

## **CONSTITUTION 47 The Mistress of Novices**

One who is skilled in winning souls is to be chosen as mistress of novices. She is to be prudent, well formed in the monastic way of life, effective in communicating the wisdom of the Fathers to the juniors and capable of giving them direction.

### **ST 47.A**

*The mistress of novices is to be at least 30 years old and solemnly professed in the Order for at least two years.*

CST 47 cites the Rule asking that the novice mistress be skilled in winning souls, which underscores a maternal and generative function to win souls for God in the Cistercian vocation. For this the prerogatives of a novice mistress are basically: that she herself has internalized the monastic *conversatio* (*conversatio monastica optime imbuta*), that she is able to transmit the wisdom of the tradition and that she is able to listen and guide younger people.

In one word, the mistress of the novices should be able to hand on the charism: the Cistercian monastic vision as it was traditionally lived out in the Order and as it is now particularly lived out in her monastic community. She should be therefore a person deeply steeped into the Cistercian vision in the way this vision is experienced and continually renewed in her own community; in other words, a person with a Cistercian identity. The key to transmission of life is the communication of an experience, an experience that can appeal to others since it is embodied by persons and communities that are happy, at peace and full of faith and hope.

Therefore, the mistress of the novices has a key role. Yet it is the community around its abbess that allows the transmission of this experience and she is just the mediator through which the novices could have access to it.

Her personal skills, her psychological insight and training, her education, her qualities are less important than her monastic wisdom. She should be a person who has found again her unified humanity by receiving it, by receiving life from others, a communal person. We cannot, in fact, become true persons if first we do not become daughters so that, by having regained our filial attitude, we give life in our turn, that is, we become mothers. To form we have to be concerned of being formed (continually taking the “forma Christi”, the Son). To be mothers first we need to be daughters. It is inherent to being human that we must first “suffer” something before being able to act it out: we must first be generated in order to generate, be formed in order to form.

She allows persons with all the richness of their unique personality to be part of the whole of the monastic life. To take part in the “common” will, judgment, life implies the whole of the person’s dedication: all her gifts and energy, all her love. It implies the person’s full awareness of her freedom and dignity.

To educate means to allow this awareness to unfold into fullness.

This means that she should risk a true relationship with those under her care in order to show them the path of true love and freedom.

In any comprehensive act of love the self of the lover is simultaneously given, received and shared. To be united with another through love is not to lose one's distinctive identity, but to be confirmed in it.

Nowadays people who join the monastery are no longer "relational," they show fragility in facing reality and in committing themselves in friendship. They do not easily trust in others.

It is of this "relational identity" that the secular educational plan has succeeded to deprive them.

The falsehood of the modern educative project lies in saying that "I am my own project".

Therefore the satisfaction of my own desire becomes my right. Every person has the right to pursue his own desire and no one should interfere.

It is evident that if the values imposed from the outside (authority, family, church, society...) frustrate my desire, they are perceived as oppressive and, therefore, do not correspond to my conscience and my perception.

The current powers have purposely left the young people at the mercy of their own desires, so as to better manipulate them through the media and fashions, in order to easily dominate them.

This project has succeeded especially by eliminating the figure of any authority, thus blocking the possibility of growth, of the transmission of an experience, of receiving a legacy with which to confront oneself and consequently to be able to choose freely.

The real crisis in formation is not, therefore, the lack of experts but the lack of adults who can be an authority in the original sense of the word; men and women who have grown and thus can make others grow (*augere*).

It is time to realize that in formation the problem is not the novices, even though they might have many problems... The problem lies in us, solemnly professed who have probably renounced to our educative task, to our task of transmitting the Cistercian monastic life. The only contribution we can offer to the conversion of others is our conversion. If the project is my personal conversion everything even my failures may become positive in the reality.

By now, you may ask me: How can we form a novice mistress able to possess such wisdom, human, Christian and Cistercian wisdom, with such humility and passion for life?

First by forming the whole community to acquire the science of discerning the spirits: between evil and good spirits. Discernment is a gift of the Holy Spirit. Through conversion and self-knowledge we can acquire the capacity of knowing the spirits. Maybe we are no longer used to think that this wisdom can be acquired; we are more used to recur to psychological training. Psychological training is useful, yet it is a human science and uses technical tools. The science of the spirits uses spiritual exercises. There are not so many

teachers of this science nowadays. Maybe we can simply say educate of being fathers and mothers. I will go back to this point at the end of this commentary on Constitution 47.

Second, if we want to communicate first of all we have to put ourselves questions about the things we want to communicate. We must have a vision. Therefore the most important thing for a community if it wants to form its members, younger and older ones alike, is to have the capacity to dialogue and to establish friendships, namely, faithful relationships because we can only educate if we are passionate about what we believe in and if we risk to esteem all the members of our community, we can always receive. We can always have hope.

If we accept to transmit life we should cultivate the supreme virtue of hope, which in time means essentially to have patience, because the journey is long and our novices do not evolve in the times and ways that we have decided. Therefore companion of this hope is poverty in spirit. We must be free in front of the response of the other. We must accept their rebellions. We should allow their failures to surface.

Sometimes we do not have the right person as a mistress of the novices and, therefore, we must work with the one we have. Sometimes those who we judge to be the right ones are still immature and self-centered.

When I entered Vitorchiano, I did not have a perfect mistress. Yet there was such an experience of goodness and beauty, of fullness of life in the way the community celebrated its past, loved the present and simply waited with hope the future that I had the impression of entering the *paradisum claustralis*, the foretaste of Paradise. It was the experience of a wholeness.

M. Cristiana commented on the events of the Order and the documents of the Church and through her I started to love the Pope, the Order, the life of the Church in the world. I felt my life wide open to the dimension of the universal and eternity. I felt that I belonged to the community's history, to its suffering, to its failures, to its poverty and to its sanctity. I could never forget the first series of Chapter talks that she gave immediately after the General Chapter in 1974, the year of the election of Dom Ambrose Southey. The series was entitled "Asceticism of friendship". It seems a contradiction in terms, yet it made perfect sense to me, because if we live true friendships, we are able to be open to everyone, as in a successful Christian marriage, the spouses always open their house to whoever comes. True friendship is also hospitality. M. Cristiana wrote about it in "Living Wisdom (Pedagogia Viva)" p. 46.

The year after I entered (1975) we celebrated the centenary of the foundation. For the celebration the remains of all our sisters who had died in Grottaferrata were transferred to our cemetery. I was just a postulant, yet the way we celebrated this historical event entered into my bones, my memory, my heart. Through M. Cristiana's remembrance these sisters were alive for us and I felt entering this history of mercy; I was part of a people who could sing: Alleluia! to the providence of God. The clear proposal of the

Cistercian experience was so evident that it became my certitude: what I expected from the Church and the Cistercian charism, the communion, the unity that I desired.

This is only to say that we do not need experts, professional people to be mistresses, we need a community that has a vision, that has internalized and renewed the Cistercian vision or philosophy as our founders and Fathers loved to say.

I never felt that we were celebrating for ourselves, rather than the mercy of God in our lives, that mercy which had generated the whole of the history of salvation. I never perceived any signs of presumption, as though we were special. I simply felt that the tradition was alive there, in spite of the evident poverty and limitations.

Sr. Alba recently said to the REM: "This is not a privilege of Vitorchiano, as if it had a special story or because of the Blessed Gabriella. Each community possesses its own tradition. The problem is to believe in it and let it speak to the new generations and not to reduce it to a museum, to a series of slides, a list of names.

This tradition is not memory of the past, but comparison and inspiration for today. It is the invitation to welcome reality as the Incarnation of Christ, the answer to the provocation that life and relationships always demand. It is to be committed to the community and to belong to all the members; it is cordial collaborations with all who have an educative responsibility.: the mistress, the in-charge of work, the teachers.

These collaborations have an absolute positive force: we can count on others and we share responsibilities.

The other fundamental element asked of the mistress of novices by the **Statute 49.1.B** is her unity of spirit, heart, and orientation with the abbess. Every word of this statute is to be considered carefully: faith, affection, unity of judgment: these attitudes can also serve as criteria for vocational discernment and, therefore, are the foundation of each member's behavior.

What I am trying to say is that faithfulness to Christ, the abbess and the community is more important than psychological insight and skill.

The question is therefore: How do we live out the Cistercian vision-experience in our communities nowadays?

We Cistercians have a vision: a vision about man and his destiny, a vision of faith, lived out in the faith and going toward the fullness of life in faith.

Since the end of Vatican II and the approval of our new Constitutions the Order has been trying to rediscover and redefine the Cistercian Charism in order to face the challenges posed by the Church's renewal. It has been clear to everyone that transmitting the Cistercian charism could no longer mean to demand silence-solitude-observance, and to be models of it so that it could be, as it were, transmitted by osmosis, just by looking at what the community does.

It has to be also motivated, verbally and intelligently motivated.

The Cistercian vision about man's fulfillment is summarized in Constitution 45.

Constitution 45 says that the purpose of formation is the restoration of God's likeness under the action of the Holy Spirit and the maternal guidance of Mary.

This vision implies that man is in relationship with his Creator and that this relationship is the core of his identity.

It also presupposes the plan that the Creator has established for man's salvation: the full revelation and manifestation of this likeness in the incarnation, likeness to which man should conform, the "forma Christi": the redemption.

For St. Bernard, this conformation assumes the shape of a journey (degrees) the journey through the three degrees of truth:

- from the misery of self-knowledge, often source of humiliation to the reception of oneself in the hands of Mercy,
- from reception of oneself in the mercy of God to the sharing in the misery of all the members of the community, all those who are in the hands of Mercy,
- from sharing in love to the contemplation of Mercy itself.

Everything in the monastery is directed to bringing us into this journey of humility to freedom in order to experience union with Christ: the liturgical life, the observances, the community life.

This journey that attracted St. Bernard and his contemporaries so much so that they flocked to the Cistercian monasteries, can this way be still attractive for young people nowadays? Is the path of conversion to the truth about oneself, others and God still an attractive "form", model for modern youth?

I would say it is still attractive through an encounter.

Only an encounter with an authentic experience can free the person from the grip of his individualistic and relativistic vision. Only a gratuitous event can change forever the person's life stirring the whole process of following, conversion, transformation and transfiguration.

Are our communities places of encounter, places of education, places of communion in which the "forma Christi" can still attract and transform; places where people can experience true human and Christian dignity?

Even though they present a very individualistic mentality, young people can be attracted by the beauty and truth of our way of life.

Pope Francis continues to say that we must go back to the essential and the essential for him is to be solidly focused on Jesus Christ.

A community focused on the essential, on Christ, on love is a place of encounter and a place of education.

Therefore if we want to educate to communion our novices, we can only do it by being a community of communion.

To be a community of communion means to share a lived vision of the Cistercian charism; a vision that cannot be taken for granted but has to be continually renewed with the dedication and contribution of everyone.

This is what the mistress needs to pass on as reiterated by Constitution 29 which we will comment in a while.

Constitution 47 is followed by a Statute in which the age and the years of monastic profession are determined.

The mistress of the novices is to be at least 30 years old and solemnly professed for at least two years.

As I roached above I would say something more on acquiring paternity and maternity as a result of the community formation:

### Paternity and Maternity as Sacrament of Communion

The Cistercian Fathers and Mothers conceived their service as spiritual paternity and maternity.

It is the only way to recover and to teach the meaning and function of the authority in the Church which is essentially paternal and maternal.

The mistress authority is a sharing in the authority of the abbess who represent Christ in the community.

Ancient and Medieval Monasticism conceived the monastic life as imitation of the communion lived out in the community of Jerusalem and their ministry of authority as deriving from the Petrine ministry.

The ministry of Peter, which legitimates and sustains every other authority cannot be intended otherwise but as sacrament of the divine mercy.

This ministry gushes forth from the forgiveness of Christ to Peter.

This forgiveness is the guarantee that the servant Peter, invested of authority precisely in his misery and not in spite of his misery, can take care of the sheep.

Because of the words of Christ to Peter: "Feed my sheep, tend my sheep", the paradigm for every authority in the Church is the Good Shepherd himself.

In Christ, however, the image of the Good Shepherd coincides with the image of the slain Lamb to reveal that the authority of Christ always points to that of the Father; his nature is essentially that of the Son.

The Father has the authority, the Son receives it and the Spirit confirms it.

The authority of Christ is the authority of the love that goes up to the end and it is therefore an authority, which obeys to a plan already established by the Father.

We become fathers and mothers if we are first of all sons and daughters, that is, if we have learned how to obey and how to be faithful.

Every authority in the Church can only be comprehended in this furrow of self-gift up to the end to accomplish the plan of salvation of the Father.

We should do everything in our power to exercise this service especially in our times in which the figures of father and mother are absent or distorted.

We need persons who are visible signs of divine paternity and therefore able to give themselves to others in order to guide them along the path of truth and obedience essential to the search for God.

We need persons who can accept to grow with everybody, who can understand the needs of every brother/sister.

We need persons who can renounce authoritarianism and the temptation of imposing one's own vision and project, persons who are not afraid of loving and living. The fear of loving and living a painful existence notably obsesses the young people... Persons ready to accompany the young in their path of discerning God's will. This is all possible with the illumining help of the Holy Spirit.

I think we are afraid to risk an "intense" and hope-filled relationship. We do not risk giving a judgment and prefer that the person confronts his problems with helps outside the community. I do not say that the recourse to psychologists is not to be advised; on the contrary, this may be necessary but not for everybody.

Our problem is not so much psychology; our problem is often a lack of faith.

In a conference at Gedono the Abbot General said that we have a certain difficulty to believe in the healing power of the Gospel lived in a community of brothers/sisters and prefer to ask from outside favoring thus a certain individualism.

The risk of psychology is that of giving a certain human confidence so that the person does not need to depend on or confront herself with anyone.

We should not be afraid of being involved affectively. How can we avoid it if we want to give our own life to affirm the other?

Appreciating every contribution from another as irreplaceable is extremely demanding and requires self-forgetfulness and acceptance of solitude.

I want to underline more three aspects:

- It is important to welcome the affective need of the person, without creating affective dependence, as a step along the journey toward God and help the brother to open his own heart to all, to free it from egoism so that his affectivity could be transformed into a desire of friendship toward the entire community. If the affective need is not welcome and channeled, it will be difficult to open one's heart to true friendship.
- It is important to humbly listen in order to facilitate openness of heart and trust. We can always learn something from everyone. It is important to offer a fixed time to every brother for personal dialogue. Periodically verifying one's path of conversion helps to deepen self-knowledge in the light of God's mercy. In this way self-knowledge becomes an experience of faith: in the light of the mercy of God and only in this light it is possible to bear the burden of the suffering and the sinfulness we discover in ourselves. The mercy of God must be concretely experienced, must have a face; it is usually discovered in the concrete act of being forgiven. Self-knowledge becomes, then, the experience of healing and hope.
- It is important to sustain hope with patience and not to be discouraged before rebellion or apparent lack of response, but always to encourage the other; then exhort him to resume the path of conversion. This helps the other to acquire true freedom: freedom from egoism and the need of being always at the center.