

Rome, December 14, 1997

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is not merely sufficient to celebrate the events of the past, we need to look to the future. We need to draw from our Founders the insights and incentives that will enable us to deal with contemporary challenges in a way consonant with our grace.

To do this the General Chapter of 1996 has proposed the preparation of a program of reflection and study to be followed according to possibilities in each community of the Order. The aim of this program is to encourage each monk and nun to a greater familiarity with the primitive texts of our Order and to make it possible for communities to enter into dialogue with our Founders with a view to discerning God's will made manifest in the signs of the times.

In a first stage, it is hoped that each monk and nun of the Order will receive a personal copy of the most important documents: the *Exordium Parvum*, the Charter of Charity and the *Exordium Cistercii*. Together with the Rule of St Benedict and our Constitutions and Statutes, these are the fundamental expressions of our Cistercian patrimony.

The program that will be offered to the communities is called ***Exordium A Program of Reflection and Study on the Values of the Cistercian Reform***. In most cases, it will be distributed by the Regions to each community, who will assume the responsibility for making further copies for all. It will appear in ten monthly units, beginning in January 1998.

It is the responsibility of each local superior to implement this decision of the General Chapter in their own communities. This will involve taking an active interest in the program and promoting, by various means, the interest and participation of the whole community. So that no community will feel that the program will exceed its resources, different formats will be suggested so that the materials can be adapted locally

The methodology used in the program strongly suggests that the superior appoint one person to act as program-administrator. The responsibilities of this person will include, receiving the materials, copying and distributing them and, together with the superior, arranging community sessions in accordance with the format adopted. An active and intelligent program-administrator will be the key to the local success of ***Exordium***

This is the first time that an order-wide program of ongoing formation has been undertaken. No doubt there will be some difficulties involved in responding to this call of the General Chapter. However, if the program helps us to understand, love and put into practice the values cherished by our founders, then every effort invested in it will be worthwhile.

Bernardo Olivera  
Abbot General