart and one soul seeking God.”⁷¹ What the SDC Rule asks from the SDC Members does not fall short from what *The Rule of the Master* demands in that anonymous sixth century collection of rules for monks.

2.6.2 Learn to Teach

The Founder wished that those who journey with him on this spiritual path desire holiness above anything else; in other words salvation of one’s soul. This too is what *The Master* sees as the greatest motivation for the monastic life: “To bring loving servants to him who is their Lord.”⁷² This maxim is echoed in the Rule of Benedict (RB) when he invites those who seek to secure their salvation to attend to the Rule – the school for the service of the Lord – by living a life that pleases God through good works.⁷³ The SDC Rule, the way of life and what the SDC prays parallel the monastic ethos. Table 1, identifies the common threads between the core elements that constitute the life of the monk, what the SDC Rule states and what the SDC Members pray to become.

The pre-eminent prayer of the SDC Member is the “Adoration of Our God,” which is prayed in community by the incorporated members on the 7th, 17th and 27th of every month. This prayer consists of seven adorations in which the Members prostrate themselves seven times and implores God to guide, bless, prosper and preserve the SDC. At the beginning of this prayer, the Members tie a green sash about the waist, symbolising their desire to be one with God. The one who presides over this prayer of Adoration, lights seven green candles and burns incense in a small thurible.

Table 1:

A comparison of the monastic ethos and the SDC ethos as expressed in the prayers of the *Adoration of our God*

70. Augustine of Hippo, “Regulations for a Monastery” 1; Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo*. p. 75.

71. Augustine of Hippo, “Reprimand to Quarrelling Nuns” 2; Lawless, *Augustine of Hippo*. p. 105.

72. Prologue of the *Rule of the Master*, qtd., in Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 60.

73. *Ibid.*, 74

Monastic ethos	SDC ethos	SDC Prayer <i>Adoration of Our God</i>
<p>Salvation – RB (Introduction) <i>Arseni, fuge homines et salus eris.</i> (Arsenius of Scetis)</p>	<p>Introduction to the Rule written by the by the Founder: "Not everybody can join the Society of Christian Doctrine, known since its foundation in 1907 as M.U.S.E.U.M., but only those who have this vocation from God. They are called to sustain the Catholic Church by instructing others and by giving good example for the salvation of people."</p>	<p>Stretch forth, O God, your might in favour of our Society, and enrich it with faith, hope and love for you; and do not turn away from us in all our misery.</p>
<p>God Alone (<i>Soli Deo</i>) "God Alone" is the proclamation that is posted at the entrance to every Trappist monastery</p>	<p>Inspired by the spirit of St Michael the Archangel, it proclaims that "nobody is like to our God!" (Rev 12:7) - God alone is adored. (SDC C 10).</p>	<p>O God, Father of light, enlighten our Society that we may avoid deceptions through prudence, and so please you in all the dispositions of your providence and wisdom in which alone true peace is to be found.</p>
<p>Purity of heart Single-mindedness (<i>Puritas cordis</i>) In seeking purity of heart, the monks hoped to acquire the needed clear-sightedness that enabled them to see "God rightly and desire only heavenly things."</p>	<p>Members are to constantly hold God as witness to all their actions, and they must often ask God to increase right intention within them. (SDC Rule C 58).</p>	<p>O God, pour forth your Spirit upon our Society so that we may glorify you by thought, word and deed, and keep us always with purity of intention in all our actions.</p>
<p>Prayer (<i>Ora</i>) The spirit of Benedict's Rule is summed up in the motto of the Benedictine Confederation: <i>ora</i> (pray) <i>et labora</i> (work)</p>	<p>The Prophet St Elijah is the protector of prayer in the Society and especially of <i>The Watch</i>. Therefore, members are encouraged to imitate him in his union with God and in their search for silence. (SDC Rule C 70).</p>	<p>Have mercy, O God, upon your servants, and grant that we fulfil the purpose for which you have created us: to know you, to love you, and to serve you faithfully.</p>

together with <i>lectio</i> sacred reading.		
Work (<i>Labora</i>)	The members are called to live in the world and to sanctify it through their lives, work and apostolate by living Christ's spirit and by promoting the Christian ideals. Thereby they are light, yeast and salt wherever they may be (Mt 5, 13 and 14; Lk 13, 21). (SDC Rule C 14).	Look, O Lord, upon our Society and nourish it with your grace that it may increase in Members and holiness for the service of our Catholic Church by teaching the words of life.
Repentance (<i>Metanoia</i>) "The monk is a Christian who has responded to a special call from God, and has withdrawn from the more active concerns of a worldly life, in order to devote himself completely to repentance, <i>metanoia</i> , renunciation and prayer" – <i>Thamas Merton</i>	To be true friends of the Gospel, members need constant conversion to it and a life of self-denial. Each morning, therefore, they take up the Cross of Resignation in their hands, repeating Christ's words: "If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross every day and follow me." (Lk 9,23) (SDC Rule C 65).	Keep our Society under your powerful protection, O God, and since you alone are the beginning and the end, covert us truly to you. Do not permit that anyone of us dies in the state of mortal sin, but grant that we all die in a state of perfect love for you.

2.7 Characteristics of the SDC Monastic ethos as Identified by Non-members.

The death of any founder triggers a period of reflection, a quest for appropriation, a thrust to conserve the original inspiration, and an exercise to nurture the charism for the future. If this reflection is mature and healthy, the life of founders and their charism continue to flourish and be relevant for the Church and the world; if not, the charism risks to wither and die. Even worse, it can be deformed into a caricature of what the Spirit intended it to be.

Nearly sixty years after the death of George Preca, his life and writings continue to be studied and reflected upon by people of differing specialties and interests, who are able to probe his legacy from different angles. This exercise helps in shedding new light on the Founder, but of even more importance, it energizes the Society he founded to deepen her own understanding of the Precan spirituality and it prompts the Members to reflect on the deeper layers of their own vocation in the present culture.

Every expression of spirituality reflects something very unique with regards to the inspiration that the Holy Spirit bestows on various members of the Church. One particular reflection that has started to be delved more deeply, especially during the last twenty years, is related to the monastic traits in the life and spiritual legacy of George Preca.

When one reads the published reflections made by non-members about the Founder and the SDC charism, one can distinctly see that all of them refer to George Preca as an inspired man, who translated the inspiration he received by the Holy Spirit into a particular *sequela Christi*. Peter Serracino Inglott (1936–2012) finds in the *SDC Rule* all the basic monastic elements of the *sequela Christi* as expounded in the *Rule of Benedict* and states that the *SDC Rule* adds a particular element to this aspect of monasticism by emphasizing meekness as a way of perfection, obeying the one who said: ‘Imitate me for I am meek and humble at heart’ (Matthew 11:29).⁷⁴

The SDC way of life can be considered to form part of the new monastic movement⁷⁵ that spread in the Church during the latter part of the Twentieth century. The SDC can also be looked upon

74. Serracino Inglott, *Aħna min Aħna*, 10.

75. The term, ‘New Monasticism’ can be attributed to Jonathan Wilson who expounded his ideas about this new phenomenon in his book *Living Faithfully in a Fragmented World* (1998). Many years before him, in 1935, Dietrich Bonhoeffer held that: ‘The restoration of the church will surely come only from a new type of monasticism which has nothing in common with the old but a complete lack of compromise in a life lived in accordance with the Sermon on the Mount in the discipleship of Christ’. This same line of thought or prophetic intuition was echoed by a contemporary philosopher, Alasdair MacIntyre, in his book *After Virtue*, where he wrote that ‘the Church (and the world) needs another Benedict who will be able to lead and renew both in the Church and in the world.’

as ‘neo-monastic,’ for while infused by that Eschatological Theology akin to every monastic rule, it is not lived within the precincts of a physical place, such as in a monastery, but lived in the secular world having no hard borders. This particular secular way of life reflects more the Incarnational Theology and puts its emphasis on appropriating the prophetic gestures of Jesus in the here and now.

The *SDC Rule* echoes the goal of the Benedictine *sequela Christi* as found in the opening of the RB: ‘to follow Christ to salvation that comes by living in the presence of God.’ George Preca understood the depth of this particular *sequela Christi* and invited every Member to live in the presence of God and let Christ lead him to intimacy with God. It is recorded that in his talks and even during spiritual guidance, Preca used to repeat the analogy that we live in God like fish live in clear water.

2.7.1 Verbum Dei

George Preca experienced this closeness to God in a special way through the mystery of the Incarnation. Indeed, he was so captivated by the revealed truth that ‘the Word of God dwelt among us’ (John 1:14), that he became the apostle of the *Verbum Dei*. He felt such great reverence towards this truth, that he asked the Members to wear the words *Verbum Dei caro factum est* as a distinctive badge on the lapel of their jackets, and he encouraged everyone to keep the words of this proclamation visible in their homes.⁷⁶

Awareness and gratitude for God’s presence among us was a constant reality for George Preca. This was so much in his mind that, to make it evident to one and all, he used to greet people with very particular salutation, and not with the conventional “good-day.” He used to raise his right hand, showing three fingers to the person he was greeting, and the respondent acknowledged the greeting by indicating the trinitarian mystery with the outstretched index finger and the other three

76. Upon asking an SDC Member about the Verbum Dei badge, a well-known Newman scholar, Professor Emeritus M. Katherine Tillman, remarked: ‘Every Christian ought to wear this badge of the Incarnation!’

digits tucked under the thumb. Three–in–one, One–in–Three; thus, both individuals indicated, one to the other, their shared life in the invisible triune God.

His devotion towards the *Verbum Dei* became manifest in other ways, too. Most notably, fervour was poured into the making by the Members of plaster figures of the Infant Christ as Christmas gifts to be distributed to children and in the Baby Jesus demonstration, which is now so well-established among the Maltese people; it is also taking roots wherever the SDC has missions elsewhere in the world. The demonstration with baby Jesus was first organised in 1920 by George Preca with the help of the SDC Members on Christmas Eve, and it took place in his hometown of Hamrun.

The demonstration with baby Jesus was most probably the way with which George Preca, in his wise, firm, and yet innocuous way, responded to the anti-clerical and anti-Christian elements so evident among the agitating groups, which called themselves ‘Illuminists’, and who were making themselves vociferous in Malta at the turn of the nineteenth century.⁷⁷

‘To God alone honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.’ This prayer phrase is repeated ten times over the course of each and every day by the SDC Member, who stops to meditate every hour on an episode from the life of Christ as prescribed in *The Watch*. As the Member is earning his daily bread at his particular place of work, he lifts his mind to adore God in an environment that all too often is not conducive to prayer. Like the monk who cries because his closeness to God enables him to see that the world is moving towards its own ruin, the Member, too, takes the role of the lamenting prophet, conveying and at same time carrying within himself, a salvific message to his fellow workers.

In the same way that the monk is ‘alone’ because he chooses to stay away from those whose values are unlike his (and because he knows that he cannot cultivate an exclusive relationship with God

77. ‘Illuminati’ or ‘Illuminist’ originated in Bavaria in 1776 and became the term used by several secret groups, both real and fictitious, founded in the era of the Enlightenment and continuing with violence and noise into many dark eruptions over the next two centuries.

without being interiorly separate), the SDC Member inserts himself in the midst of the secular world to give witness to the *Verbum Dei*. The *Rule* states that the SDC Member is expected to live in this world in order to sanctify it: ‘[T]he members are called to live in the world and to sanctify it through their lives, work and apostolate by living Christ’s spirit and by promoting the Christian ideals. Thereby they are light, yeast and salt wherever they may be (Matthew 5,13 and 14; Lk 13,21)’.⁷⁸ Thus, even though the method may be different from that traditionally lived by the withdrawn monk, yet the spirit is the same; in fact, the *SDC Rule* parallels the monastic tradition and calls on the Member to live in a holy contradiction: that while being in the world, he must not be of the world and, ‘[I]n a spirit of true penance, seriously avoid all worldly sentiments: honour, fame, pleasures and wealth ...’⁷⁹

2.7.2 The Final Aim of every SDC Member

In many of his writings, George Preca stresses that the final aim of every person on earth is to know, love and serve God,⁸⁰ and, thus, to become holy. While meditating on God’s love, the SDC Member ponders: ‘Human beings exist on earth for one end only: to know, love and serve God, their absolute Lord, and by so doing they will enter into eternal happiness’.⁸¹ Then, the Member pauses in reflective silence and brings to mind that he lives only for three goals:

a) to **know** God (*pause*). We know God naturally through the works of his hands, and supernaturally through the teaching of Jesus Christ;

b) to **love** God (*pause*). We love God when we observe his commandments as Christ himself has declared: ‘Whoever holds to my commandments and keeps them is the one who loves me’ (John 14:21), and

78. SDC Rule C14.

79. SDC Rule C66.

80. Preca. *Sanctuary of Christ’s Spirit*. p. 14.

81. Preca, *The Watch*, Meditation 15:00 for Sunday.

c) to **serve** God (*pause*). We serve God by giving him the entire sacrifice of our wills. By so doing I will be saved.”⁸²

Chapter 15 of the *SDC Rule* is entirely dedicated to the prayer life of the SDC Member. Like the monk whose life is embedded in prayer, the Members are: ‘[t]o keep themselves constantly in the presence of God and to pray without ceasing.’⁸³ If the monk attains this presence of God through the use of the prayer-phrase or prayer-word, in the 6.45 p.m. meditation about ‘The Interior Life,’ the Member recalls that he ought to aspire that his ‘breath’ becomes ‘prayer’. And in the same way that prophet Elijah is considered by every monk as the embodiment of prayer, the *SDC Rule* indicates Prophet Elijah as ‘[t]he protector of prayer in the Society’ and that the ‘[m]embers are encouraged to imitate him in his union with God and in their search for silence’.⁸⁴

Nobody can imitate Christ in his totality, and founders and charisms can only highlight one aspect from Jesus’s message that eventually becomes the hallmark to their unique spirituality. What is so very often highlighted by those who write and reflect on George Preca is that the Preca spirituality is centred on Jesus’s ÔT (prophet gesture) of meekness. This virtue is the characteristic *par excellence* that caught the imagination of George Preca, who by proposing the living of meekness in a radical way, befit him for that category of holy people who are commonly referred to (especially within Oriental spirituality) as ‘fools for Christ’.⁸⁵ According to Paul, ‘if God chooses what is foolish in the world to shame the wise ... what is weak in the world to shame the strong ... and what is low and despised in the world’ (1 Corinthians 1:27–28), then George Preca fits into this category as a ‘fool for Christ’ because he always thought and referred to himself as weak and wanting in every sense of the word.

82. Preca, *The Watch*, Mediation 07:00.

83. SDC Rule C69.

84. SDC Rule C70.

85. Camilleri C, ‘Aħna boloh minħabba fi Kristu’. (*Rivista ta’ Spiritwalità*, No 124, 2003), 182-189.

2.7.3 Chosen to Teach

George Preca considered himself as some kind of inadequate vessel that God stubbornly continued to use. When his confessor, Aloysius Deguara, told him that God was choosing him to teach his people, his inner feeling was one of surprise: ‘I teach God’s people! I who am not capable of doing anything of real value, who lack physical strength, wanting in every natural gift. How come that this is possible!?’⁸⁶ Here one can conclude that George Preca deliberately chose to speak thus about himself, only to emphasize that what has been achieved was entirely through God’s power. That which seemed like his own doing, in fact was nothing other than the work of God: that is, God working through him and within him (and also reprimanding that, ‘[i]n the eyes of the world he was considered as good for nothing; “timorous chicken” as he used to call himself’.⁸⁷

George Preca understood holiness as a way of beauty. The older SDC Members who remembered and those who reflected on the early years of the SDC foundation both assert the appeal of this ‘way of beauty’. The youths he encountered playing in front of the parish church in Hamrun were inspired not merely by an ideal to which they could aspire, but by an invitation to embark on a spiritual journey that led to the discovery of God as beauty. This was not easy to find or experience, what with the liturgy being in Latin, along with the church’s rituals of the day. Latin was a language that the simple and uneducated people did not understand. The young priest was offering the Hamrun youths a new way of beauty and a new approach, delivered in understandable language; all these gushed forth in a “thirst” for God, which only God could slake.

The method of approaching these young people that George Preca applied was mystagogic in nature. The youth could learn deeply by this method, which did not merely convey incomprehensible concepts, high-worded truths of dogmatic theology, or crude catechetical lists. The instruction in the way of beauty was something that created peace; it enlightened the mind

86. Ibid.

87. Ibid.

and enkindled the heart with a new understanding and new love. In turn, with great zest and enthusiasm, the youth themselves wanted to reach out to others, to share with others ‘the pearl of great price that they have found’, desiring that everyone should benefit from this new way of spiritual beauty. This ‘Way of Beauty’ is a method that is analogous to that used in the early Apostolic Church as well as in fourth century monasticism, which followed soon after.⁸⁸

This mystagogic method that George Preca used can also be understood as a merging of two strains of the monastic life: the active and the passive. From this perspective, we encounter the monk in George Preca, i.e., the one who sets his heart wholly and completely on God. The active is the ascetical path, while the passive is the mystical path. The first shows an aspect of one’s work and action in exercising the virtuous life, as lived by the SDC Member (especially in his active–ministry of instruction and faith-formation), while the second shows one’s unitive love with God (as manifested through the classical metaphor of *con-templum*, abiding within the temple of God), and as lived in the contemplative aspect of *The Watch*.⁸⁹ These two dimensions of the spiritual life, active and contemplative, are made visible in the lives of the virginal-celibate SDC way of life where a lay person accompanies and affirms another lay person, both fixing their attention and constant prayer Godward, as they await the mandate of the Word, woven within the interior lives and themselves both as the monk and the apostle.⁹⁰

2.7.4 Jesus Christ: The Great Book

Another characteristic of monasticism that is highlighted in the life of George Preca and the SDC is the cardinal theme of salvation. On reading the writings of the Founder, especially *Sanctuary of Christ’s Spirit* (SCS) and *The Great Book* (GB), one cannot but conclude that, for George Preca,

88. Farrugia E, *Aħna min Aħna*, 43.

89. ‘Can it be possible that you forget the thought of god’s presence if you, whoever you are, fulfil this *Watch* with true spirit? And what benefits does the presence of God bring about in you? Perfection and peace.’ Exhortation of the Founder as found in *The Watch*.

90. Camilleri C, (Talk, SDC General House, Blata l-Bajda Malta, Wednesday, March 21, 2012).

there was one unique and safe way to glorify God and to merit eternal life: ‘Follow Christ, and imitate perfectly this one and only model Master’ (SCS, Chapter Six).

Purity of heart and simplicity, which are more commonly referred to as *puritas cordis* and *simplicitas*, are two core monastic virtues that are frequently echoed in the Founder’s writings. The person seeking purity of heart is in training for detachment from acquisitiveness and correction of narcissism; he must prepare himself to: ‘Despise honours, glory and prestige, as well as all its delights, pleasures, enjoyments and all that the world holds as dear to her’ (SCS— Chapter Twelve). It is very evident that, for George Preca, the true disciple of Jesus must shun all self-comforting pleasures, trivialities, and mundane thoughts. Instead, a disciple who is true will fix his gaze on Christ crucified, who alone can purify the heart through humility and make it ready to ‘embrace and practise self-denial, patience and love’ (SCS, Chapter Nine).

The *SDC Rule* dedicates an entire chapter to the virtue of simplicity. SDC Members are ‘to constantly hold God as witness to all their actions, and they must often ask God to increase right intention within them’⁹¹; and (because every person is so prone to be deceived), the Founder encourages all SDC Members to undergo a process of discernment with each one’s spiritual director in order to to ‘examine themselves carefully so as to discern which intentions are predominantly motivating their decisions and activities’.⁹²

2.7.5 Monastic Wisdom

The counsels that the Founder used to give both to the Members and to the general public is remarkably similar to that found in the monastic tradition, commonly referred to as ‘monastic wisdom’. Like the desert monks, George Preca used to impart wisdom through short phrases, symbols, and prophetic gestures that are treasured and remembered by many who received them, even up to the present. Some examples of these phrases, and probably the most commonly

91. SDC Rule C58.

92. SDC Rule C59.

remembered, are: ‘Thank you Lord God and forgive me Lord God’ and ‘Good towards everybody and harm towards nobody’ and ‘You are here, and I am in you’.

The imparting of Christian wisdom and spiritual direction through short phrases can be compared to the anecdotes of the *Vita Patrum* and the life of saints, such as that of Philip Neri. These prophetic gestures that were strange many-a-time, as much as peculiar, attracted the attention of the general public. In the same way that the monk did not attract attention to himself, but redirected that attention towards God to emphasise the absurdity of the present life, these prophetic gestures that Preca used, such as the kissing of the feet, enabled the ‘prophet’ to hide his own holiness in the absurdity of the act itself. One particular prophetic gesture that George Preca employed to emphasize the dignity of every human being was to kneel and kiss the feet of common men walking in the streets. It is also said that, once, when he was travelling on a ferry-boat, another passenger (out of disrespect for a priest) spread his legs across the bench bringing his soles just in front of George Preca’s face. As they reached the quay, just before disembark, George Preca, in a gesture of meek humility, lowered himself and kissed the man’s feet. The story continues to tell that the man was so embarrassed that he asked the priest to forgive him.

2.7.6 Lay and Celibate

In the same way that every monk leads a life of virginity and remains celibate for the Kingdom, the SDC Members (even though they are lay, yet they remain celibate) give a new twist to the meaning of the word ‘dedication’.⁹³ George Preca understood that being dedicated to God means to become one with Christ, and this is not achieved by negation (as in not marrying). Instead, it is achieved through ‘assimilation’, by becoming one with God through integration in Jesus Christ. The combination of ‘laity’ and ‘virginal celibacy’ renders the Society as extraordinary, even inconceivable. Some even perceive the ‘virgin and lay’ people as some kind of undiscovered ‘savage tribe’; from a prevailing promiscuous culture, this radical counter-cultural way of life

93. Farrugia E, *Aħna min Aħna*, 43.

presents a challenge to be reckoned with, and makes the Society *sui generis*: unique and one of a kind.⁹⁴ Members embrace celibacy for the sake of God's Kingdom as a gift, a grace, and a unique work of the Holy Spirit. The *SDC Rule* proclaims that through celibacy, 'they recognise the primacy of God in their life and they choose to dedicate it entirely to him'.⁹⁵

It is true that, when you consider that the SDC was founded in 1907, this particular physiognomy comes across as a paradox in a world that is not comfortable with what is not clear-cut. Today, with the creation of so many new forms of monastic movements and a world that is more non-interventionist, tolerating practically everything and anything, this way of life is more acceptable and, to a certain extent, even understood.

The lived Theology of Incarnation is made evident in the lay state of life that the SDC Members lead in the secular world. While the SDC Members must work to make a living, they do not put undue emphasis on building a career: '[M]embers are to work to earn their living. At the same time they are to see that whatever job they hold, their employment is not a hindrance to their vocation'.⁹⁶ They reside with their families or else in simple homes, which are not different from that of any average worker; those who live as 'Internal Members', have their houses adjacent to those of their neighbours and participate in the life of the parish with the other parishioners. Even the SDC Centres themselves are located side-by-side to common living quarters and in no way situated in any special or elite secluded area.

The *incarnational* aspect of George's message and the way the SDC Members live, where they to make Christ be born again in the here and now, as well as the '*inculturational* aspect, which tries to conjugate Christ with this new wider environment, or culture, could hardly have been stressed in a better way'.⁹⁷

94. Ibid.

95. SD Rule C16.

96. SDC Rule C15.

97. Farrugia E, "Dun Gorg, the man and the saint", *The Times*, May 9, 2001.

2.7.7 The SDC Centre: A School for Intentional Living

On reflecting on the SDC inspiration, mission, and vision, Charló Camilleri says that Preca offered something altogether new for he offered: a creative answer that is essentially monastic in its core. The Founder did not choose to frivolously, ‘Knead bread from flour that fell from the sacks of religious orders such as the Jesuits, Dominicans or Carmelites, but recovered something that was lost from the sack of the baker and founded something new’.⁹⁸ The novelty that George Preca brought with him was that of a kind of ‘prophetic distance’; for rather than competing for centre stage, he opted to seek the periphery of society in order to stay with those who were simply ignored and redundant; this is an option so much in accord with Pope Francis and one which he repeats and stresses so very often.

It is fair to say that George Preca can be regarded as one of those who understood monasticism from a very original standpoint, that of seeking to live at the fringes of society. Like the saintly fools who came before him, Preca was also many-a-times looked upon as outcast, ignored by many, and at times referred to as ‘mad’. Yet, as time has proven, George Preca managed to prove himself right through giving all the glory to God. He offered a valid alternative Christian discipleship to those who find themselves alienated by the formal and established church, ‘turning an established culture on its head’⁹⁹; truly, he has shown many other ‘timorous chickens’ how to cross the road from disbelief to zeal, darkness to light, from indifference to abundant life.

By establishing the SDC Centre, George Preca created this ‘monastery’ for those who wanted to live the Christian option in an intentionally way. The SDC Centre (*Qasam*)¹⁰⁰ was intended to be independently owned, thus autonomous, governed by particular laws and regulations; with roles and responsibilities assigned to those who form part of it. Keeping in mind that celibate men and

98. Camilleri C, (Talk, SDC General House, Blata l-Bajda Malta, Wednesday, March 21, 2012).

99. Farrugia E, “Dun Gorg, the man and the saint”, *The Times*, May 9, 2001.

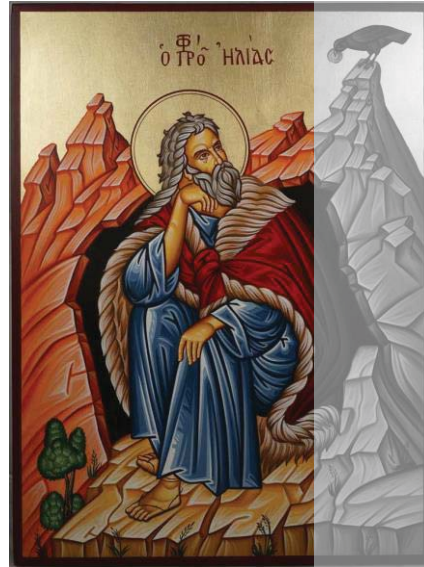
100. The word that the Founder chose for the centre is *Qasam*, a word directly related to agriculture; a field where crops are cultivated.

women gather daily at the Centre to ‘exercise themselves in the evangelical life and to learn from the evangelical school, then the SDC centre can be recognised as a place that satisfies all the criteria by which one defines a monastery. This is even reinforced when we keep in mind that Preca created these centres in a context of a church and civil society that were decadent. By creating the SDC centre, Preca was offering an alternative evangelical option that became for both the village and the diocese a reference point that had the energy to rebuild the local Church.’¹⁰¹

101. Talk by Charló Camilleri during the weekly SDC meeting on Wednesday May 16, 2018.

CHAPTER THREE

CHAPTER THREE



Chapter 3

‘SOLI DEO’ – God Alone

3.1 The SDC’s particular ethos: “a Monk is a True Christian and a Christian is a True Monk”

“The human being is an animal who has received the vocation to become God.”¹

Mesmerised by the truth that, through the *Logos*, “All things came into being... and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3); and even more so by the very fact that this same *Logos* “Became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:14) to witness God’s love, (John 3:16) George Preca felt himself compelled to share the life-giving riches with the ordinary people around him of the very treasure God shared with humanity: Jesus Christ.

A monk’s vocation and ultimate goal is, as Abbot Antony puts it, “To be ready to appear before God,” and thereby to share in God’s life and love. Every Christian is called to partake from this life of God. That divine life is what the Founder, George Preca, desired for the SDC Members when he called them to embrace their vocation; the call was basically to journey towards holiness: “The foundational aim of the Society is the holiness of its members. Therefore, keeping in mind the example of Jesus Crucified, they should seek perfection of Christian life by following the Rule.”² The Rule is simply pointing towards the authentic living of the

1. Gregory Nazianzen, Eulogy of Basil the great, Oration 43, 48 (PG 36, 560) qtd., in Olivier Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Hyde Park, NY: City Press, 1993), 76.

2. SDC Rule C5

Theological virtues and the Beatitudes.³ These precepts of the first Constitutions were intended to be lived, by common men and women, who formed part of their local parish community.

3.1.1 Obedience that Leads to Holiness

God created Man in his image and likeness (Genesis 1:27) to live in fellowship with Him; therefore, every person is called to become holy as attested by Jesus: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). George Preca followed the example of the early great founders of the monastic movements, monks who showed a way of perfection for those who sought to live their Christian discipleship in a radical way. Preca designed a simple way, too, that had holiness as its sole objective. The Emanu-El in the Person of Jesus Christ has made possible the human aspiration to be like the Father, not through miracles or the casting out of demons, but through obedience (Matthew 7:22). One needs to deny oneself to obey God, “No one will be able to please God if one only wants to please oneself,”⁴ and Jesus teaches us in the Gospel that obedience to the will of God makes us one in him: “Pointing to his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother’” (Matthew 12:49-50). Indeed, one can rightly say that obedience does enshroud the universal call for holiness.

This Christian spiritual way of life has two simultaneous dimensions akin to it: sowing and reaping. It enables one to work for the Kingdom, resting secure in complete dependence on God: “I did the planting, Apollos did the watering, but God made things grow” (1 Corinthians 3:6); at the same time, it allows enjoyment of the fruit as “partakers in the Divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4). George Preca reminds the SDC Member that a true Christian is one who must be dependent on God, and God alone: “Led by grace... seeks only God in everything... accepts

3. Constitutions 21 spells out the four aims why the Member is to pray the *Mons Domini*: (i) to live the aim for which every person was created for to know, love and serve God; (ii) to keep in mind The Last Things in order not to befriend the world with all its illusions; (iii) to follow the Word of God and (iv) to reach and rest on the holy Mountain of the Lord.

4. Preca, *Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit*, Ch. 56, 70.

patiently and perseveringly whatever happens to him, be it prosperity or adversity.” He understood that such an attitude generates “peace of heart” in the one who, “Treasures obedience above everything else... by imitating Christ who was obedient unto death.”⁵ Obedience leads to complete surrender to God’s will, and George Preca emphasises that this way to holiness is not the result of one’s work but God’s work: “If Yahweh does not build the house, in vain the workers toil.”⁶

On the other hand, the workers need to toil, but they are always guided by the virtue of simplicity, as articulated in this statement by Augustine: “God who created you without you, will not save you without you.”⁷ Divine Grace must therefore be reciprocated and accepted with an open heart on the part of the individual; this exchange of divine and human love triggers a process that, if nurtured daily by prayer and sacramental Grace, one will eventually know oneness with God, which is the final aim of the Christian life: “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21).

3.2 A Correlation Between Elements Within Monasticism and the SDC.

George Preca had a very clear idea of how to mould the lives of the first Members into a model which is not alien to that lived by monks. The Founder’s intention was to imbue the future Members with a burning love of God and then motivate them to have only one unwavering purpose to live for throughout life: God Alone – *Soli Deo*.⁸ Thus, the first shock for the sizeable number of young men attending the meetings with Preca was when he told them that only unmarried men could continue to come; those who were married could not continue to form part of the early

5. Preca, *Sanctuary of Christ’s Spirit*, Ch. 57, 71.

6. This line from Psalm 127:1 is quoted in the first line of the Introduction to the SDC Rule (2013).

7. Augustine, *Sermo 169*, 13.

8. SDC Rule C10.

group. Thus, with this first decision, the young priest started paving the way to create a number of laymen (and laywomen, thereafter) who desired the way of holiness, not simply as unmarried bachelors, but by living in virginal celibacy for the Kingdom (Matthew 19:12). George Preca wanted the Members to seek holiness by becoming “true scholars of Jesus Christ”; he wanted the Members to let Jesus be “one’s own divine teacher” and to strive to “imitate his examples”; he urged them to, “Practice with divine help all that [Jesus] thought... for the great glory of God, for the salutation of mankind, for one’s true peace.” Every Member was encouraged to “engage deeper in this fellowship” and be strong in his “faith in the Incarnate Son of God.”⁹ This quest – living entirely for the love of God – that George Preca confirmed as the sole purpose of the SDC Member fits hand in glove with what Jesus himself commanded in Mark 12:30 and with what Benedict of Nursia wrote in his Sixth century Rule: “Above all, love the Lord God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength; then, your neighbour as yourself.”¹⁰ This is repeated again near the end of his Rule when St Benedict recapitulates his teaching urging the monks above all to love God, Christ, the abbot and the other members of the community, summing it up with: “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ.”¹¹

3.2.1 A Learning Community

George Preca wanted the Members to become a learning community; lay men and women who are not only able to teach others but, they themselves thirst for God’s wisdom. Upholding the view that people did not love God because they did not know him, he wanted to teach for as he used to repeat so very often, “sound teaching is the fount of all goodness.”¹² In an era when few Catholics read the Bible, George Preca wanted the members to become friends of the Gospel; he wanted them to meditate on the Word of God;¹³ later, he devised his own method for the study

9. Preca, *The Course of the Christian Pilgrim*, 3.

10. RB Chapter 4

11. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 183.

12. Preca, *Sanctuary of Christ’s Spirit: PASSUS IV*, 11.

13. Constitutions 95-98.

and contemplation of Sacred Scripture which he called *Qaghda* (The Sitting).¹⁴ He wanted the members to study continuously and daily; in the first Constitution, there is record of a list, day by day of what the members were required to study,¹⁵ a method that continues to the present.

From the earliest days, George Preca trained the Members through good instruction into the basic elements of Christian discipleship; he created a community of learners where one and all could be sanctified through the exercise of learning and teaching. This is reinforced daily at the start of the “Assignment,” when the SDC Members repeat their resolve: “To be poor, simple, meek, humble, love being despised and to love one another with great charity.”¹⁶

Both Basil and Benedict of Norcia speak of the monastery as the place where virtue is practiced, especially through a proper rhythm of time *horarium*. Benedict writes in the Rule that, “The goal is precious; there is no time to waste getting there.” In order to reach this goal, he divided the day into three principal activities: work, prayer, and reading.¹⁷ Likewise, George Preca gives due importance to order and guides the Members with the maxim to “Uphold order and order sustains you”; this order is preserved through work, prayer and study: “The members are called to live in the world and to sanctify it through their lives of work;¹⁸ pray without ceasing¹⁹ and attend the daily Assignment as part of one’s “continuous formation”²⁰ and a “process of communal formation.”²¹

George Preca advocated single-minded attention and simplicity in living, always and everywhere, because none other than God would witness all of the member’s actions. At all cost, he wanted

14. This was inspired by the posture Mary the sister of Lazarus used to keep at the foot of Jesus listening to his teaching.

15. Constitutions 18 -24 list the themes and how much time each of these subjects the members had to spend studying.

16. SDC Rule C7.

17. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 4.

18. SDC Rule C14

19. SDC Rule C69

20. SDC Rule C36

21. SDC Rule C37

the members to avoid all ostentatiousness.²² He used to repeat that, “*Il bene non fa chiasso e l chiasso non fa bene*” for everything that is salient is quiet, while on the contrary all that is hollow is noisy.

Like the Benedictine monastery that is to serve as a “school for the Lord’s service”²³ and a place where one learns how to “progress in virtue,”²⁴ the SDC Centre was envisioned by the Founder to become a “forge”²⁵ where sin is destroyed and where young and adult members meet to befriend the Gospel, listen to the “Voice of the beloved” and receive adequate training to live the virtuous life: “Everyone in the Company is subject not only to learning, but also to be trained in virtue.”²⁶ The SDC Centre was also intended to serve as a place where “Members meet in an atmosphere of prayer and fraternal union for their own formation and to carry out most of their apostolate.”²⁷

3.2.2 Internal Membership

Christian monasticism was countercultural when it started to take shape in the world of the late Third and early Fourth century. Likewise, when it appeared in Malta, the SDC, too, was regarded as countercultural, mainly because it endorsed virtues and values that were different from the prevailing culture and because it distanced itself from the larger life of both the mundane and the conventionally pious. George Preca managed to imbue the young people with that needed *anima* that empowers those who want to withdraw from the world, only to be able to return and engage with it on a deeper level, and with renewed energy. In the same way that monasteries are, “Uniquely placed to serve as church’s conscience, calling it out of any cultural accommodation to

22. Constitutions 218.

23. RB Prologue: 45.

24. RB Chapter 73.2 – ‘Ma per chi vuole procedure calermente verso la perfezione di tale vita, vi sono I precetti die santi Padri, che fedelmente praticati sono be atti a condurre ‘uomo al culmine della virtù.

25. The Founder used to refer to the SDC Centres as forges where sin is burnt.

26. Constitutions 130.

27. SDC Rule C87.

faithful living,”²⁸ and as much as the SDC Centres were meant to serve as “forges where sin is burnt” they are to serve also as “oasis that quenches the thirst.”²⁹ In the same way that the “Early desert monks who had deliberately separated themselves from society in order to form a new civilization,”³⁰ the SDC Member moves from being an “outsider to insider, from counter-cultural to culture-creator, from prophet to teacher,”³¹ not within the walls of the monastery, but through the SDC way of life, a “Pre-can option,” which transforms him into a monk without borders.

From its onset, the SDC way of life ran against the grain of the existing culture. It was then very natural that a small core within the greater SDC membership would long for a way to live this particular spirituality away from the hubris of the world; they came to opt for life as “Internal Members.” Such a way of life was like the monastic alternative of *fuga mundi*; SDC Members opted to accentuate the contemplative-prophetic dimension, while still retaining all that the external Members live. The Founder felt that he should offer such a space in the Constitutions for those who wished to focus their attention on the adoration and worship of God.³² This particular SDC Internal way of life was proffered and provided for in every Rule and in the last General Chapter a resolution was approved, encouraging those “members who are called to community and contemplative life to form an internal community in accordance with the Rule.”³³ The main ethos of this community is to be of “prophetic witness to the same Society and the contemporary culture.”³⁴

At present the SDC has only one community of internal Members and this is within the female section. This community started in 1921. The male section had internal communities in Malta from 1918 up until 1990 and in Australia from 1966 till 1975. The Founder himself resided

28. Donald Bloesch. P, qtd., in Peters *The Story of Monasticism*, 117.

29. The theme of the SDC General Council of 2014

30. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 47.

31. Ibid.

32. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 51.

33. Resolution of the General Chapter 2014, para. 5.3.

34. Ibid.

with the internal Members during the Second World War and the first General Superior, Eugene Borg, joined the internal community in 1943 up until his death in 1967.

Knowing that the Founder was a member of the Carmelite Third Order, it is very possible that he saw in the internal community an expression similar to that lived by a group of Carmelite *Bisocche*³⁵ who lived in community in a house that was adjacent to the Carmelite Convent in Santa Venera,³⁶ which is in walking distance from where Preca lived.

3.2.3 Pray Without Ceasing

Both St Elijah and St John the Baptist are considered as guiding figures for every monastic movement as they teach the mystical way of contemplative prayer or as it is more commonly referred to as *hesychasm*, from the Greek ἡσυχασμός.³⁷ In an article penned by the present Superior General, Natalino Camilleri, entitled *Hesychistic Aspects in the Spirituality of George Preca*,³⁸ the author refers to both writings and anecdotes which illustrate that the Founder wanted the SDC Members to be imbued with the spirit of silence, quiet and recollection for, “It avails you not to retire into the desert if your inner silence is broken by the thoughts that keep your mind

35. A group of women Carmelite Tertiaries lived under the guidance of the Provincial Prior Fr Spiridione Vassallo.

36. Document outlining the Guidelines for Living in Community within the Carmelite Third Order, Mdina Branch. October 7, 2018, para. 11. (Linji-Gwida għall-Għixien fil-Komunità -Terz Ordni Karmelitan Fergħa Mdina.)

37. The term ‘Hesychasm’ knows its origin from the ascetical life of Arsenius of Scetis (+449) who left the palace of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I and left for the desert after hearing a voice telling him, *Arseni, fuge homines et salus eris* (Arsenius, flee the world and you will save). In the solitude of the desert he prayed God to guide him in the way of salvation and once more he heard the voice *Arseni, fuge, tace, quisce. Hæ enim sunt radices impeccantiæ* (Arsenio, flee, be silent and discrete and thus you will never sin). (Apophtegmata Patrum, Arsenius 1, 2, PG 65, 88 BC) Therefore the escape to the desert and solitude were not a scope in themselves but a means to attain one’s intimate union with God. Interior and exterior silence, was the way that that brings one to the knowledge of God’s continuous presence. Arsenio’s journey was not towards the heart of the desert but towards the core of his heart and in that silence and recollection he sought to listen to the Word of God and reach full communion with Him. To achieve this internal silence or union (*hesychia*), the fathers of the desert used particular tools of asceticism (praxis) such as watchfulness, fasting, silence and prayer without ceasing.

38. Natalino Camilleri, “Aspetti Esikastici fl-Ispiritwalità ta’ Dun Ġorġ” *Rivista Dun Ġorġ* No 40, SDC 2000.

occupied.”³⁹ In “The Great Book,” Preca attests that if a person leads a life of prayer and silence “the heart enjoys true peace and a quiet mind.”⁴⁰

The Founder chose Prophet Elijah to be the protector of prayer and of the Assignment⁴¹ in the Society and throughout the year, whenever a month happens to have five Sundays, the Members pray *The Watch* together and Elijah is invoked.⁴² He also considered it providential when the name of John the Baptist was drawn and chosen as the protector of the SDC.⁴³ The veneration of the Founder towards John the Baptist is very evident; he wrote a special programme spread on seven days prior to the feast of the Saint. Moreover, he initially called the Society *Istitutum Sancti Joannis Praecursoris* and wanted that new Members incorporate in the Society either the Sunday closest to the feast of John the Baptist or on Christmas day. St John is also invoked in *The Watch* every Sunday.⁴⁴

In the Rule of Benedict, the monk is encouraged to “give *oneself* frequently to prayer.” Likewise, the SDC Members are, “To keep themselves constantly in the presence of God and to pray without ceasing.”⁴⁵ The monk has his day divided by scheduled times of prayer; similarly, Preca created a unique and creative method of prayer that befits the diverse ways in which the Members live as

39. Preca. *Gymnasium For The Spiritual Life*, 74.

40. Preca. *The Great Book*, 23.

41. In Constitutions 69, Moses and Elijah are the protector of the Assignment.

42. The invocation to St Elijah, written by the Founder himself in Latin is as follows: *Salve Sancte Elia; Salve Dei Zelator, Salve Orandi Speculum, et Deum ora pro nobis.* (Hail St Elijah; full of zeal; example in prayer; we ask you to pray God for us.)

43. The patron saint of the SDC was chosen through a draw of names. Every Member was asked to write a name of a saint that he thought should be the patron saint of the group, many wrote the name of Our Lady Mary, others the patron saint of Hamrun, St Cajetan while one Member only wrote the name of John the Baptist. All the names were then put in the Founder’s hat and a boy was called to draw one. Providence willed that the name of John the Baptist be drawn and the Founder was very happy with this for John the Baptist was the son of priest but not a priest himself and thus served well for the Members. (See Alexander Bonnici Vol 1, p. 311)

44. Salutation for the protection of John the Baptist: *Salve Joannes Magne, Salve Praecurso Domini, Salve Angele Dei, et esto nobis tutela.* (Great John the Baptist, the Lord’s forerunner, you are God’s messenger, we ask you to be our protector.)

45. Constitutions 30 and SDC C69.

lay people. The Founder's first prayer book for the SDC was called *Mons Domini*⁴⁶ – “The Mountain of the Lord”; it was intended as an exercise in contemplation on the Sermon of the Mount (Matthew Chapters 5-7). Later, he devised *The Watch*, a workers' manual comprising short prayers every 15 minutes from 6.00 a.m. to noon and from 2.00 to 8.00 p.m. George Preca was convinced that, “Without instruction and without prayer... (one's) spiritual life will remain dead;”⁴⁷ but through prayer and meditation, there are numerous benefits to be enjoyed: “Perfection and peace... be preserved from sin... receive abundance of graces... abhor the maxims of the world,” and in all matters, to be guided by Christ's “light and life.”⁴⁸ The “pedagogical method” of prayer that George Preca designed for the Members “deserves more attention than it have received and may be called ‘around the clock in 24 hours;’ for, indeed, he left little to chance. A little prayer, with variants for adults and for children, known as ‘*L-Arlogg Museumin*,’ goes long ways to show us how every member was supposed to live in God's presence and keep alive his remembrance.”⁴⁹ In this way the SDC Member truly becomes a person who prays without ceasing.

For George Preca, inner silence was the guardian of every virtue and if one wants to grow in holiness then one must “make prayer a part of one's work from the start.”⁵⁰ As stated before, the sole purpose of *The Watch* was precisely to cultivate within the Member the spirit of prayer without ceasing. The richness of the prayer book is also evident in the different forms of prayer that it harbours, for one can find vocal, vocative, penitential, adoration, supplication, contemplation and meditation. With regards to both the contemplative and meditative aspect of the prayer book, one cannot but refer to the correlation between the Biblical episodes that are

46. *Mons Domini* – the Mountain of the Lord - to invite the members to contemplate the New Law given by Jesus in the Sermon of the Mount. He then extended and refined this method of prayer through the prayer book *The Watch* which is intended to knead the Members into contemplatives who strive to “pray without ceasing.” (1 Thessalonians 5:17)

47. SCS Chapter 11

48. Preca, *The Watch*, Exhortation.

49. Farrugia, “Dun Gorg, the Man and the Saint”, *The Times* (9 May 2001).

50. Preca, *Gymnasium For The Spiritual Life*, 74.

found every hour in *The Watch* with the Biblical meditations written by Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi (†1602).⁵¹

3.2.4 Humility and Meekness

George Preca emphasised that, if *Christus Magister* served to nourish their hunger for wisdom, the pre-eminent way of life of the member was to be moulded on this maxim of Jesus: “learn from me because I am humble and meek at heart” (Matthew 11:29). If *Conversio Morum*, the fidelity to the monastic life, is what the new Benedictine monk promises in front of all his brothers,⁵² humility and meekness are likewise the *Conversio Morum* of the SDC Member.⁵³

The Founder also put great stress on the two most salient virtues for which the members were to pray: humility and meekness⁵⁴ – virtues that are dealt with at length in all the Rules that guide a monastic life. With regards to humility, Abbot Antony saw the world as something like a minefield that only the humble can safely traverse: “I have seen all the snares of the enemy spread out over the world, and I said with groan, ‘Who can get through such snares?’ Then I heard a voice say to me, ‘Humility’.”⁵⁵ Benedict speaks of twelve degrees of humility, and at the end of these steps one will “arrive at that perfect love of God,” not because of fear of hell, “but out of love for Christ, and good habit and delight in virtues,” and as a result of his humility and the working of the Holy Spirit. The monk is “now cleansed of vices and sins.”⁵⁶ Bede the Venerable speaks of humility as

51. *Come un agnello condotto al macello: La Passione di Gesù in Santa Maria Maddalena de' Pazzi*, edited by Monache carmelitane, (Perugia: Graphe.it, 2006), 10-11.

52. The most commonly quoted and translated verse pertaining to conversio in the Rule of Benedict is Rule 58, describing the procedure for receiving new members into the monastery. Prior to his reception in the community, the new Monk enters the oratory and promises stability in front of all the brothers. “Fidelity to the Monastic Life,” Fidelity to the Monastic Life, accessed 28 December 2018, <http://www.idahomonks.org/sect805.htm>.

53. Constitutions 110: Indispensable qualities of the members: humility, meekness and love for learning.

54. Ibid. SDC Rule C45.

55. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 91.

56. Ibid., 95.

the medicine Christ the physician gives in order “to heal the chronic weakness of our pride.”⁵⁷ We have many stories that have come down through the monastic tradition. It is said that once, when Pachomius was weaving a mat, a boy stopped him to show him the right way of weaving he had learnt from Abba Theodore. Pachomius got up at once and asked the boy to show him, then sitting down he worked with joy for “Having forestalled the spirit of pride,” and in such a small matter, too.⁵⁸ The late Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, speaks of the humble person as one who is not “Disturbed by praise, since he is no longer concerned with himself... and when praise comes, he does not refuse it because it belongs to the God he loves.”⁵⁹

Echoing these great masters, George Preca taught that the pre-eminent way in the life of the SDC Member was to be moulded on this maxims of Jesus. He advocated humility because, “Jesus Christ, the King of glory, emptied himself by voluntarily becoming a servant... subjected himself to the will of the Father and to ill-treatment from cruel people,”⁶⁰ becoming for us the ultimate example to imitate. In the same writing, George Preca teaches that one sign of humility is when one is convinced “that anything good in you is due to God’s power,” therefore, “To God alone, is all honour and glory.” He also places a child as a model for humility because, “A child is never really cross, for it does not think itself important or indispensable.”⁶¹

With regards to the virtue of meekness, George Preca wanted the Member to take a daily vow of meekness, and he stipulated this also in the first Constitution. He wanted the members to take this daily vow in front of “The meek and humble Master Jesus Christ,⁶² before the blessed Mary every Virgin and before St Michael the Archangel,” and to oblige themselves, “Under grave or venial

57. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 95.

58. *Ibid.* p 92.

59. *Ibid.* p 98.

60. Preca. *The Watch*, mediation at 3.00 p.m. for Wednesday.

61. *Ibid.*

62. Constitutions 115.

obligation in all circumstance of God's Divine Law, not to take revenge on my neighbour all day tomorrow."⁶³

3.2.5 Simplicity

George Preca advocates single-minded attention and simplicity in living so that it will be only God who is the witness of one's actions. Like Benedict who didn't want "ostentation of fine clothes and the ostentation of rags"⁶⁴ but wanted the monks to wear inexpensive clothes found in the area where the monastery was located, the Founder wanted the Members to wear simple clothing and hairstyle,⁶⁵ never adorn themselves with ties and bowties,⁶⁶ never wear gold or silver items,⁶⁷ and at all costs to avoid being photographed.⁶⁸

Thomas Merton says that the desert Fathers, "Neither courted the approval of their contemporaries nor sought to provoke their disapproval, because the opinions of others had ceased, for them, to be matters of importance."⁶⁹ Likewise, George Preca writes that "The person who cares neither about honours nor about ill-treatment from others enjoys great peace."⁷⁰

3.2.6 Silence

Silence is not easy to learn! It is said that Abba Agatho carried a stone in his mouth for three years, "Until he learned to be silent."⁷¹ The SDC Members are not only asked to "cultivate silence,"⁷²

63. Constitutions 189 and SDC Rule C47.

64. Feiss, *Essential Monastic Wisdom*, 101.

65. Constitutions 33 and SDC Rule GD50.

66. Constitutions 33 and SDC Rule GD51.

67. Constitutions 217.

68. Ibid 84 and SDC Rule GD53.

69. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 17.

70. Preca, *The Watch*, meditation at 3.00 p.m. for Tuesday.

71. Merton, *Wisdom of the Desert*, 33.

72. Constitutions 40, SDC Rule GD71 and SDC Rule GD97.

but are also trained to be united with God through silence,⁷³ imitating the Prophet Elijah who experienced the God's presence in the "shuttering silence" on Mount Horeb (1 Kings 19:12).

Silence has another similarity between the Benedictines and the SDC Members. It is written in the Rule of Benedict: "Prefer moderation in speech and speak no foolish chatter"⁷⁴ and "There must be no word or sign of the evil of grumbling, no manifestation of it for any reason."⁷⁵ Likewise, the SDC Members are reminded that they should never engage themselves in idle talk; never to talk about themselves, either good or bad things;⁷⁶ and to use speech only to share short spiritual messages with whoever they happen to meet.⁷⁷ This last advice reminds us of the "Abba give me a word" (*rhema*)⁷⁸ that many novices used to seek from their Abba whenever they went for direction or instruction. The Founder wanted the Members to act like spiritual companions to others and "that he should never miss a chance to deliver a short spiritual message when he is in the company of others, Members or not"⁷⁹ and that every SDC spiritual director should end every session with "some beneficial word."⁸⁰ Accompanying speech and silence, the Founder linked fasting as a regular daily observance. The quotidian exercise of fast – in honour of St Peter of Alcantara⁸¹ – was a way of keeping vigilance on speech and the cultivation of silence. As far as fasting was concerned, the Founder always associated fasting as a discipline to cultivate silence.

The SDC Founder assigned silence as the SDC's last act for the day: *Serva silentium. Et silentium servet nos* –Let us observe silence. And silence preserves us. (Then kneeling by the bedside and

73. SDC Rule C70.

74. RB 4:52-53.

75. Ibid. 34:6

76. Constitutions 121.

77. Constitutions 38.

78. Harmless, *Desert Christians*, 171.

79. Preca, *The Watch*, 'The Spirit of the SDC Member according to the Founder', 142, para. 5.

80. SDC Rule GD84.

81. SDC Rule GD64.

with hands out-stretched, The Member kisses the image of the *Verbum Dei* and in bed meditates on the daily assigned particular Divine Attribute.)

3.2.7 Virginitas

If the hallmark of the life of a monk is living entirely for God especially by living a state of virginal celibacy, these signatures are equally important and marks the SDC member today, just as much as in the early years of the Society.⁸² It is undisputable that, George Preca, wanted those who journey with him on this particular spiritual path to be virgin. As attested earlier, in the first weeks that the youths started meeting in the newly rented two room house in *Fra Diegu Street* in Hamrun, the Founder asked all married men to stop attending the meetings. This was not because he wanted that those who incorporate with what later was to become the SDC as not married as in the etymological meaning of celibacy or men who were leading a chaste life which is a Christian virtue that every baptised is expected to live, but he wanted the member to be exclusively for God; dedicated solely to God and to no one else. This celibate way of life is nothing short than what Jerome understood with *Puritas Cordis* and this was precisely what George Preca wanted the SDC Member to aim and aspire for. This purity of heart leads to the Member to truly empty “*vacare Dei*” his heart from any bondage and offer himself entirely to God. In the Encyclical Letter, *Sacra Virginitas*, Pope Pius XII stresses this radical aspect of virginitas when he quotes Augustine: “Love with all your hearts Him Who is the most beautiful of the sons of men: you are free, your hearts are not fettered by conjugal bonds . . . Let Him Who was fastened to the cross be securely fastened to your hearts.”⁸³ By virginitas, the Founder meant exactly what one understand theologically and

82. SDC Rule C7 and SDC Rule C38.

83. “De Sancta Virginitas”, cc. 54-55; PL XL, 428, Encyclical of Pope Pius XII on Consecrated Virginitas, accessed January 5, 2019, http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_25031954_sacra-virginitas.html.

in a way he was once again giving form to the “white martyrdom”⁸⁴ that the early monks and women virgins sought when they left the cities to live in the desert.

The Constitutions stated clearly that those who choose to become members must never be married or have led a promiscuous life. Every Rule and Constitution of the SDC was clear that if a Member tempers publicly with chastity, or involves himself in any form of impure act with some other person, he is to be expelled from the SDC.⁸⁵ The Rule also excludes widows and widowers from incorporation with the SDC⁸⁶ on the grounds of virginity.

3.2.8 Spiritual Formation and Direction

The Founder also knew that one cannot be a guide to himself, therefore he asked the Superiors to exhort and correct the members every week;⁸⁷ whenever the need arose, the members themselves were to correct each other in a fraternal way;⁸⁸ and every member was to seek regular spiritual direction⁸⁹ from another member once every two weeks.⁹⁰

This practice is very similar to the formative years of every student within the monastic tradition. Young men who sought to join a monastery use to be assigned a master who will guide them and teach them the Rule and the *horarium* of the monastic life. This was the surest path for the novice to discern his vocation and eventually to live the monastic way of life. The Founder of the SDC was convinced that there could be no real spiritual growth without healthy and proper spiritual

84. Jerome had used the term "white martyrdom" for those such as desert hermits who aspired to the condition of martyrdom through strict asceticism.

85. Constitutions 36.

86. SDC Rule C20 (f).

87. Constitutions 28.

88. Constitutions 39.

89. Constitutions 143.

90. Constitutions 29.

direction and the focus of this direction was to preserve the SDC way of life and create for each other a “spiritual culture.”⁹¹

Spiritual direction is so central in the life of the SDC that even the youth who are still undergoing basic spiritual formation are assigned by their Local Superior a Curator who is responsible “for the spiritual, intellectual, and affective formation,”⁹² to help them mature in their vocation. Once a Candidate incorporates in the Society, he is then encouraged “to have a spiritual director to consult regularly as a companion and with him share the joys and sorrow of life,”⁹³ so that through this spiritual accompaniment he may “examine himself, especially in his right intention.”⁹⁴ The Member who practice spiritual direction is in a much better position to avoid what hinders the spiritual life because through the manifestation of the conscience one unmasks false “motivations” and any inordinate “inclinations of the heart.”⁹⁵

In the prologue of the Rule of Benedict, we find that spiritual direction and obedience go hand in hand: “Listen carefully, my children, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart.”⁹⁶ George Preca, took these rules to heart and asks the Member to practice spiritual direction with “genuine humility” to be “docile, obedient and sincere towards his director”⁹⁷ for through this holy exercise one reaps a fruitful harvest. There are great similarities between the qualities of the *Abba* in the RB and the SDC spiritual director. The RB stipulates that the determining factor should not be age but wisdom and experience, seeks to continue to grow in self-awareness and knowledge, surrenders to the power of grace and is aware that he is being

91. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. II*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 264.

92. SDC Rule C159.

93. SDC Rule C77.

94. SDC Rule C80.

95. SDC Rule GD82.

96. RB Introduction.

97. SDC Rule C79.

directed by the Holy Spirit.⁹⁸ Likewise, the SDC spiritual director should be a member who is: “Leading a life of union with God; mature in the living of the SDC charism; have intelligence and competence in biblical and spiritual theology; is trained in the discernment of spirits; and possess knowledge of the human sciences.”⁹⁹

3.3 The SDC: Being Regarded as “Fools for Christ”

From the early days of the SDC Foundation, the Members were guided into a particular way of life, which made them look like “fools” in the eyes of many. George Preca often claimed for himself something similar when he said that the Founder of the SDC was not himself but Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. It is no wonder that what the Founder asked of the Members was what St Paul himself also demanded: “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, as though sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to mortals. We are fools for the sake of Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:9-10).

Accordingly, from the early days, the SDC Members were ushered into a particular way of life that made them look “odd” by conventional expectations. To live for “God Alone,” and to lead a life akin to that of the *Anawim* (poor in spirit), one needs to resemble Jesus in every dimension, not only inwardly but also externally. As mentioned above, from those who opted to follow him in this new *sequela Christi*, the Founder demanded some very tough, even radical decisions, from the Members, which included: to cut their hair short enough to not need combing; to abstain from smoking; to avoid hard liquor; to wear no gold or silver jewellery; and to wear neither neckties nor bowties. The Founder’s sole intention was to help the Members to live freely in Christ by

98. Kathryn Casper, “The Person and Practice of Spiritual Direction from the Rule of St Benedict RB 80 Appendix A,” Rule of St Benedict, accessed 5 January 2019, http://www.solesmes.com/sites/default/files/upload/pdf/rule_of_st_benedict.pdf.

99. SDC Rule GD79 (a-e).

eradication of all worldly vanities and esteem; thus, as “true friends of the Gospel” each Member was to lead a life of “constant conversion and self-denial.”¹⁰⁰ This austerity was not at all easy; in fact, to their contemporaries, the Members looked more like inmates lately released from prison than a group of young men aspiring to be ascetics! They experienced verbal, and at times physical abuse; they were taunted and ridiculed in the streets and squares of the villages. In spite of all adversity, this disparagement did not discourage them, for they considered themselves to be “blessed” to have been found worthy to be despised for the sake of Jesus Christ.

3.3.1 – The SDC as a Radical Option

George Preca did not present this radical option only to the young men, those who were closer to him; he included young women who were called to journey on the new way of *sequela Christi*. The stylishly dressed young lady, who went to seek the Founder’s advice about her vocation to become a “bride of Christ,” also was invited to make a counter-cultural statement in fidelity to Christ. Without mincing his words, the Founder told her that she first needed to resemble the beauty of the crowned “groom” of hers and do away with attention to herself. This meant the elimination of fancy clothing as well as facial make-up and manicure. This was the first very difficult step, but it was a step towards freedom to love. Only when one rejects self-absorption and its attendant pride can one devote the heart solely to God.¹⁰¹

The Founder tested the Members even further. At random, he used to pick a Member to run around the village playing a hand bell and looking ridiculous. Ridiculous as much as it could be, for the Member who executed such a command out of obedience, revealed only holiness. The early Members recount that a few days after they were all asked to get short crewcuts, the Founder asked them to follow him, hats in hand, as he left the Centre and walked down the main road of the village. It is said that one particular member found this exercise in humility just too embarrassing,

100. SDC Rule C62.

101. Archimandrite Sophrony, *Asceticism and Contemplation*, pp. 33-4.

and he simply took a tangent, dodging down a side road; eventually, he stopped attending. These exercises were tough and demanding on the Member yet they eloquently pointed towards a spirituality in line with those who were ready to be regarded as “fools for Christ.”

If these acts were intended to galvanise the spirit of single-mindedness in the early Members, the hardest exercise came when the Founder asked the Members to submit themselves to the Vow of Meekness. At first, Preca intended this vow to be exercised by the Members themselves in private, but when the goings became rough, especially towards 1916, and offensive letters against the Society were making the rounds in some of the local newspapers, the Founder took the Members to the Carmelite Convent in the old capital city of Mdina, and there, kneeling in front of the Crucifix, he obliged them all to take the Vow of Meekness.

3.3.2 Meekness as the Highest Grade of Discipleship

In addition, the Members promised neither to retaliate nor to defend themselves from any of the false accusations being flung at them. No wonder, then, that the life of the SDC Member came to be regarded as, “Holy intransigency, wise and flexible, flexible in the sense that it needs to adapt continuously to be able to face and fight the many superficial ideas of how one can put on Christ and become a disciple.”¹⁰² George Preca wanted the SDC charism to be able to “Love to the point of banality for the good of all and the good of the Church.”¹⁰³

As lay people living in the contemporary world, the SDC Members refuse to turn their backs on the people of the world, not because they are stubborn, but because they are able to be unwavering before those who would ridicule, harass and belittle the faithful. From this perspective, George

102. Camilleri C, *Dun Ġorġ: Monaku fl-ispirtu, attiv fl-appostolat*, Carmelite Institute Malta, March 21, 2012.

103. Farrugia E, ‘*Dun Ġorġ, the man and the saint*’, *The Times*, May 9, 2001.

Preca gave the laity at large, and the SDC Members in particular, “The highest grade of discipleship that they can enjoy in the Church.”¹⁰⁴

What made the SDC Members to be galvanised in such a way of life? The answer is definitely the fact that they saw the Founder as a living example of someone who embodied all the prerequisites of those who are ready to be regarded as fools for Christ.¹⁰⁵ Charló Camilleri writes that Preca fit the category of those who can be considered as fools for Christ because he was first and foremost obedient to what his formed conscience told him rather than succumb to human respect. Preca built his apostolate on heavenly wisdom, shunning worldly knowledge and never tiring to witness the gospel truth in public, fearing no one. Like the fools for Christ, George Preca had a spirit of prophesy and was able to read the hearts and thoughts of those who sought his guidance. Above all the *idiōtēs* before him, he escaped all limelight, applause, public approval or popularity and instead preferred the company of the poor, the humble and the simple.¹⁰⁶

George Preca never travelled abroad and therefore could not have any direct contact with any monk in the traditional sense of the word. What we but know for certain is that he used to frequent the Greek Orthodox community on a regular basis and a number of prayers and adorations, together with signs symbols and language pertaining this community found themselves in the

104. Ibid.

105. This type of spirituality developed mainly in the East. Among the holy men and women who personified this ‘holy foolishness’ we find in the 10th century we find Andrea Salos and later, Simon of Emesa (+c1550) who is remembered for his strange behavior towards the conventions of his time. Some of these holy fools are venerated as saints with Basil the Blessed (+1550). Considered as the greatest fool for Christ in the Russia. He is one of the very few who had the courage of facing and rebuking Czar Ivan the Terrible for his violent and bloody atrocities. On one particular day of fasting and abstentions, Basil made the Czar eat meat to demonstrate in front of everybody that fasting and abstentions meant nothing if one’s hands are dirtied with violent blood.

106. Camilleri C. “Aħna boloh minhabba fi Kristu” (1Kor 4, 9b-10). *Rivista ta’ Spiritwalità*, No 124, 2003, 182-189.

prayer life of the SDC. One entry in the diary of Papás Shciró¹⁰⁷ notes that George Preca preached the sermon on the feast day of Our Lady.

3.4 Counter-cultural to Contemporary Society in Malta

On May 9, 2001, the day when Pope John Paul II beatified George Preca, Edward Farrugia wrote an article that appeared in *The Times of Malta*, the leading English daily paper, in which he refers to the SDC as, “One of the few truly successful countercultural movements”¹⁰⁸ in the history of Malta. The Maltese people, however, were discomfited by the sight of the SDC Members of this new movement; they objected to the lack of normal convention.

The Founder asked the Members to go against the grain of fashion and popular trends to express: “An attitude which included the refusal to come to easy terms with a society often tempted to pay lip-service to the Gospel.” Every average Maltese man and woman of the early Twentieth century, however limited in means, would just the same try their very best to keep up with the trends of the day. While young people in their best attire enjoyed strolling down through City Gate and walking *Strada Royale* in Valletta, Edward Farrugia notes that SDC Members were asked to go around in “crew cut hair and tieless collars”; and this was, “Only one symptom of a wholesale—and wholesome—attempt not to compromise on one’s principles.”¹⁰⁹

This small gesture pricked the collective conscience of the Maltese! Generally, they could cope with one unshaven priest in an old, patched cassock, who went around the islands wearing

107. There is an entry in Papàs Giorgio Schirò's diary on the 28th October 1932 which testifies that George Preca was invited to preach at the Greek Catholic church in Valletta. The entry states: *In ricorrenza del II anniversario della Incoronazione della Ven. Immagine della Damascena si é cantata la sera lo Paraclisio e la predica è stata tenuta da D. Giorgio Preca.* – (On the occasion of the second anniversary of the Incoronation of the Venerable Image of Our Lady of Damascus the *Paraclisis* was sung and the sermon was delivered by Fr George Preca.)

108. Farrugia E, “Dun Ġorġ, the man and the saint”, *The Times* (9 May 2001).

109. *Ibid.*

policeman-style unlaced boots, but the sight of tens of young men in “crew cut hair and tieless collars,” sprawling around their towns and villages, was too much to endure. The Catholic Maltese society at large was “thoroughly favourable to Dun Ġorġ;” however, “they were quite opposed to his fellow-workers, precisely on account of their intransigence”¹¹⁰ to go by what the prevailing culture demanded.

Not only did the SDC Members go against the general norms of self-importance and vanity, but they also went against other expectations concerning the lay person in general. In a different article,¹¹¹ Edward Farrugia highlights the fact that George Preca was not ready “to preach a comfortable Gospel.” Nor was he “content to have his listeners parrot sentences from the Bible,”¹¹² but, instead, “Encouraged the Members to confront the lesson with their life-style in a demanding but rewarding pedagogy which instilled values and formed their character.”¹¹³ Many-a-time (as the Liturgy was in Latin), the Gospel and public worship took place in a language that was not even understood by most of the congregation. It was definitely daring to encourage the Members to “become friends of the Gospel” when there was not even a translation of Holy Scripture in the Maltese language; moreover, this was a time when one needed permission even to read the Bible. Farrugia says that Preca managed to do this because: “Passion both for orthodoxy and for his love towards God and his people (was) something that must amaze us in one who had to bear up with so many years of incomprehension from the official Church.”¹¹⁴

3.4.1 Lay Spiritual Accompaniment

If making the Bible available to the laity was countercultural in the Maltese Society of the early Twentieth century, asking the SDC Members to give spiritual direction to one another must have

110. Ibid.

111. Farrugia E, ‘St George Preca, Second Father in the Faith’ History repeats itself only once—the second time!’ *The Times* May 9, 2007.

112. Ibid.

113. Ibid.

114. Ibid.

seemed anathema! Edward Farrugia lauds George Preca for inserting this salient practice into the first Constitutions of the SDC; such a practice, Farrugia wrote, “Stands not only in the best tradition of the Church, and especially of the Eastern Fathers, but also shows how modern and post-conciliar he was in spirit.”¹¹⁵ However, the Church authorities, for their part, were adamantly against laity giving spiritual direction, and they removed it from the SDC Constitutions. Yet, knowing the many advantages of spiritual direction and how beneficial it was for the Society, the Founder managed to get around the objections, while still remaining obedient. Preca rewrote the Constitution and renamed spiritual direction, calling it *parrinija*, a new word that stems from the Maltese word *parrinu* (mentor or godfather). The word *parrinu* was used in the rites of both Baptism and Confirmation; this offshoot term the Church authorities accepted.

It is recorded that a number of well-meaning priest thought that the way of life that Preca was presenting to the Members was too severe and that he should soften his stance on a number of issues. In his crude and many-a-times straightforward way, George Preca, responded that he did not want “empty vases on the pharmacy shelf!”¹¹⁶ Having lost the battle to persuade him, these priests tried press their point home by asking a visiting well-known Jesuit priest, Plater, who happened to be in Malta to give a number of talks, to talk to the Founder and persuade him that if he were to soften some of the Constitutions he would have a larger membership. The Founder responded that he sought quality over quantity. George Preca used to be very frank with the Members about this subtle pressure and during the Wednesday general meetings, he used to talk about the need for the Members to be serious about their spiritual life, for holiness was not the work of the fainthearted.¹¹⁷

115. Farrugia E, *St George Preca, 'Second Father in the Faith' History repeats itself only once—the second time!* The Times May 9, 2007.

116. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Ħajja-Xiehda-Dokumenti Vol. II*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 203.

117. *Ibid.*

3.4.2 The Engagement of Women in the SDC

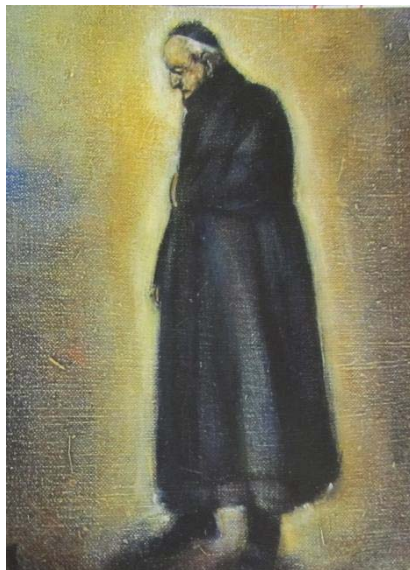
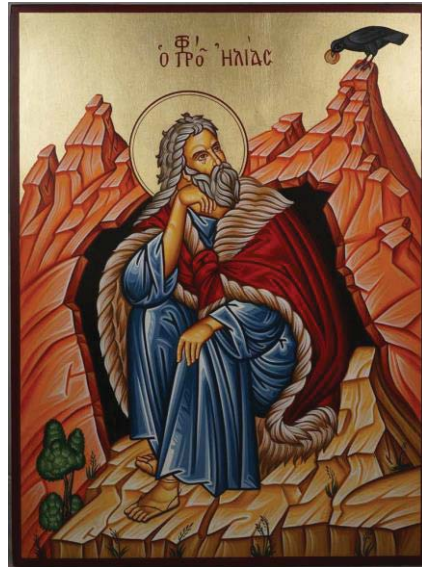
What can also be regarded as equally countercultural with the SDC was that young women too became interested in the SDC way of life, just as the young men did. It is also remarkable to note the fact that just three years after the founding the male section, Preca established an autonomous section for women, something which in those days would also be considered as counter-cultural. The female SDC section was to have the same mission of holiness and employ the same means as the male section, but it was to be administered independently. From the earliest years, the female SDC female Members made an abiding and positive influence on their contemporaries. George Preca was blessed to find lay women who were eager to join, Edward Farrugia wrote that the “Affable Giannina Cutajar, whose charismatic welcoming was immortalized by the doggerel: ‘*Ejj’ immorru għand Ġiannina biex tghallimna id-duttrina!*’”¹¹⁸ On the sister Island of Gozo, the female SDC Section predates that of the young men. The first regional superior of the female SDC Centres in Gozo was Rakele Camilleri, and all the correspondence that transpired between her and the Founder is kept at the SDC archives at the Central House in Blata l-Bajda.

The SDC posited itself as countercultural not only with regards to the secular and the religious, but also in relation to what was commonly referred to at the time as “the language problem,” a tension between English and Italian as the Island’s national language. George Preca never engaged himself in this polemic, but instead, he simply opted to write, talk and communicate always in Maltese. In the SDC Constitutions, the Founder decreed that every person who was to join the SDC had to be literate in his mother tongue. SDC Members always conducted their catechism classes, faith-formation sessions and Assignment in Maltese (and later in the native language of the country wherever they established Centres outside Malta).

118. Let us go to Ġiannina, for she teaches us catechism.

CHAPTER FOUR

CHAPTER FOUR



Chapter 4

The SDC as a New Phenomenon: Past and Present

4.1 A Universal Call to Holiness: the SDC way

In chapter 5 of “*Lumen Gentium*”, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the conciliar fathers of Vatican II eloquently underline the universal call to holiness, which is not limited to any one state in life, but is indeed universal, embracing all baptised Christians. Paragraph 39 reads: “... this holiness of the Church is unceasingly manifested, and must be manifested, in the fruits of grace which the Spirit produces in the faithful; it is expressed in many ways in individuals, who in their walk of life, tend toward the perfection of charity, thus causing the edification of others; in a very special way this (holiness) appears in the practice of the counsels, customarily called ‘evangelical.’” The SDC Rule identifies a specific “evangelical” way with which the Member is to manifest the grace of the Spirit: “The members, therefore, resolve to live the spirit of humility and meekness, in order to become increasingly Christ-like. In that way the fruits of Baptism in all its maturity will be manifested through their witness as lay people.”¹ *Lumen Gentium* emphasises even further this same universal call for holiness by stating that every one of the faithful, without

1. SDC Rule C13.

distinction, “Whatever be the conditions, duties and circumstances of their lives and indeed through all these, will daily increase in holiness, if they receive all things with faith from the hand of their heavenly Father and if they cooperate with the divine will. In this temporal service, they will manifest to all men the love with which God loved the world.”² This resignation to the will of God is manifested daily by the kissing of the Cross of Resignation and the recitation of the sentence, “If anyone wants to be a follower of mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23), up until the death of a Member. The Rule states that, when a Member dies, “The Local Superior, or someone delegated by him, places the Cross of Resignation of that member in his hands as a sign of his adherence to God’s will till the very end, together with the words, “You are righteous indeed, O Lord, and your rulings are correct” (Psalm 119:137).³

4.1.1 A Radical Way of Life

Taking this truth to heart, Pope Francis dedicated his last apostolic exhortation precisely on the theme of holiness in the contemporary world, *Gaudete et Exsultate* (9 April 2018). In the opening remarks the Pope states that the universal call for holiness is addressed to all: “The Lord asks everything of us, and in return he offers us true life, the happiness for which we were created.” The Pope reminds all that God “... wants us to be saints and not to settle for a bland and mediocre existence.”

Likewise the SDC Member is definitely not expected to “settle for a bland and mediocre existence;” in fact the Rule asks the Members to take up a way of life that is, “[c]haracterised by the virtues of love, meekness, humility, simplicity, poverty and the joyful acceptance of worldly contempt for the sake of Jesus.”⁴ These virtues that the Rule contemplates, together with the foundational aim of the Society which is the “holiness of its members,”⁵ embrace dimensions of

2. Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium*, Ch. 5, para. 39.

3. SDC Rule GD179

4. SDC Rule C7.

5. SDC Rule C5.

the monastic life that are akin to the universal call for holiness. The road to holiness is a journey of discipleship after Christ, during which, to attain this holy ideal, the Members are called to, “Strip off their old behaviour with their old self” (cf. Colossians 3:9), and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. Romans 13:14). Through this witnessing, Members integrate the Gospel in a holistic way: within the family, at the place of work, in the SDC centre, in solitude and wherever else they happen to be.⁶ By living this particular spirituality, the Member directs himself towards “Christian perfection”⁷ by keeping “in mind the example of Jesus Crucified”⁸ and living from within the spirit of the Rule.

4.2 The Church’s Reaction Towards the Early Members

The reactions towards the SDC within the Church were varied. Those who knew George Preca and were close to him, were supportive; others for different reasons were suspicious both of Preca himself and even more so about the Society he founded. The Society was founded during the bishopric of Pietro Pace,⁹ who, being prompted by speculations and at times blatant lies,¹⁰ ordered the closure of all the SDC centres. This was 1909. Bishop Pace conveyed his order through his Vicar General, Salviour Grech, but a few days later, he temporary suspended his condemnation of the Society. The bishop’s change of intention was mainly due to the defence that the parish priest of Hamrun, Joseph Muscat,¹¹ put forward in favour of the Founder and the Society.¹² Yet, even though permission was granted to the Society to continue its meetings within the parish of

6. SDC Rule GD1.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. Pietro Pace was born in Victoria, Gozo on April 9, 1831. He was ordained a priest in 1853 and was consecrated as Bishop of Gozo on April 8, 1877 and served there until 1889. He was then transferred to the Bishopric of Malta and served for 25 years until he died on July 29, 1914.

10. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Ħajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. I*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 207-208.

11. Ibid. p.219.

12. Ibid. p.211.

Hamrun, Bishop Pace still wanted to look into the matter. For the time being, however, they were free to operate; yet, a cloud of suspicion still lingered on the new foundation, fuelled in a special way by a spate of letters that were appearing in two local papers, “*Is-Salib*” (The Cross) and “*Malta Tagħna*” (Our Malta).

“No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins” (Mark 2:22). Yet, even though this sentence is said by Jesus himself, whenever faced with new religious movements and new spiritual expressions, the Church hierarchy is usually sceptical and rarely looks at “the new wine” as work of the Holy Spirit but more as a threat to what is familiar and established.

4.2.1 The Years of the Inquiry

Bishop Pietru Pace was succeeded by Mauro Caruana OSB (1867 – 1943).¹³ On becoming the Bishop of Malta, Bishop Caruana came to know both of George Preca and the SDC, which in those days was only referred to as *Mużew*. The newly elected bishop did not take long to address the pending situation; barely a year in office, Bishop Caruana opened an enquiry about the Society, the first sitting was actually held on March 10, 1916.¹⁴ No one doubted the integrity of the Founder; although there was a handful of priests who tried to spread rumours that Preca was insane, or suffering from some form of mental problems, the Church’s authority never doubted the integrity, uprightness and sanity of George Preca. The enquiry was concluded in a positive judgment; the Founder received a number of recommendations by which he had to abide, and subsequently the SDC was officially approved in 1932.

13. Maurus Caruana, O.S.B., K.G.C., K.B.E. was born in November 16, 1867 and died on December 17, 1943. He was a Maltese Benedictine monk who served as the Bishop of Malta between 1915 and 1943.

14. Bonnici. *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. II*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1981), 327.

4.3 The Maltese Society's Reaction Towards the Early Members

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Malta was facing social and cultural unrest incited by anarchists and other people who set themselves against anything kind of establishment. The Church in Malta, too, had its critics and the anti-clerical movement was strong. Yet, if these disruptions were to be regarded as the staunchest enemies of the Church's hierarchy, George Preca, was spared for he was a priest who favoured the poor. On the other hand, as stated earlier, Edward Farrugia notes that, "It was quite common to meet people thoroughly favourable to Dun Ġorġ, but quite opposed to his co-workers."¹⁵ This disparity was probably because the SDC did not have an apparent precursor in the base culture of Malta and therefore was either envied or feared from those who wished to capture the support and the political backing of the working class.

4.3.1 The Seed Starts to Germinate

The historical fact that the Society grew fast and that SDC Centres mushroomed around the harbour area within the first years of its foundation is a clear sign that, by and large, the work done by the SDC Members was appreciated and approved at least by the parish priests. On the other hand, many of the Members did experience derision and ridicule simply because they attended or were members of the SDC. Charló Camilleri recalls how, when he was still a secondary student, he used to be taunted as "*taċ-Ċomba*"¹⁶ (a disparaging reference to the badge SDC members wear) by other boys of the same age for wearing the pin bearing the words *Verbum Dei caro factum est*. The *Elects* (twelve to sixteen year olds) junior members were also teased because they carried a copy of the prayer book, *The Watch*, in their bags and used it for prayer during the day. The Members suffered ridicule; they were often called names. Some of the detractors even composed

15. Farrugia E, "Dun Ġorġ, The man and the saint", *The Times*, May 9, 2001.

16. Oral communication among friends during school hours or other informal gathering.

taunting riddles and sung them to imply through these rude jingles that the Members were banal, stupid and foolish.¹⁷

This negative approach, and at times outright persecution, came also in the form of letters to the press. Even though the letters were not numerous, they took their toll on both the Founder and the Members, especially those missives written by priests. At times, the Founder lamented that he was hurt by the false reports circulated and written about him and the Society. Although he was strict that none of the Members retaliate or defend either him or the Society, he used to play a pun on the name of the local paper, *Is-Salib*, which was reproducing the detracting letters, calling *Is-Salib* “my cross.”¹⁸

4.3.2 Years of Misjudgement and Misunderstanding

Suspicion and misjudgements came also from a number of the village people who regarded the meetings at the first SDC Centre as secretive and spread the word that the place was nothing but a covert Masonic Lodge.¹⁹ On the other hand, there were people who knew the good that was happening at the centres and also financially supported the early Members. When the first Superior General, Eugene Borg, would go around collecting some money to pay the centre’s rent, men who had once spent time with him as he taught in bars and civic centres, used to help him financially.²⁰

Fate and coincidence, too, played a part in the way the early Members were conceived by the general public. It happened that when the first Superior General opened a new centre in Cospicua, a certain Italian man bearing the same name as that of Eugene Borg was spreading false teaching. Eugene Borg was mistakenly reported to the Curia as the one who was spreading this false teaching, and the parish priest was asked to publicly denounce Borg, the SDC Superior General.

17. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. I*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC 1980), 191.

18. Ibid.

19. Bonnici, *Dun Ġorġ Preca Hajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. I*, (Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980), 163.

20. Ibid.

Subsequently, the parish priest, Joseph Azzopardi, announced in Church that anyone who attending Eugene Borg's meetings would be excommunicated! Eugene Borg thought that the best way forward was to go and talk to the parish priest himself, and that was what he did. As he was crossing the city square, on his way to the priest's house, he had to face a crowd of people; some were very angry at him, while others, who knew him, were crying. The parish priest received him and asked him about his teaching. Eugene told the priest that he was reading aloud for the young men excerpts from *Thomas à Kempis* and *Preparation for Death* and teaching them sentences of the "voice of the Beloved," which he learned from Preca. The curate was confused for this was very different from the news that had reached him; he encouraged Eugene Borg to continue.²¹ George Preca was really afraid when he had to go to the Curia to face the Church's authority. He used to confide to his one of his closest friends, Canon Joseph Vella that he suffered the affliction of diarrhea whenever he received a letter summoning him to call at the Curia.²²

4.4 Challenges to Be Resolved by the SDC today

The SDC today is present in a number of countries and continents, thus making the challenges varied and, at times, complex. The responses from diverse cultures to the varied tasks now before the Society cannot be reduced to a simple recipe or carried out in strict uniformity. This is because the ways to holiness are neither easy nor straightforward, even if the many routes all eventually arrive at the same final and eternal destination. What is most encouraging by far is the fact even though more than one hundred and ten years have passed since the SDC's foundation and fifty-five years since the death of its Founder, George Preca, young people still choose to live this particular way of life; they find the SDC spirituality attractive. The challenges that the SDC faces come both from within (i.e., the way the Members themselves understand and live their vocation)

21. Ibid., 196.

22. Ibid., 205.

and from without, especially from those cultural environments and societies where religious devotional practice and Catholic identity are no longer relevant for the people.

4.4.1 Internal and External Tensions

In his introductory remarks for the 2014 General Chapter, the present General Superior, Natalino Camilleri, remarked that the early years after the death of a founder may be decisive for the future of a Congregation or Society: “Currents within the same Society can cause it to split up, lose its original inspiration, or even die out.”²³ In the same address, the Superior General noted that, whatever the challenges, the SDC faced and is still facing, “it did not pay this high price.”²⁴ This can be attributed to the fact that during these past twenty years, the Society was bold enough to embark on a program of renewal in the light of what Søren Aabye Kierkegaard (*Journals*, 1843) wrote, “Life is understood in retrospect, but needs to be lived in the future.”²⁵ The SDC, too, needs to: “Understand itself in the light of its long tradition, to be able to understand and live the present moment.”²⁶

The tools the SDC used to renew itself were mainly, although not exclusively, its General Chapters. The General Chapter of 1999 formally asked for the renewal of the Rule; consequently, by 2013 the SDC had a new Rule, conveyed through a Constitution and a General Directory. This renewal happened in conjunction with other important exercises, related (i) to the deeper understanding of its charism and how to translate its vision into mission,²⁷ (ii) how to sustain the Members and the Centres in their ministry and authentic living of their vocation²⁸ and (iii) the

23. Camilleri N, (General Chapter introductory talk, Dar in Ħanin Samaritan, April, 2014).

24. Ibid.

25. Joseph Buttugieg, *Aħna min Aħna*, 88.

26. Ibid.

27. SDC General Chapter final document, *Identity and Formation – From Vision to Mission*. April, 2004.

28. SDC General Chapter final document, *A Blazing Heart That Sets Others Ablaze*. April, 2009.

ability to respond to a changing culture, but without betraying the original inspiration; authentic holiness remains the reference point to all who seek God.²⁹

When we speak of challenges from within, we think of those Members from its fold who, “are trapped in the identity problematics.”³⁰ These Members cause a great threat because they do not mature spiritually, even though they may age; they act more like, “An adolescent who is stuck in the development stage between identity and confusion, making it impossible for the SDC to be of one mind and one heart,”³¹ authentically witnessing and living its mission.

4.1.2 Trapped in Mundanity

Another enormous internal challenge is that of self-sufficient individualism. When Members struggle with the question of how to do mission, there are those Members who, “Driven by individualism, think that they can work on their own; or those who reason that mission may be carried out with the same attitudes or means which are actually alienating the culture from God.”³² This echoes what René Camilleri speaks of when in a talk given to the Chapter delegates he noted that: “Today we find ourselves living in a culture that after doing its utmost to make us look irrelevant by causing us an identity crises, it tries to convince us that by reducing the price of our message we can ‘sell’ better.”³³ This is a real temptation, and if the SDC fails to hold fast to its original inspiration, it can easily succumb to pressures similar to those George Preca himself faced in the early days of the SDC foundation, but which he adamantly resisted, as stated earlier. *Lumen Gentium* reminds us that, if we give in to the “world that is passing away,” we will find ourselves working “against the Spirit.”³⁴

29. SDC General Chapter final document, *An Oasis the Quenches Thirst*. April, 2014.

30. Ibid.

31. Camilleri N, (General Chapter introductory talk, Dar in Hanin Samaritan, April, 2014).

32. Ibid.

33. René Camilleri, *Aħna min Aħna*, 93.

34. *LG* 5, 42: “Therefore, all the faithful of Christ are invited to strive for the holiness and perfection of their own proper state. Indeed they have an obligation to so strive. Let all then have

Another internal challenge, which is related more to the apostolic dimension of the SDC charism, is: “The reduced number of youthful and proactive Members who are capable of continuing the apostolate in an effective way, especially with the young who are increasingly more demanding.”³⁵ This resonates with the remark made by Edward Farrugia when he referred to the fact that, “The level of education has changed drastically since the time when George Preca has started the SDC,”³⁶ and that the SDC needs to strive hard to find that intelligent language with which it can continue to resonate with the spiritual hunger of the modern world.³⁷ Farrugia notes that, “When the Society was founded, education was still not compulsory yet today many not only complete secondary education but opt also to graduate from University. If in the days of the Founder many were illiterate or semi-illiterate, today the great majority of the Maltese can be critical of the message if this is not challenging enough. Therefore one of the main challenges that the SDC Member has to face today is the ability to convey the Christian message in a way that makes sense and captures the imagination of the listener.”³⁸

A related challenge to the apostolic dimension and the running of the SDC Centres is the very fact that Members (especially the local superiors) feel overwhelmed: “Administrative and ministerial duties that place on them multiple roles and responsibilities.”³⁹ Unfortunately, when numbers fall, the Administration finds it difficult to reduce its active ministry, and as a consequence (even if not

care that they guide aright their own deepest sentiments of soul. Let neither the use of the things of this world nor attachment to riches, which is against the spirit of evangelical poverty, hinder them in their quest for perfect love. Let them heed the admonition of the Apostle (1 Corinthians 7:31) to those who use this world; let them not come to terms with this world; for this world, as we see it, is passing away.”

35. Minutes of the 2014 General Chapter.

36. Farrugia E, *Aħna min Aħna*, 52.

37. ‘At the same time the Society must strive to offer its members sound formation through relevant and updated instruction in adequate language, so that they may be able to find direction for themselves and for those with whom they share their faith journey by means of catechesis and spiritual direction. For this same purpose, the Society is to encourage and sustain its members to deepen their formation in Bible Studies, Theology, Spirituality, Missiology and Catechetics.’ Resolution of the General Chapter 2014. (para. 4.2.)

38. *An Oasis the Quenches Thirst*, para. 4.2

39. Minutes of the 2014 General Chapter.

purposely intended), reduce the time from prayer, contemplation, study and formation to the detriment of its own existence.

4.4.3 Ministering in The Global Village

With regards to challenges that hit the SDC from the outside, one cannot but acknowledge that the SDC is exposed to: “A modern and globalised culture... marked by a fast rhythm of life... by families that are not always up to the Christian ideal, by youths who are often insecure and reluctant to commit themselves to a vocation... by a culture of consumerism and agnosticism which apparently has lost the awe of the transcendent while continuing to seek eagerly for a higher meaning for life.”⁴⁰

Particular countries, such as Australia and the UK, where the majority of the people seem to have lost their interest in God and live a quasi-agnostic way of life, the SDC is hardly deemed of any significance or relevance. In societies, which seem indifferent to God, the SDC finds it hard to thrive, to attract vocations and to be relevant.⁴¹ In an ungodly atmosphere or merely secular environment, the SDC vocation and its ministry are rendered anachronistic; the treasure stored up in heaven is not valued or simply dismissed as irrelevant.⁴² The spiritual corrosion of such an environment can undermine the spiritual growth of the individual Member and may even corrode his faith and, subsequently, his vocation.⁴³ On the other hand, the prophetic and contemplative aspect of the SDC vocation can serve as a restorative antidote in these places, thus acting as a catalyst, enabling the Members to enter into a healthy and profitable dialogue with those who still

40. *The SDC Vocation Identity and Formation*. para.2.

41. Minutes of the 2014 General Chapter.

42. Camilleri R, *Aħna min Aħna*, 96.

43. “A member who is caught up in the superficiality and individualism of contemporary culture withers away and parches all around him. He will start leading a fragmented life and assuming conflicting identities both in his real and virtual worlds. Thus he loses the integrity that makes him whole. The many compromises that he makes render him mediocre and worldly, close him up in himself and alienate him from God and from the others. As a result, he eventually abandons all the decisions that he took when he dedicated himself to God in the SDC vocation.” Resolution of the General Chapter 2014, para. 3.1

hunger for some form of spirituality, even if they are put off by formal church-going.⁴⁴ Therefore, what is therefore of great value for the SDC Member is to continue to appreciate its prophetic and contemplative dimensions, so that, sustained by the grace of the Holy Spirit, it can preserve the essential union with the Blessed Trinity; from this union, it can serve all people better and act like a relevant sign post for them on their life-journey.

If the SDC wants to safeguard its original inspiration and continue to be prophetic, it needs to take these several challenges very seriously. This is especially urgent, as we begin a new millennium, and the past forces that shaped Christian culture drift away from their earlier moorings in the Greco-Roman cultures upon which Christianity was built. Unfortunately, other “Monastic and religious congregations evolved from a revolutionary force in European society into an established part of it, becoming an essentially conservative voice of conventional orthodoxy rather than an innovative or prophetic movement.”⁴⁵ If this happens, the SDC will be solidifying itself, like those, “Who turned their focus from personal spirituality to institutional service, rendering their vocation void of its true transformative power.”⁴⁶

4.5 The Call to the Radical Christian Living: Basic to the SDC Foundation

In every SDC General Chapter held during the past twenty five years,⁴⁷ the Society sought to engage in an ongoing exercise of renewal⁴⁸ in the spirit of *Perfectae Caritatis* (PC).⁴⁹ In this

44. “We must be more aware of the changes that this culture brings about, and of the diverse opportunities and resources presented by this transformed modern situation of today’s peoples who, in spite of everything, are still blessed by the fruits of the Incarnation and the Redemption of the Lord Jesus.” *The SDC Vocation Identity and Formation*. 2004 General Chapter, para. 3.

45. Kauffman, *Follow Me*, 81.

46. Ibid. p. 86.

47. From 1994 until 2014, General Chapters were held every five years. Now they are held every six years.

48. ‘Within this ecclesial spirit the SDC seeks constantly to know and understand more what God wants her to be. This understanding of its own identity leads it to live its vocation more authentically so as to remain always a significant leaven among the people of God.’ *The SDC Vocation Identity and Formation*. 2014 General Chapter, para. 9.

49. Paul VI, *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on the adaptation and renewal of Religious Life, 28 October, 1965.

Decree, Paul VI (†1978), asked for, “Constant return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original spirit of the institutes and their adaptation to the changed conditions of our time.”⁵⁰ A clear example of this was when, prior to the 2004 General Chapter, the Society’s Administration invited a number of keynote speakers to help her reflect on her identity, renew it, and be able to live its “authentic sources.”⁵¹

One of these keynote speakers, Edward Farrugia, reflected on the nature of the SDC and highlighted the fact that the Founder, “Managed to devise a Society which is so unique that it hardly fits any of the conservative categories making the SDC, in a sense, *sui generis*, for it is neither religious, in the traditional sense of the word, nor a secular institute in the more recent terminology.”⁵² Edward continues insisting that, George Preca “Intuitively shaped out of the amorphous matter of a religiously illiterate though devout worker class an association which could have come straight from the early Church and which would probably be destroyed if one would try to update by ignoring this wild character which so profoundly characterizes.”⁵³ This assertion puts a great deal of responsibility on the SDC to preserve its radicalism and, continues to respond to the needs of the Church today. Again, this is very much in line with what we find in *Perfectae Caritatis* which explicitly states that the way forward for every religious group is twofold: looking to its past for appropriation of every good that is found there and living that good with renewed energy in the present; “Though paradoxical, in order to move forward in faith, one has to go backward first.”⁵⁴

50. Ibid., para. 2.

51. Ibid., para. 6.

52. Farrugia E, *Aħna min Aħna*, 43.

53. Ibid.

54. Peters, *The Story of Monasticism*, 2.

4.5.1 Faithful and Orthodox

Faithful to the Church's teaching,⁵⁵ the Society focused on the renewal of the Rule⁵⁶ and the ongoing formation of its Members: "The future of the Society will still be determined by the quality of its members and their fidelity to the Rule, their personal integrity, the bond of unity and love that binds them together, their commitment to self-formation especially through sound reading, the Assignment, and by their love for the Society."⁵⁷ When one studies the themes of the last five General Chapters, one immediately notices that the Society has indeed taken to heart its responsibility to preserve her particular *ethos*; this it did in order to be able to "yield greater good to the Church."⁵⁸

When addressing the 2014 General Chapter, Superior General, Natalino Camilleri, highlighted the steps the Society took to retain her radicalism and how these in return have yielded hope for the future of the SDC. The five signs are:

(1) The Society has a Rule which was renewed over the years, but which at the same time managed to safeguard its original inspiration and charism.

(2) In general, among its members in various localities there are also clear signs of life in the faithful living of the Charism, in the rich SDC apostolate and in vocations by which God is still blessing the Society.

(3) Generally (but mostly in Malta, Peru and Kenya), the SDC has Candidates in formation whose number is reasonable and at the same time realistic for a vocation like ours.

55. *PC* para. 11: 'Superiors, therefore, should give serious attention especially to the spiritual training to be given members as well as encourage their further formation.'

56. *Ibid.*, para. 3

57. *An Oasis the Quenches Thirst*, para. 1.

58. *PC*, para. 1.

(4) The Society has members who, though not so old in years, have understood well the original inspiration and who have the energy and the skills to shoulder administrative roles and thus continue to lead the Society in the future.

(5) Many more persons, who have never been in the Society, are showing genuine interest and are appreciative of its spirit, considering it an alternative to what the contemporary world offers.

It may not be within the limited scope here to enumerate in depth, but the ongoing formation of the Members (the regular prayers, the daily Assignment, monthly and annual retreats, seminars and the Wednesday weekly General Meeting) are all tangible efforts that the SDC undertakes to keep the original inspiration alive in the lives of its Members.

4.6 Faithful to the Original Spirit of SDC: Rethinking and Reinventing

If one was obliged to use labels, the SDC would be likely pegged as “conservative.” The theme of the last General Chapter (2014), and the ensuing document entitled “Oasis that Quenches Thirst,” seeks precisely to retain that which is so central in the original inspiration and, at the same time, to orient the Society towards the future. In the Book of the First Constitutions, the Founder spells the three qualities of “humility, meekness and love for learning” (Const. 110) as indispensable characteristics for the SDC Member to integrate. These same qualities feature with great importance in every subsequent edition of the SDC Rule.

In the first Constitutions, Preca sought to create places (Centres) where people could come together to “learn in order to teach” (Const. 111, 127, Testament VII)⁵⁹ and where, through holy instruction, the Members “become holy.” Today, more than hundred and ten years after the foundation of the first SDC Centre, the last General Council also sees the SDC Centres as “oasis

59. In the first Constitutions, the Founder listed 7 rules, which he called the Testament for the *Papidi* and *Papidissi*. These seem to encapsulate the spirit of the Society.

that quench the thirst of all those who cross their threshold”⁶⁰ and the Members as people who “instil hope in whoever comes in contact with them.”⁶¹

4.6.1 An Ongoing Process of Renewal and Reinterpretation

The earliest constitutions that the Founder designated in 1907 are, in their greater entirety, present in the SDC Rule today. Like John the Precursor, who is the inspiration for every monastic movement and who himself lived and preached in a hostile environment, George Preca was inspired to demand that SDC Members be:

- single-minded among fragmented peers;
- humble in a society that is obsessed with grandeur;
- meek in a violent world that thinks that meekness is weakness;
- virgin, celibate and chaste in a world charged with promiscuity;
- prudent where hedonism is the game of the day;
- evangelically poor where poverty is despised and
- other-centred in a society that glorifies narcissism.

These very basic monastic attitudes constituted the backbone of the first Constitutional document and were renewed in the subsequent General Chapter documents of 2004, 2009 and 2014.

Every revision of the Rule sought to conserve the vision the Founder had for the SDC and for the healthy and holy growth of those who incorporate in it. The SDC Member is expected to be a person wholly committed to God; to imitate Jesus (Testament VI), especially in humility and meekness (Testament II); to pray without ceasing (Testament I); to cultivate silence; and to resolve, on a daily basis, to be poor (Const. 178), simple, meek (Const. 113 / Testament II), humble

60. *An Oasis the Quenches Thirst*, para. 2.1.

61. *Ibid.*

(Const. 121, 142), love being despised (Const. 4)⁶² and love others with great charity (Const. 210). In a nutshell, these are the characteristics that identified, then and now, the SDC Member, who was constantly training himself to become more in union with Christ through this radical living of the Faith.

The Members also reflect the interiority of their souls with outward signs; the Founder wanted them to avoid all ostentation, (Const. 84, 218), to dress simply (Const. 33, 217), to be guided by a spiritual director (Const. 143) and to keep God alone as witness to everything they say and do. These very fundamental qualities that define the SDC Member are akin to the life of every monk as described in the various Rules pertaining to monastic living.

4.6.2 What to Shed and What to Keep: An Ongoing Process of Discernment

One can say that none of the essential rules that really define the SDC spirit were shed or altered in the renewal of subsequent SDC Rules. The only rules that were changed or shed were of a transient nature – such as the number of Elects in a class, or the rule that forbid football or similar games for they were considered dangerous (Const. 211), or that only the organ could be played in the SDC Centre (Const. 58). Other rules that were removed are related to the attendance of women in Centres for men; during the time of the Founder, no women were permitted to enter the SDC Centre (Const. 112); this is not the case anymore nowadays.

However, one can argue that there are some rules that are now lived with less radicalism than in the days of the Founder, and these are generally related to the ways that Members participate in recreation. During the time of the Founder, Members were not allowed to recreate themselves with non-members; they were not expected to attend weddings, attend large gatherings (concerts and performances) or engage in any type of social event (Const. 134). In the present Rule, the way the

62. ‘Whenever a Member is despised, he should sit down and say: “*Soli Deo honor et gloria in saecula saeculorum. Amen*”’. (To God alone honour and glory for ever and ever. Amen.)

Member recreates himself is somewhat vague: “In a spirit of true penance, Members should seriously avoid all worldly sentiments: honour, fame, pleasures and wealth; thus, they will be transformed into new beings.”⁶³ The onus for discernment and honest intention rests on the Member.

The greatest dilemma today is not that of which rules were retained and which were shed; rather, the greatest challenge is to the Members themselves – that of right intention, sound judgement and clear understanding of the SDC charism by the individual Members. If the Members define themselves merely as catechists (imparters of catechetical programmes for the reception of Sacraments), rather than men who have dedicated themselves to God alone, or if the Members look upon the Society and its Centres as “service stations” (where people come to fulfil a religious duty) instead of an “oasis that quenches thirst” or “a forge where sin is burnt,” then the charism will be at risk of extinction. Therefore, what is most essential for the SDC to retain in its original inspiration is that every Incorporated Member become ever more: “Conscious that he partakes of the same inspiration together with all the other Members, that they are sharing the same experience of the same calling, and that they are living the same charism. This bond of unity is not built on communal conviviality, but it emanates from one sole aim – Jesus Christ, who is to be loved and known; one faith – united to the Pope always; one spirit – meekness and humility, and one heart – helping one another.”⁶⁴

63. SDC Rule C66.

64. *SDC Identity and Formation*, para. 42 and *The Book of Constitutions*, Introduction, para 5.

CONCLUSION

Conclusion

This thesis attempted to draw a portrait of the monk—in the traditional sense of the word—and then juxtapose this portrait with that of the SDC Member. In so doing and by applying the “revisionist method” one will be in a position to assess whether there is a basis for a critical correlation between the core elements of monasticism and the lived experience of the SDC today.

By way of conclusion, this thesis seeks to demonstrate the clear parallel that exists between the monastic ethos and the SDC ethos and put a number of suggestions as to how the SDC can appropriate this true identity and live it as a charism in the Church for the service of the world.

It is evident that the SDC particular *sequela Christi* configures with monasticism as well as contributes particular characteristics to contemporary forms of new monasticism, especially with regards to the centrality of living the virtues of simplicity (single mindedness), humility and meekness. These virtues are distinctive characteristics of the members of the SDC who every evening renew a vow of meekness, accompanied by a resolve to be poor, simple, meek, humble, to love being despised and to love one another with great charity. In living these virtues the SDC Members choose freely to live away from the limelight of secular society and renounce worldly recognition and the lure of power, while supporting themselves with work of their choice, without ambitiously striving for success to climb the career ladder, since their ultimate goal is eschatological. In order to sustain themselves in this monastic lifestyle, without taking a vow of obedience, they submit themselves to the SDC Rule and strive to be obedient to their Superiors.

Very much in line with the Benedictine monastic tradition, in the SDC Rule love of learning and love for teaching translate into an ongoing process of formation and growth for the Members, and an ongoing active apostolate among children, youth and adults. The SDC communities are learning communities that meet daily for an hour of study and prayer while welcoming others with whom faith is shared.

Emulating the true monk who lives in *penthos* (compunction) for his sins and the sins of humanity, the SDC members seek to love the world without being of the world and are ready to be misunderstood and despised on account of the Gospel, not shying from being considered fools for Christ.

The SDC spirituality draws deeply from the cistern of the great masters of monasticism and, in turn, the SDC way of life enriches monasticism with a new lay dimension; it offers to the contemporary world a kind of “Precan Option” that leavens the world with men who can be considered as “monks without borders.”

As is stated in the *SDC Identity and Formation*: “[T]he Members are conscious that Divine Providence has marked out for them a delightful place (Psalm 16 [15]:6). They, therefore, recognise the value of their calling for virginity which testifies loud and clear for the common calling of all Christians to empty themselves fully like Christ; kenosis in order not to let anything or anyone come in between them and the Father. In other words, by means of his virginity the SDC Member is expressing his keen longing for “the one needful thing” (Luke 10:42). Living thus, he witnesses for the calling of all the Christian faithful to live the monasticism of the heart.”¹

Through its prophetic dimension, the SDC charism witnesses to the world the virtues of simplicity, humility and meekness—all three are core elements of monasticism as much as pre-eminent marks of the SDC spirituality. By the prophetic dimension, the SDC Members are called to “propose an

¹ *SDC Identity & Formation*, para. 18.

alternative to power and violence which in the current culture are causing injustice, poverty, ecological disasters, lack of peace and oppression of the weak, children, women, the illiterate and other persons marginalized by society.”² This stance reflects the original inspiration of the first *Constitutions* that laid down that the SDC members ought to, “Manifest more affection towards poor children without offending the rich ones.”³

As the monk lives to love God and his fellow brethren with single-mindedness and single-heartedness, similarly the SDC Member seeks “intimacy with God” that, “Fosters in the Member that contemplative or mystic heart of a person who has learnt to find God in all and all in God... By means of his contemplative gaze, he finds, sees and adores God in the members of his own family, in his colleagues at work, in needy persons, in his fellow Members, in his activity at work or profession, in the apostolate of proclaiming the Word.”⁴

As the day nears its end, before praying the *Act of Contrition*, the SDC Member meditates on *The Interior Life*. This prayer manifests the ethos of the SDC spirituality and eloquently mirrors the similarities between the virtues that befit monasticism and the SDC spirituality. The SDC Member aspires to live his *ascēsis* in the spirit of the *monachos*. In this prayer, George Preca sketches a veritable way of life akin to monasticism for the one who wants “to be perfect,” that is: the one who is resolved to sin no more and has fixed his gaze on Jesus intending to live in union with the Blessed Trinity.

In the light of what was highlighted one can rightly say that the SDC does add a distinctive mark to contemporary monasticism. Like a monk without borders, the SDC Member, who knows that he is “not of this world” (John 8:23), but “born of the spirit” (John 3:6), leaves the “city” to dwell in the “desert” of *The Interior Life*. The SDC “*monachos*” prays as the night approaches: “God

² Ibid., para. 28.

³ *The book of the Constitutions*, Ch. XIV, para 6.

⁴ *SDC Identity & Formation*, para. 39.

the Holy Spirit, enlighten the minds and enkindle the hearts of the followers of Jesus Christ. Amen. Hide me in your divine wounds, good Jesus. Who glorifies God? Who merits? Only the person who nourishes the interior life." Then he meditates on the interior life through a reconstruction of his bodily life.⁵

Receiving such a great gift from the Holy Spirit, the SDC has the responsibility to pass on the charism and its particular *sequela Christi* to future generations as authentically as it originally received it. The General Chapter is the guardian of the charism as stated by the Rule: '[t]he General Chapter has the right and duty to: a) preserve the spiritual patrimony and the charism of the Society, and to update them appropriately ...'⁶

By way of conclusion I venture to write an introduction. As time passes and 'a pearl of great price' is passed from one generation to another, it can happen that it loses its lustre; is simply ignored by the inexperienced who deem it valueless or is mistaken for something else. Like a child, any given foundation can grow and become what it was intended to be or otherwise live in the shadow of its true self.

With nearly forty years of living the SDC way of life and with the knowledge I gained by the reading material that served as the basis for my research, I wish to pen my heart's desires and aspirations for the Society I grew to love and cherish so much.

I am of the opinion that by and large even though many Members live the charism in good faith and right intention, they do not appreciate fully its true identity. This identity crises does not exist

⁵ Preca George, *The Watch*, 18:45 Meditation, "The Interior Life".

His mind—right intention; His mouth—prudence; His forehead—confession of truth; His eyes—attention and vigilance; His ears—instruction; His breath—prayer; His cheeks—modesty; His shoulders—obedience; His chest—zeal; His back—contempt for the world; His heart—sincere and unselfish love towards everybody; His hands—justice; His stomach—sobriety; His feet—naked faith; His life—trust in God; His blood—meekness; His flesh—temperance; His bones—fortitude; His shadow—patience; His memory—steadfast peace; His reason—silence; His intellect—light from the Christ crucified; His will—perfect self-denial; His food—perfect resignation; His clothes—penance; His property—nothing. Amen – Amen – Amen.

⁶ SDC Rule C111.

in the written official documents or the Rule of the SDC but in the way the Members live, talk and project themselves. I believe that this came about mainly because of two factors. After Vatican II the SDC failed to reflect on its charism in the light of the major relevant documents of the Council especially *Perfectae Caritatis*, *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*. Consequently, from the late '70s to the mid '90s the emphasis was on the active ministry. The ideal SDC member was the one who owned a van, thought multiple classes every evening and was ready to go from one SDC Centre to another. This disproportionate emphasis on active ministry eclipsed all the other dimensions of the SDC charism and created a mind-set through which the members perceived themselves primarily as parish catechists and strived to be creative and appealing with the sole purpose of attracting as many children, adolescent and youths to the SDC as possible. The aim might have been good but the means were mistaken. The second factor was that basically the SDC Centres were rendered parish service-stations for Sacramental catechesis, impoverishing the original aim of the Centre which was to minister to the people of God to grow in the knowledge of their faith, pray together and aspire to live the SDC spirituality marked by simplicity, humility, meekness and prayer. The overall effort of the SDC was to stretch out rather than to go deeper.

The SDC still suffers from the fact that the Members do not share a common *forma mentis*. This is so because Candidates are not formed in the SDC spirituality systematically and uniformly. Even though there is a formation course run by the central administration, in reality formation largely depend on what the Candidates receive daily at the Centre they attend. Because of this not all 'compasses' in the mind and soul of the members point to the same 'north'. Goal posts seem to shift and the northern star is not steadfast for all. This is very evident when one listens to what members talk about, to the dreams that they share and to how they understand their vocation.

Thus, if I were to propose what the SDC today needs to address, I would point towards three objectives that were already highlighted in past General Chapters.

- 1- The SDC needs to painstakingly remove the ‘bandages’ that mummified it into a parody of what it is called to become: a community of celibate people for the kingdom of God – *soli Deo*; simple, humble and meek in their imitation of Christ Jesus – *puritas cordis*; contemplatives of the *Verbum Dei* living the *eschaton* in an Incarnational way – pray without ceasing; prophets healing and enlightening those seeking the life of virtue. The means to achieve this are mainly two: (i) the formulation of a *Ratio Formationis* and (ii) a revived Assignment.
- 2- The SDC needs to re-understand the nature and character of the SDC Centre. The physical space of the SDC Centre must be remodelled to its original image of a forge where sin is burnt into ashes so that the eschatological truths shine forth; an oasis where the seeker find nourishment and recover his humanity and not let himself metamorphosize into an insensible robot; a fertile portion of land (*Qasam*) from which echoes the ‘Voice of the Beloved’ and where seeds of contemplation can germinate and produce prophets and friends of the Gospel who can feed the world with ‘the bread of life’. The means to achieve this are mainly three: (i) all those who frequent an SDC Centre must come to know that this place has a particular distinctive ethos; (ii) what is taught is not a syllabus explained in a textbook or a programme that is covered in order for one to receive a sacrament, but a journey embarked upon while being accompanied by fellow travellers whose destination is living the virtues of the ‘Sermon of the Mount’; (iii) as much as words can enlighten the mind, the SDC Centre must offer silence to enkindle the heart. Thus the Centre must also serve as a school of contemplation.
- 3- The SDC must continuously invest in its Members and encourage them to study and deepen their knowledge especially in the areas of Theology, Scripture, Catechetics and Evangelization. The SDC must, on a regular basis have Members who are studying at university level so that the input they give will meet the needs of a society that is becoming sceptical, doubtful and agnostic. On the other hand, the SDC must not lose or in any way look-down on the excellent original method hewn by the Founder when he created the daily

Assignment as an on-going formation that is given by members to members. It must never shun, or be exclusive to, any particular section within society, but receive everyone with love provided the person meets the requisites stated in the Rule.

I believe that the SDC has an important apostolate in the church and the world today, but even more so it can offer a much needed way of life that can make it a sacrament in the secular world. The SDC can build communities among diverse people. I believe that the SDC needs to reclaim the interior monk: the one who lives for God alone; the virgin-celibate: the one who vacates himself for God; the lay: the one who is not restricted or limited by borders; the humble: the one whose feet are grounded and knows that he depends on God; the meek: the one who inherits love because he does not assume anything for himself; the simple: the one who takes to heart the words of the Master who told us that unless we become like the little ones we do not enter the Kingdom of the Father and prayer: not in the sense of what one prays, how much one prays, when or where, but in the sense of being contemplative—subsisting in God—the SDC Member becomes God's prayer here on earth.

The SDC Members are called to be the churches and the cathedrals, now. They are called to be the body of Christ in the streets, malls and workplaces. The SDC Centres are called to become the monasteries with porous borders; the SDC Members are called to become monks without frontiers.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bonnici, Alexander. *San Ġorġ Preca fid-Dawl ta' l-Ittri Tiegħu*. Malta: PEG, 2007.
- Bonnici, Alexander. *Dun Ġorġ Preca Ħajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. I*. Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1980
- Bonnici, Alexander. *Dun Ġorġ Ħajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. II*. Malta: Edizzjoni SDC Malta 1981.
- Bonnici, Alexander. *Dun Ġorġ Preca Ħajja-Xieħda-Dokumenti Vol. III*. Malta: Edizzjoni SDC, 1989.
- Cassian, John. *The Conferences*. Boniface Ramsey, Trans., *John Cassian: the Conferences*. New York: Paulist Press, 1997.
- Evdokimov, Paul. *Interiorized Monasticism, Age of the Spiritual Life*. NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998.
- Feiss, Hugh. *Essential Monastic Wisdom: Writings on the Contemplative Life*. NY: Harper San Francisco, 2000.
- Frank, Karl Suso. *With Greater Liberty: A Short History of Christian Monasticism and Religious Orders*. Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 1993.
- Gillett, H.M. *Saint Bede The Venerable*. UK: Burns Oates & Washbourne Ltd., 1935.
- Gracewing Fowler Wright Books. *The Life and Teaching of Pachomius*. (Trans. By Mary Dominique Slough & D Mary Groves. UK: Redwood Books, 1998.
- Harmless, William. (2004). *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*. USA: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- Hart, Patrick, ed., *The Monastic Journey of Thomas Merton*. Kansas City: Sheed Andrews and Mc Meel, 1977.

Kauffman, Ivan J. *Follow Me – A History of Christian Intentionality*. USA: Cascade Books, 2009.

Farrugia, Edward. *Melita Theologica. Monasticism as a Bridge between East and West*. vol. 44 (1993).

Merton, Thomas. *Wisdom of the Desert*. UK: Burns & Oates 2002.

Peters, Greg. (2015). *The Story of Monasticism: Retrieving an Ancient Tradition for Contemporary Spirituality*. USA: Baker Publishing Group, 2015.

Preca, George *The Right Intention*. Veritas Press, Malta, 1983.

- *The Great Book*. Veritas Press, Malta, 1983.
- *The Convent of the Crusaders*. Malta: Veritas Press, 1984.
- *Discipleship*. Malta: Preca Library, 1988.
- *The Mansions and Praeconia*. Veritas Press, Malta, 1994.
- *Popular Letter on Meekness*. Malta: Preca Library, 1994.
- *Gymnasium For The Spiritual Life*. Malta: Preca Library, 1996.
- *Sanctuary of Christ's Spirit*. Malta: Preca Library, 1997.
- *A Spiritual Directory*. Malta: Preca Library, 1997.
- *The Course of the Christian Pilgrim*. Veritas Press, Malta, 1998.
- *Guide for the Way of Peace*. Malta: Preca Library, 1999.
- *The Watch*. Veritas Press, Malta, ed. 2018.

Pratt, Lonni Collins. *Benedict's way: an Ancient Monk's Insights for a Balanced Life*. USA: Loyola Press, 2000.

Stead, Julian. *Saint Benedict – A Rule for Beginners*. NY: New City Press, 2002.

Suso, Karl Frank OFM, *With Greater Liberty*. USA: Cistercian Publications, 1993.

Tracy, David. *A Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan. *School(s) for Conversion: 12 Marks of a New Monasticism*. USA: The Rutba House, 2005.

SDC OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS

A Blazing Heart That Sets Others Ablaze. Document of the 2009 General Chapter. Malta: Veritas Press, 2009.

Aħna Min Aħna. Sensiela SDC. Malta: Veritas Press, 2009.

An Oasis the Quenches Thirst. Document of the 2014 General Chapter. Malta: Veritas Press, 2014.

Il-Ktieb tal-Kostituzzjonijiet għall-Għaqda tal-Papidi taħt il-Maħtur Speċjali San Ġwann Battista, il-Prekursur tas-Sinjur. (SDC Archives, Blata l-Bajda).

Kostituzzjonijiet tal-Papidi ta' Qabel is-Sena 1916. (SDC Archives, Blata l-Bajda).

Minutes of the 2014 General Chapter. (SDC Archives, Blata l-Bajda).

The SDC Vocation Identity and Formation. Document of the 2004 General Chapter. Malta: SDC MUSEUM, 2004.

TALKS

Buttigieg, Joseph. *Jien min Jien?* Talk delivered during the presentation of the Chapter document, November 7, 2014.

Camilleri, Charló. *Dun Ġorġ: Monaku fl-Ispirtu, Attiv fl-Appostolat.* Talk delivered during the SDC General Meeting on Wednesday March 21, 2012.

Camilleri, Charló. *Il-Monasteru bħala mudell għall-qasam museumin.* Talk delivered during the SDC General Meeting on Wednesday May 16, 2018.

Camilleri, Natalino. *Bejn it-Tentazzjoni u l-Intergrazzjoni.* Talk delivered during the Wednesday General Meeting on Wednesday November 17, 2014.

Camilleri, René. *Ir-Relevanza tal-Kariżma Museumina.* Talk delivered during the Wednesday General Meeting, November 10, 2014.

Farrugia, Edward. *Riflessjoni fuq l-Identità, il-Vokazzjoni u l-Formazzjoni tas-SDC.* Talk delivered during the 2004 General Chapter - April 13, 2004.

Serracino Inglott, Peter. *Identità u Formazzjoni Museumina.* Talk delivered during the General Chapter, April 12, 2014.

ARTICLES

Camilleri, Charló-Carmel “*Aħna boloħ minħabba fi Kristu*” (1Kor 4, 9b-10). Rivista ta’ Spiritwalità, No 124, 2003.

Camilleri, Natalino. *Aspetti Esikastici fl-Ispiritwalita ta’ Dun Ġorġ*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ. No 40, 2000.

Farrugia, Edward. *Dun Ġorġ, the man and the saint*, The Times May 9, 2001.

Farrugia, Edward. St George Preca, “Second Father in the Faith”. *History repeats itself only once—the second time!* The Times May, 2007.

Farrugia, Mario. *Il-MUSEUM., il-Fidi u l-Kultura*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ. No 40, 2000.

Sant, Alfred. *Ħsibijiet profani dwar il-hidma ta’ Dun Ġorġ Preca fis-sena meta gie kkanonizzat*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ. No. 46, 2010.

Serracini Inglott, Peter. *X’Hadet il-Knisja minn għand Dun Ġorġ*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ. No. 29, 1990.

Serracini Inglott, Peter. *Tifkira ta’ Dun Ġorġ*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ. No 6, 1974.

Sultana, Ronald G. *Dun Ġorġ and the Democratisation of Knowledge*. Rivista Dun Ġorġ, No 40, 2000.

Vella, George. *Defining Identity: The Role of the Catholic Church in Malta in the Discovery and Formation of Maltese Youth’s Identity*. Għaqda Studenti Teoloġija, Malta: Progress Press, 2018.