

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

A new year in our pilgrimage toward the Father's House has just begun. And those who are formed in the School of Charity (Schola caritatis) cannot remain idle. Still less when they desire to renew themselves day after day according to the image and likeness of Christ who is the only true image of God.

The present letter is motivated by a particular event. An event in our small history which is inscribed in the great Salvation History of humanity by a God who became one of us.

Ten years ago the General Chapters of Holyoke and Escorial took place. Our new Constitutions saw the light of day in these capitular assemblies. It is fitting to celebrate this event in order to rekindle in each and everyone the fire and light experienced at that moment.

*It is to be hoped that this collection of Constitutions and Statutes will be an effective means of helping the Order to embody the spirit of Second*

This very special circumstance moved me to write you, with the Permanent Councilors, this letter on the new Constitutions. We are confident that the same Spirit who inspired our constitutional text, will again inspire a new breath of life in our hearts, using these words that are the reflection and mirror of our lives as Cistercian monks and nuns.

## **1. History**

Fifteen years of work preceded the General Chapters of Holyoke (1984) and Escorial (1985). The Mixed General Meeting of 1987 did not bring any substantial changes except in what concerned the nature of the relationship between the two "Branches". The years 1994-1995 can thus be considered the tenth anniversary of our renewed Constitutions.

During the fifteen years that preceded Holyoke, after several consultations, three successive projects submitted to the communities and Regional Conferences for study, and orientations and decisions of various General Chapters, we were able to arrive at a common understanding and an expression of this in a text voted almost unanimously both at Holyoke and Escorial.

The presence and action of the Holy Spirit were truly felt at the General Chapter of 1969. Some of the basic options that we find in the Constitutions come from this Chapter. And we cannot doubt that the same Spirit assisted the Order during the following years of preparation and work.

Autonomous monasteries of the Order, spread throughout different parts of the world, are joined together by a common tradition of doctrine and law (Cst

Furthermore, we can affirm that even the purely juridic elements of our Constitutions are the fruit of a wisdom acquired by the Order and the Church through the centuries. The fidelity or infidelity to

these same elements have been sources of grace or misfortune. History teaches us this.

## 2. Meaning

The question is valid and pertinent: what is the meaning of the recent Constitutions, renewed according to Vatican II? And meaning here signifies a path which gives us joy, a life turned toward eternal happiness.

### Our Particular Way of Following Christ

Before everything and first of all, we can say that the Constitutions are the concrete expression of our particular way of following Christ according to the Gospel and the Rule of St. Benedict.

This Order is a monastic institute wholly ordered to contemplation (Cst 2)

This means that the approval of the Constitutions by ecclesiastical authority is the guarantee that they express the Gospel, that they help and incarnate its exigencies and that they always lead toward it.

Consequently our Cistercian charism can be considered as a form of "exegesis of the Gospel": it brings out and reveals certain aspects of the Gospel. Because of this, the Constitutions, as medium and incarnation of our charism, are an instrument of evangelical interpretation; they clarify our reading of the Gospel as Cistercians.

### Plan of Salvation for Us

We can also say that the Constitutions present the plan of salvation and evangelical and monastic sanctification for us, Cistercians.

Because of this, our monastic life does not run parallel or in juxtaposition to our Christian life: it is the same Christian life brought to fulfillment thanks to a way inspired by the Spirit of God.

We are not: first of all Christians and then monks. It would be more correct to say: our monastic fulfillment is our Christian fulfillment. It is in being monks that we are Christians: monasticism is our way of being Christian, and our way of being Christian is monasticism. For us, because of God's call, there is no other way of identifying ourselves with Christ. And the Constitutions present this mode of identification with the Lord and are thus our monastic path of Christian salvation.

### Our Book of Life

All of the above helps us to understand why the Constitutions are not a simple "code of regular discipline", but much more: a book of life. Indeed, they proceed from life and lead to life. By the same token, they can also be considered as:

- A vocational guide: in the words of the Constitutions, it is possible to hear the call of God to follow Christ as a Cistercian.
- A spiritual guide: in the words of the Constitutions, we are able to find an orientation and a stimulus, a motivation and a meaning as the works of this unique Guide who leads us toward the complete truth.
- A guide for the discernment of individual charisms: in the Constitutions, we meet objective words which confront our aspirations and our personal ways of living the common charism.

### Expression of Our Charism

The community forms one body in Christ. Each brother/sister is to contribute to the upbuilding of fraternal relations especially by sharing with others the spiritual gifts he/she has received by God's manifold

Let us say, finally, that the Constitutions are the lasting expression of our Cistercian charism of the Strict Observance. They express the consciousness that the Order has of itself in this moment in its history. They are, therefore, our letter or our card of ecclesial identification, with all that that can signify for unity and formation in the grace that the Spirit has given us for the upbuilding of the Body of Christ and the service of humanity.

And because they are a concrete expression of our charism, they are also a harmony of means and ends, of observances and values, in order to live the Christian life in all its radicality, centered on the search for God. Precisely because of this, we also find in them a two-fold complementary aspect:

- Normative aspect: Prescriptions of a juridical character at the service of persons and communities.
- Didactic aspect: Motivating principles which promote life in the Spirit.

### 3. Usefulness

What has just been said about the meaning of our Constitutions speaks to us also about their usefulness. However, we want to clarify even more what has been said. For this we now ask the question: of what use are the Constitutions? The answer to this question could take several volumes!

We assume that everyone accepts the juridical usefulness of the Constitutions. Those who want to live together and in society must agree on several things:

norm and law precisely, make for

affability. A city without stop lights and full of cars runs the risk of chaos. And it is equally evident that the cars do not run because of the stop lights but because of their motors. We do not walk in the Spirit because of the Constitutions, but we need them to coordinate our walking together animated by the Spirit.

All the brothers/sisters are called to mutual care, mutual cooperation and mutual obedience (Ct 162)

Then, without fear of repeating ourselves and avoiding making usefulness a principle and norm of everything to the point of depriving the text of its meaning, we will limit ourselves to the three following points of interest:

### At the Service of our Historical Identity

Every group, or human organization, needs a text which expresses its particular culture. That is: its manner of understanding life, its perception of the meaning of existence, its particular way of being in relationship with God, with others, with the cosmos and with itself.

But a culture is also a living reality. Each generation needs to re-express it. A religious institute expresses its understanding of its particular vocation and its manner of living the Gospel in its time by its Constitutions. St. Benedict and his first disciples did it in the Holy Rule. Our Fathers of Cîteaux did it in the Exordium Parvum and the Charter of Charity. Our immediate predecessors, in this century, did it in the Constitutions of 1927.

Our new Constitutions, in their introduction, link us to the age-old tradition that unites us to Cîteaux, without any doubt. But even beyond Cîteaux, they put us in line with the great Eastern and Western monastic tradition which is rooted in the Gospel itself.

Gathered by the call of God, the brothers/sisters constitute a monastic church or community that is the

The Cistercian vocation is always an appeal for a concrete and real community. This community is, together with all the other communities of the Order, co-responsible for the Cistercian patrimony. We are not the owners of this patrimony. We are only its guardians. It is a common possession of the People of God, the Church. When the hierarchy of the Church approved the Constitutions, it officially attested that the form of life described in them is not only an authentic way of living the evangelical call to a life of perfection, but also a faithful incarnation of the Cistercian patrimony in the context of the Church and world today.

### At the Service of Formation

New people entering our monasteries are gradually formed to the Cistercian life, above all, by concrete daily life.

But it is necessary to be able to present them with a text where our spirituality and the concrete way of understanding and living it today is expressed. Doubtless, during the time of the novitiate, it is necessary to present the Rule of St. Benedict and the Charter of Charity to the novices. But it is also of prime necessity to present the Constitutions to them.

The monastery is a school of the Lord's service where Christ is formed in the hearts of the

All the Constitutions, and not only the section referring to formation, are formative. That is: putting them into practice conforms us to a form of

life. Moreover, it reforms us in order to conform us to the form of Christ, Cistercian Monk. The entire process of formation is oriented toward the progressive transformation into the likeness of Christ, by the action of the Holy Spirit and the maternal care of the Mother of God.

### At the Service of Belonging and Unity

Modern hermeneutics remind us that a written text, once drawn up, has its own existence which evolves with each reading of it. Familiarity with a text creates a family spirit among all those who cultivate this familiarity. Familiarity with the Gospel, with the Fathers of the Church, with the authors of the great monastic tradition, is exactly what makes us feel that we belong and are united to the great Christian family and the great monastic family. It is not for nothing that our old Usages prescribed the annual reading of the complete text of the Constitutions in community.

Our new Constitutions are well known and used frequently in certain communities of the Order. They are presented during initial formation; they are commented on by the Abbot or Abbess in Chapter, each monk or nun has a personal copy of them or can have easy access to numerous copies available for the use of the community. In general, in these communities, it is easy to find a love of the Order, a sense of belonging to a monastic family, a desire to deepen the essential elements of the Cistercian life and a creative fidelity in the manner of living pluralism.

In other communities, it must be said, the Constitutions are scarcely known. Many brothers or sisters hardly know where to find a copy in the library. Some have never seen them or, at least, have never read them in entirety. They seem to think that the Constitutions are a collection of norms and rules that the Superior must consult when there is a canonical problem to solve. We can ask ourselves: is not all this explained by the fact that the sense of belonging is weak in these communities and, weaker still, the sense of belonging to an international and pluricultural Order?

The Constitutions present our life as a response to a call to consecration to God through monastic profession. They remind us of the constituent elements of monastic asceticism lived in a community of brothers or sisters. They present us with the norms that should govern daily life at the local level so that the community is truly a School of Charity. Finally, they describe the mechanics which allow the various autonomous communities of women or men, to form a single great community of communities, the Cistercian Order.

The communities of the Order spread all over the world are gathered into

## 4. Keys to Reading

A key to reading is a way of interpretation, i.e.: an orientation for reading a text and interpreting it correctly. A key to reading, if it is really this, consists in a reality underlying the entire text and which enlightens the whole text as well as each of its parts.

We offer here three keys for reading in order to understand correctly our Constitutions: Jesus Christ and his Gospel, the cenobitic Rule of Benedict, and the contemplative charism of Cîteaux.

## A. Jesus Christ and the Gospel

Jesus Christ and the Gospel are, without any doubt, the first and principal key of interpretation for the entire constitutional text. The Constitutions are at the service of the search for and encounter with Jesus Christ following the way of the Gospel. Our hope consists in entry into the Kingdom of Heaven, all together, guided and led by Him.

All this implies the renunciation of our own will, following the example of the Lord who was obedient even unto death. It is in renouncing ourselves that we participate in the passion of Christ. And in order to prefer nothing to Christ, we must become strangers to the ways of the world.

By the profession of solemn vows, we hand ourselves over to Christ. We continue the entire length of our monastic life by learning the "philosophy" and the mystery of Christ, at the school of Christ, until he attains the fullness of maturity in us.

Only if the brothers/sisters prefer nothing whatever to Christ will they be happy to persevere in a life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious. And may	Because of this, we can say without hesitation that our entire life is a participation in: the passion, the compassion and the mission of Christ; the priesthood, thanksgiving, peace, hope and coming of Christ. In a word, our entire life is a participation in the mystery of Christ. And if our life is dedicated to Mary it is in order to grow in perfect communion with Christ.
	We seek Christ, this is true. But it is also true that Christ himself comes to meet us especially in the person of the Abbot/Abbess, the seniors, the sick, those in need and guests.

The entire life of the local community must be conformed to the supreme law of the Gospel. And all the organization of the monastery, of the school of divine service, has as its end: the formation of Christ in the heart of each one and the intimate union of each one with Him in order to form all together a single Body, the Body of Christ.

Without the good news of the Kingdom and the constant reference to the King, our Constitutions lack meaning and are incomprehensible.

## B. Cenobitic Monasticism

Cistercians today seek God in following Christ, guided by the Gospel, interpreted and mediated by the Rule of St. Benedict. For this reason: the Abbot/Abbess ought to explain the Rule often, our on-going formation and our monastic profession are made according to the Rule, and the General Chapters must watch over its observance.

The Cistercian way of life is cenobitic. Cistercian monks/nuns seek God and follow Christ under a Rule and an Abbot/Abbess in a stable community that is a school of brotherly/sisterly love (Cst 2.1)

Just as St. Benedict wrote a rule for cenobites, so our Chapters of Holyoke and Escorial did the same in drawing up our Constitutions. Precisely because we follow the Rule of St. Benedict, our Constitutions declare that our form of life is cenobitic.

In our Constitutions, we find a "law of the common life", made up of observances, communitarian structures and a quality of relationships based on love. Without all that, it would be unthinkable to speak of the community as a school of fraternal charity, and still less, without the Eucharist, as source and summit of the communion of all in Christ.

Our cenobitic life tries to reproduce the model of the first Christian community of Jerusalem in which everyone owned everything in common and had only one heart and one spirit. This is, evidently an ideal. But we cannot speak of idealism: the Gospel, the Rule and the Constitutions offer us the means to promote the Spirit so that the ideal is converted into reality.

In a word, our Constitutions have been written by cenobites and for cenobites. They can only be understood if we read them and live them with the eyes and the heart of cenobites.

### C. Contemplative Orientation

Our cenobitic identity is fully understood when we affirm at the same time the nature and contemplative goal of the Citeaux of yesterday and today. Without the light of our total orientation to contemplation, we cannot understand our constitutional text. The contemplative purpose and project underlie all the Constitutions.

Our contemplation and our contemplative life are incarnated and expressed in all our actions and in every moment of our life. Indeed, at every moment and in each action, we seek God who seeks us, moved by the loving desire to see his Face and to hear his Voice.

Because of this, we can say that all the ordinances of the Constitutions lead us to perceive an aspect of this Face and make us attentive to his Voice. However, this does not prevent certain determined ordinances from being explicitly destined to protect, favor and develop our contemplative experience of the Lord and his mystery.

In a spirit of  
compunction  
and intense  
desire,  
monks/nuns  
devote  
themselves

The contemplative orientation, which defines the nature and goal of the Order, is expressed by constant prayer in a climate of solitude and silence, and by cultivating simple relationships with the very simple God. It is thus that purity and simplicity of heart produce the fruits of peace and deep and constant stillness, at the same time as continual remembrance of the presence of God.

Everything, absolutely everything, in the house of God, should favor silence, peace and recollection. Even the construction of the monastery should completely safeguard the recollection and solitude of those who live there. The ultimate criterion of an authentic contemplative vocation is the search for God by means of continual prayer; because to this superiors must be attentive so that each and everyone can make good use of their free time in order to give themselves to reading and prayer.

Silence, asceticism, fasting, under different forms, are at the service of the contemplative search for the Lord and spiritual desire. The Liturgy of the Hours and *lectio divina* are the school of continual and contemplative prayer. The

By constantly cultivating mindfulness of God, the brothers/sisters extend the Work of God throughout the whole day (Cst 20).

relations with the outside world and even the reception of guests are discerned according to the particular character of our contemplative life.

Spiritual desire is the soul of the contemplative orientation of our life. This desire allows us to live in heaven while still being on earth and to make the Mother of God present in our heart. This desire, during the hours preceding sunrise, expresses itself by waiting for the coming of the Lord in hope.

Contemplative orientation and spiritual desire incite us to learn, day after day, the philosophy of Christ, a philosophy that is learned only in conforming oneself to Christ.

The contemplative life itself is our particular way of participating in the mission of Christ and of the Church and of inserting us into the local churches. Above all, a foundation ought to be understood as the gift of a contemplative presence to a local church.

It is the contemplative life itself that is their way of participating in the mission of Christ and his Church and of being part of the local Church (Cst 31).

Finally, if in our life or in the Constitutions that express it, we cause the disappearance or impoverishment of Christ and his Gospel, Benedict and his Rule for cenobites, Citeaux and its contemplative orientation, nothing remains but ashes at the mercy of the wind.

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Ten years ago, Dom Ambrose, in writing to the Order regarding the new Constitutions, presented several general considerations, made some concrete suggestions and treated certain difficulties. The objective of his circular letter in 1984 was to stimulate the monks and nuns of the Order to make the best possible use of the text of Holyoke.

The present letter is in continuity with that of my predecessor. The same desires animate it. Already, at the last General Chapter, I referred to the Constitutions as one of the privileged instruments with which to pursue the conquest of the gift of spiritual inculturated renewal and the gift of new life which the Spirit gives to whomever has the courage to die to self in order to live to a God who became man.

At the beginning, in indicating the aim of this letter, I also formulated, with the Councilors, the desire that the Spirit inspire in our hearts a breath of life by using the words that the same Spirit had inspired when we drew up our renewed Constitutions. In conclusion, it only remains for me to say:

May God grant that by the breath of his Spirit the brothers and sisters may observe them in a spirit of fraternal charity and fidelity to the Church, and so joyfully make their way to the fullness of love with the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of Citeaux.

The Abbot General and Permanent Council