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ORDO CISTERCIENSIS S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

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Dear Brothers and Sisters,

We are celebrating the ninth centenary of the founding of Cîteaux. And in less than two years' time Christian history will turn a page to enter a new millennium.

The present letter falls within this time frame. I wish to look respectfully, from where we are today and from my own limited perspective, at the world, the Church and the Order. It is important to know the living context in which our life is unfolding. The adage that "Every point of view is only the view of a point," is universally valid, but without points of view we lose the view of both the present and the future.

The accelerated changes of recent years point to the fact that we are not only in an age of change - that is, the chronological shift to the year 2000, - but also in a change of age, with very deep cultural shifts. Moreover, we live in a culture of change as a characteristic of life, since we live in the midst of change, with changes all around us and in a continual expectation of more changes.

These deep mutations are a time of both crisis and grace. They are moments of apocalyptic discernment: God's hour in which he wishes to intervene with a greater display of his saving will. Similarly, but on a more spiritual level, the celebration of the 900 years since the founding of Cîteaux, Mother of us all, is a reminder to live time as a Liturgy, that is, as an act of thanksgiving and as an occasion for conversion.

The intention of this letter is to help us all reflect, pray and act. I would like to contribute to your understanding of our times and its signs, knowing that your reactions and replies will also help me.

I. A WORLD IN MOVEMENT

Our monasteries are scattered on all five continents. Wherever they are, they find themselves within a worldwide process of:

- neoliberal modernization with its rejection of the poorer classes,
- a universal extension of this culture provoking the affirmation of cultural pluralism,
- and a search for new gods, a thirst for the true God and the need for a new Evangelization.

A closer look at the worldwide situation lets us see, among other things, a series of megatrends clearly typical of today's world. The following ones constitute a frame of reference, something like a road, the end of which we cannot see nor do we know where it will lead:

1. The cold war has ended and so has the arms race between the two hegemonic blocks: Russia and its communist block on one side, the United States with its Western allies on the other. Russia

has ceased to exist as a superpower. We now live under a **monopolar geopolitical system**. No one doubts the worldwide control of the United States. It is still too soon to predict what can happen when China finishes emerging from within the ocean of this worldwide situation.

2. The disintegration of the block of countries formerly controlled by the Soviet Union has meant the eruption of **nationalisms and nationalities**. In some places this has occurred at the price of the shedding of blood. We can recall what happened in the former Yugoslavia. The same phenomenon is taking place in the ethnic wars of Central Africa, which are fed by interested parties on the outside.

3. The industrial revolution has given way to the **technological revolution**. We are beginning to see what this means for labor relations and the production of goods: manpower is no longer the primary factor. The same can be said of raw materials and the countries that export them. Science and technology rule the work force. As a consequence, the gap is widening between the developed North and the developing South.

4. Related to the foregoing is another significant change that has occurred: **interdependence**, planetization or the appearance of a "single worldwide system" in which everyone affects everyone else on a planetary scale. Although this is basically a structural and technological phenomenon open to many possibilities, it is now producing its fruits on the economic and regional levels. This explains the birth of the European Economic Community, the North American common market (NAFTA), the block formed by Japan and the South-East Pacific countries, and the common market of the southernmost American countries.

5. The debate between socialism and capitalism has come to an end. The hegemony of the capitalist system - under its neoliberal form - is a fact. **Economic neoliberalism** has taken advantage of planetary interdependence and is attempting to globalize the world economy so as to convert the world into an immense free market. For Third World countries the dilemma is whether to be included in, or excluded from, this new, obligatory, socio-economic system which fosters both development and exploitation. In either case, the poorest 30% of the world's population is excluded. Such is the price of inclusion in this new system! The impoverished masses of humanity have become the world's human garbage! This neoliberalism shows a deep concern for productive economic efficiency and a remarkable inefficiency and lack of concern for the social distribution of the goods it produces. Not only does it not resolve the problems which previously existed in this regard, but it increases them.

6. We are also facing a **cultural change** of deep consequence, where we are witnessing:

- the growth of a culture "of the masses," an invasive, universal culture born in and exported from North America.
- the predominant influence of the means of communication which transmit cultural forms in such a way that the mass-media are conditioning and even determining the culture.
- the fading away of "modern" culture as lived in the Western world of the North Atlantic, into a "postmodern" culture.
- the growing influence of women in terms of their increasing roles of service, authority and power.
- the dechristianization of Christian Europe with the multiplication of Christians not linked to any Church and for whom Christianity is a frame of reference, but not a religion to belong to. At the same time there is the rapid growth of African Catholicism and the slow Christianization of Asia's pluralistic religiosity.

II. A CHURCH IN MOVEMENT

The Church of today is not withdrawn from the joys and sorrows of the world in which it lives and which it attempts to serve with the light and strength of the Gospel. It is not removed from the deep changes and accelerated transitions which today's world is living.

Some people speak of a new springtide for the Church, others see it more as winter. The global project of a new inculturated evangelization would be a sign of spring. Rigid Catholic uniformity governed from the center would be an indication of winter. A more detailed analysis allows us to speak of basic tendencies, analytical categories or theoretical **models** which help us to understand and describe the present-day Church scene. The different local Churches in their historical realities - just like religious Orders and Congregations, - may express more than one of the different models, with the emphasis or dominant model differing from one place to another. We can distinguish three models of the Church:

- A **traditional** model emphasizing the Church as an institution that communicates truth to a distant world alienated from God.
- A **modern** model putting the accent on the Church as an organization that presents a doctrine in response to the questions of secularized persons and societies.
- An **incarnated** model which stresses the following of Jesus, preaches the Good News to everyone and tries to embody the Gospel in poverty, through the more impoverished people of this world.

If we place ourselves in the center of the Christian world, that is, Rome and the Vatican, we can discern two programs, the features of which are becoming clear at the end of this millennium. Once again it is a question of programs which do not mutually exclude each other. In a certain sense they characterize the college of Cardinals.

a.) A **religious and political program** which assures the political visibility of the faith so as to strengthen the ethical and political function of the Church in society. The enemy of this program would be the darker side of modernity and a secularism which blocks the implementation of Christian social models.

b.) A **dialogical and reforming program** which, in order to promote a more collegial system, stimulates dialogue with the other great religions, openness in ecumenical dialogue, changes in how the Papacy functions and reforms in the structure of the Roman Curia.

There is no doubt in anyone's mind that the Church at the end of this millennium has been strongly marked by the pontificate of John Paul II. Here is a person who is both multifaceted and strong in his sense of identity: a man who is sweet and firm, compassionate yet resistant, with a great gift of leadership, good qualities as actor and communicator, facility in learning languages, ease in the rhetorical arts, an artist and a poet. However, any "**portrait**" of John Paul II must necessarily go beyond the Pope himself. It will tell us much about the Church of today, and perhaps of tomorrow, too. His pontificate of over 19 years lets us point out the following characteristic features of this Pope:

- He is a philosopher and a theologian whose formative years were influenced by Thomism and personalism. He is clearly Christocentric, which explains his strong attraction for a philosophy of man.

- He is deeply devoted to the Mother of Jesus and Mother of the Church. He is thus the Pope who consecrates to Mary different persons, cities, countries and even the whole world.

- He often acts on two different levels: looking outward, he is the Pope of ethnic minorities, human rights, world peace, the dispossessed and the poor; looking inward, he is the Pope who defends traditional doctrine, keeps Church discipline and devises new pastoral plans.

- He is the Pope who has opened wide the door of ecumenical and interreligious dialogue.

- He is the travelling, missionary Pope more than any of his predecessors: 20% of his time has been passed travelling.

- His appointments of bishops have given rise to a particular type of Bishop: orthodox, with a solid theological formation and a strong Catholic identity, faithful to Rome, centered on spirituality.

- He is the Pope who has condemned both communism and classical capitalism so as to "humanize" the meaning of work. When he stood up to communism he was applauded by the West. The other side tried literally to assassinate him. Now that he criticizes capitalism and its cultural consequences, he is crossed off by many in the West as morally meaningless.

- Never in history has there been a Pope with such worldwide political influence. He has been mediator of conflicts over the Beagle Canal, Lebanon, Panama and, above all, Poland, along with being an active participant in various meetings held under the auspices of the United Nations: Cairo, Beijing, R o de Janeiro and elsewhere.

- More than anyone, he is the deep friend and champion of women's rights in today's world. It is most curious that very many women, who only know the opinions of the Pope through what they read in the press, consider him to be anti-feminist.

Now let us look at **consecrated religious life**, since it is the immediate, living context in which our monastic life is located. According to the different geographical areas, we can see the following typical situations:

· **Africa** is a virgin who has been repeatedly violated but always remains faithful to herself. Consecrated life there is marked by a strong spirit of celebration and community, a deep sense of what is autochthonous to the region and thus a need for inculturation.

· **Asia** is harmonious through its centuries-old sensitivities, but is tense today because of an uncertain tomorrow. Consecrated life in Asia is a significant minority searching for new forms based on monastic models, open to temporary religious experiences as a preparation for life in the world.

· **North America**, in its technological, secularized and religious grandeur, is the defender of liberties and the melting pot of many races. Consecrated life there shows an exquisite sensitivity in favor of cultural pluralism and the role of women in society and the Churches.

· **Latin America** is the continent with a Catholic majority, the home of many martyrs, deeply desiring a social justice which has been long in coming. Consecrated life there is searching for new life styles with a greater sense of history and for greater insertion into the poorer, marginated levels of society.

· **Western Europe**, wise in its old age, has exported its classical culture and structures. Consecrated life in Western Europe now tries to redimension its activities, overcome its vocational crisis and be a prophetic voice crying out in the desert of bourgeois society.

· **Central and Eastern Europe**, separated from their western sister for many years, are rich in lasting traditions. Consecrated life there features the central place given to monasticism, the glorious stigmata of its fidelity to the Lord and an updating which does not betray its own nature and history.

· **Oceania** is not a continent of water, but of a vast multitude of islands that give joy to the Pacific Ocean. Consecrated life in Oceania has difficulties in the formation and stability of its members, due to the immense distances involved. At the same time, there is great hope for the future because of its youthful character and its faithfulness to the Gospel.

III. THE ORDER: NOW AND IN THE FUTURE

There are many ways to look at the Order in its present historical situation and with an eye to the future. One possible way is from the perspective of values, challenges and utopias. During the last General Chapter I spoke of utopias or dreams. Now seems to be the moment to look more closely at the values and challenges, though not forgetting the importance of creatively dreaming while awake.

A. The Gift and Value of Monastic Identity

Values are "attractive goods." That is why they are powerful forces motivating our behaviour, helping us to advance and persevere in the way of life we have embraced. Values are constitutive elements of the Cistercian grace which motivate persons in their personhood, galvanize whole communities and touch the whole Order. We can say that these values are like gifts after a victory. They are graces, gifts from the Lord, the acceptance of which implies not a little sweat and tears so that they may become life and growth.

In our Order we find many valuable realities which can be thought of as relatively acquired, or in the process of being so. They thus motivate the journey of the Order today. But this does not mean that we can rest on our laurels. On the contrary, we must know how to examine ourselves so as to continue advancing in our journey.

I would like to discuss at greater length one of these valuable victory gifts which characterize our life today. It is the clear, existential and juridical statement of our monastic and contemplative **identity** in the heart of the Church and in confrontation with today's world. The fact of being able to make this statement after so many years of renewal, *aggiornamento* and institutional reform should make us thank the Spirit of the Lord, who has always guided us and been with us.

We can understand the importance of a clearly defined identity if we consider that, without it:

- There cannot be a sense of self, of continuity in time or of consistency at any given moment, either as a human person or as a monk or nun.
- Nor can there be any continuing existence, in the midst of changes in the concrete living of monastic observances or in the Order's pastoral structures.
- Any sense of community, of shared ongoing existence together, would also be impossible.

I realize that there are many ways in which personal identity can be understood. For our present purposes we are only speaking of identity as a significant mode of existing, with the dynamic relationships flowing from this mode. Let me explain. The identity of the different forms of life within the People of God emerges from the relational process of existence in the Church. The

distinction of the different charisms takes place in the context of the tension between their convergence and their divergence, between communion and separation.

We can thus say that our identity is a reality which lets us define ourselves in terms of what makes us meaningful within a network of relationships, but without inauthentic inclusions or falsely narrow exclusions. That is how we can say that we identify ourselves as meaningful followers of Jesus in the heart of the Church community. But this is obviously not enough. The years after the Council have taught us to go back to the origins and to go deeper in depth. Remember how we had to consult the founding Fathers of Cîteaux in order to describe our own identity more clearly? Let us return now and recall the lesson we learned.

In the first place, we should remember the intention or "purpose" of our founding Fathers. It is clear that the reform which they undertook was above all a movement of spiritual renewal. Such a renewal project could only be carried out on the basis of precise, well defined ideals. What were these ideals? What characterized the founding charism which our Fathers received from the Lord?

The primitive documents from Cîteaux, quite apart from any problems they may present to historians, clearly present us with the following ideals:

- **Authenticity** in monastic observance, in the spiritual life and in liturgical life.
- **Simplicity** and poverty in everything, so as to follow, and be poor with, the poor Christ.
- **Solitude** so as to be able to live for God while building up a communion of brothers.
- **Austerity** of life and of work, so as to promote the growth of the New Man.
- **Conformity** to the Rule of Saint Benedict, a conformity that is absolute, that is, without additions contrary to the Rule's spirit and letter.

Actually, these ideals were very similar to what all the reformers and renewers of the eleventh and twelfth centuries were trying to accomplish. Nevertheless, the accent in the New Monastery on the Rule of Saint Benedict to be observed with "greater strictness and perfection" - *artius atque perfectius* - seems to have been the key to their success. In fact the first Fathers found the monastic identity they wanted in their conformity to the Rule. Above all, they found there the balance and harmony needed for seeking God over a long period of time.

There is no mention in the primitive documents of a literal observance of the Rule. It is a question of keeping it in all its basic demands and of following it in its purity and probity. The probity and purity of the Rule is what constitutes its essence as a practical monastic way to live the Gospel. The Rule offered our founders a proven way of evangelical perfection thanks to its prudent balance of the traditional monastic observances. The *dura et aspera* - the hardships, difficulties and observances - are mediating realities, instruments and expressions of purity of heart and unity of spirit *puritas cordis* and *unitas spiritus*.

Here, then, are the basic convictions concerning the Rule of Saint Benedict which the first Cistercian Fathers wished to incarnate in their lives:

- * The search for God is the purpose of monastic life. (RB 58:7)
- * God is found in Christ. (RB 4:21; 72:11)
- * The cenobite carries out this search under a Rule and an Abbot. (RB 1:2)
- * The Opus Dei occupies a primary place in the monastic day. (RB 43:1-3)
- * Private prayer is a preparation and prolongation of the Opus Dei. (RB 4:56; 52:1-5)
- * Reading and meditation alternate with work to balance the monastic day. (RB 48)

- * Obedience, taciturnity and humility are the pillars of ascetical life. (RB 5-7)
- * Fraternal charity, under the form of good zeal, governs the morality of the Rule. (RB 72)
- * The monastery is a workshop within which the monk labors throughout his life under the orders of the Lord and is himself worked upon by God. (RB 4:78)
- * Discretion is the essential virtue for having peace in the House of God. (RB 64:17-19)
- * Stability is required for this life to be fruitful. (RB 4:78; 58:9,17)

Moreover, the Rule taught our Fathers - just as it teaches us today - to lead an integral, harmonious, balanced, *holistic* life. There are in the Rule a series of paired elements which are complementary to each other and act like balanced magnetic poles:

Prayer: <i>Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer. (4:55-57)</i>	Work: <i>Idleness is the enemy of the soul. Therefore, the brothers should have specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading. (48:1)</i>
Common Good: <i>No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. (72:7)</i>	Personal Good: <i>If there are artisans in the monastery, they are to practice their craft with all humility. (57:1)</i>
Prayer in Common: <i>Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God. (43:3)</i>	Private Prayer: <i>If someone wishes to pray privately, he may simply go into the oratory and pray. (52:3)</i>
Discipline: <i>Discipline your body; do not pamper yourself, but love fasting. (4:11-13)</i>	Dispensations: <i>There should be consideration for weaknesses. (34:2; 55:21)</i>
Silence: <i>Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times. (42:1)</i>	Communication: <i>The brothers are to express their opinions with all humility. (3:4)</i>
Enclosure: <i>No one shall presume to leave the enclosure of the monastery without the abbot's order. (67:7)</i>	Hospitality: <i>All guests are to be welcomed as Christ. (53:1)</i>
Disappropriation: <i>No one may presume to give, receive or retain anything as his own, nothing at all. (33:2)</i>	Needs: <i>In order that this vice of private ownership may be completely uprooted, the abbot is to provide all things necessary. (55:18)</i>
Older monks: <i>The younger monks must respect their seniors. (63:10)</i>	Younger monks: <i>The seniors must love their juniors. (63:10)</i>
Seriousness: <i>A monk speaks gently and without laughter, seriously and with becoming modesty. (7:60)</i>	Joy: <i>No one may be disquieted or distressed in the house of God. (31:19)</i>

The first disciples of Cîteaux's Founders and the second Cistercian generation - Bernard, William, Gueric, Aelred, Isaac, Amadeus, Gilbert, Baldwin, John, Adam - all think of the Rule as a text offering direction and advice for the interior life. Benedict offers abundant teaching on humility, obedience, love and the fear of God. Moreover, he invites the monk to drink directly from the Gospels and the Church Fathers. Our teachers of the twelfth century reread the Rule in the light of this previous monastic tradition, without neglecting the signs of their own times. They thus developed some aspects of life in the Spirit which are hardly to be found in Saint Benedict: for example, their teaching on the human soul and the image and likeness of God, their emphasis on self-knowledge, their treatment of love and mystical contemplation. The *School of the Lord's service* also becomes a *School of charity*.

The founding charism of our first Fathers, which is the charism that establishes our Cistercian identity, was embodied in the primitive documents. But obviously the documents are neither the charism nor the identity. The charism, as the experience of the Spirit configuring the monk with Christ in a special way and giving a specific identity, resides in human hearts: in those of our Founders and in our own.

Now let us look at our present situation. The Cistercian charism as a specific form of evangelical life - a dynamic and transforming gift of the Spirit - resides in the heart of each one of us. In fact our vocation to a Cistercian monastery can be thought of as the discovery of our true spiritual identity. We find within us the seal imprinted there by the charism and the desire that this grace, this seal of the Spirit, reach its full potential. Although it can sound like an exaggeration, we must say that, when we arrived at the monastery, we already had the Cistercian identity and the founding charism of Cîteaux in their pure and original state, as seeds ready to grow.

The charism of the Founders and the consequent identity have been transmitted to each one of us to be constantly lived, preserved, deepened and developed. This process takes place in communion with the Body of Christ which is in constant growth. The good of both the Church and the world requires our fidelity to the gifts we have received. The Cistercian charism and identity are a gift of the Spirit to the Church and, through her, to the world. The Order's new Constitutions are our identity card, letting us identify ourselves within the Church community. All our efforts for a new step in spiritual renewal rest on these convictions.

Once again, let me present in a synthetic format the guiding principles of this new stage of inculturated spiritual renewal. It is taking place within the context of a deeply changing world and of a Church inviting us to share in the process of a new evangelization. Its principles are:

- **Following** Jesus.
- **Orientation** toward his Mystery.
- **Formation** for cenobitic living.
- **Belonging** to an Order.
- **Communion** in and with the Church.
- **Solidarity** with all men and women.
- **Discernment** of one's culture.
- **Inculturation** of our Patrimony.
- **Dialogue** with other Churches and religions.

The foregoing might seem to be somewhat abstract, but it is easy to make it more concrete if we look at ourselves. Let us contemplate respectfully - the only way to look at human beings - the 4,350 monks and nuns who make up the Order today. There is no doubt whatsoever that we ourselves are the great value, the great mutual gift which constitutes the spiritual wealth of the Order at the present time, after nine centuries of pilgrimage through history, guided through it all by the Lord.

It is true, our wealth, the motive of our song of thanksgiving, are the 165 communities of persons of every age and social condition called by one and the same Lord. In some communities there are up to four or five different generations, which is immensely precious in today's world.

Our riches are all the many older monks and nuns, so full of wisdom and dedication to their neighbor, so joyful to have lived and to still live united to the Lord Jesus during their years of silent fidelity. Our riches are also the younger brothers and sisters called by the Lord to be configured to his monastic image. They are today's vital enthusiasm and the hope for the future. Our riches are

also all the middle-aged members of the Order who are carrying the weight of today's burdens. They have the joy of knowing that they are strong links between the past and a future full of promise.

And how could we fail to mention, among so many people who are known, or perhaps unknown, to us, the saints who give joy to God's house? In our own century, now drawing to a close, the Lord has given us the splendid witness of the martyrs of China, Spain and Algeria. There are many reasons to think also of Blessed Gabriela Saghedu of Grottaferrata-Vitorchiano, Blessed Rafael Arnáiz Barón of San Isidoro de Dueñas, Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi of Mount Saint Bernard and Venerable Marie-Joseph Cassant of Our Lady of Désert.

The theme of identity will become more important in the immediate future. The deep changes which are taking place in the field of communication and human interaction, plus the growing awareness that all life is interconnected, will result in new replies to the traditional question of identity, on the personal, group and social levels. Increased pluralism and the global nature of environmental issues will require us to specify more clearly the core elements of our vocation, which we cannot renounce. We will have to discern what can be assimilated from outside, then renounce what is accidental or accessory so as to give to others what is most valuable in our charisma and thus enrich them and ourselves.

B. Challenges and Stimulants

The noun "challenge" comes from the verb, "to challenge," the meaning of which is to defy or provoke. The noun is synonymous with "incentive", "stimulant", something that pushes us to face difficulties with courage and fortitude. Sociologically speaking, it is the set of characteristics of a given historical, social and cultural context which question the behaviour of human groups.

From a theological viewpoint and in relation to the Order, it is important to see that challenges are not simply historical facts, but also words of God for us here and now. We can think of them as invitations from the Lord to act in conformity with his plan of salvation for us as Cistercians at this end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st. Thus, in their deeper meaning, the challenges which face the Order today are also "signs of our times," or signs from God for this historical moment.

From among the different challenges which confront us, let us concentrate on just one: the need to spell out a new doctrine and vision of man, that is, a new **anthropology** at the service of our cenobitic life. This is something closely linked to the theme of monastic and contemplative identity. Every change of epoch requires an adjustment in the meanings and visions of reality. The very first reality that requires an adjustment is anthropology, that is, the vision which a human being has of him or herself. And every change of anthropology brings with it a change of spirituality. Although this is not the time or place to elaborate on this theme, which I wrote to you about in a previous letter, it does seem to be the moment to present some suggestions.

Anthropology - the question of what it means to be human - has experienced a series of important shifts in recent years. These new approaches cannot be ignored when we ask questions about ourselves. To put it briefly, we can speak about shifts:

- from a masculine-centered approach to a **human-centered** one. Anthropology must be about man-woman humanity, not just about males. Nor is this because of women's rights, but rather in order to recover the fullness of humanity.

- from duality to **unity**. The human spirit can only be thought of and experienced within the limits of material reality. We are not spirit and body, but incarnated spirits.

- from idealism to **realism**. We only discover what it means to be human from what exists in the historical framework of times, places and cultures.

- from a one-dimensional vision to a **multi-dimensional** one. What is essential, simple and well-defined is not the only thing that is important, but also what is existential, complex and unlimited.

- from what is immanent and closed in on itself to what is open to **self-transcendence**. The human being is characterized by going beyond itself. It can only be understood from its own interiority and from outside itself.

I would like to pause for a moment and explain the first shift mentioned above, the shift toward an integral vision of humanity. More specifically, let us look at the new awakening, growing importance and increasing leadership of women in the world and Church today. It is something which can greatly contribute to the enrichment of our human and monastic identity. We are especially sensitive to it since we are an Order formed of both monks and nuns. It is increasingly clear to more and more people that male and female identities are not established separately from one another. On the contrary, their establishment is achieved precisely through the relationship of man and woman within a wider network of relationships and in a continual process of growth towards maturity. As a result, **relational ability** is the essential feature of either form of personal identity, and is therefore an absolutely necessary component in the development of an anthropology. If such a development is not achieved, we will fall into the stereotyped models promoted by the mass media of communication.

Focusing our attention now on the man-woman relationship, we can see three general models used to describe it:

- The model of **absolute difference** (bipolar dualism). This model does not see the difference between personhood, which is a reality common to all human beings, and the male or female condition which is specific to each gender. For those who think this way, the biological, psychological and social characteristics of each gender determine everything else. Thus they conclude that there is an absolute difference between man and woman.

- The model of **total equality** (emancipated uniformity). This model emphasizes the similarities so much that it makes the differences disappear. What is proposed is thus an androgynous, unisexual existence.

- The model of **interdependence** (equivalent, differentiated reciprocity). This model emphasizes the reciprocal otherness of man and woman within their personal equality. It rejects both an equality based on the lowest common denominator between the sexes and a complementarity based on subordination of one sex to the other. It states that the person is transformed in relationships and in community.

The third model - that of interdependence - integrates what is positive in the two other models and avoids their disadvantages and limitations. Thus it is the best for rethinking our situation in a full, complementary way.

But perhaps the most interesting element of present day anthropology is the discovery of woman as **archetype** of humanity. As surprising as it may seem, this vision does not come from radical feminism, nor from any of its better known advocates. It comes from Christianity, from Catholic

tradition. More precisely, it comes from the official Church magisterium as expressed in the teaching of Pope John Paul II. A renewed awareness of what it means to be female cannot be just a question of roles to be regained or rights to be obtained. It is much more a matter of rediscovering a human dimension which deeply touches both women and men, though in different ways.

A woman is a representative and archetype of the entire human race. In other words, she represents that humanity which is proper to all human beings, both men and women. The feminine gender is a living symbol of all that is human. A woman's female qualities have a prophetic character, since they show man's own identity. It is impossible to achieve an authentic interpretation of man - that is, of what is "human" - without an adequate reference to what is "feminine." Human identity is marked by "being for the sake of another." (John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem* 4,7,22,25,30)

In this sense a woman represents humanity in three different but complementary ways at the same time:

1. By her condition as **spouse**, which is both reciprocity and the demand for it. This spousal quality is the consciousness of possessing an exclusive yet complementary gift to be shared with another person. It is the capacity to move and enable a man so that he, too, may show reciprocity, self-manifestation and acceptance of another.

2. By her condition as **mother**, that is, her feminine priority in the area which is most distinctly human, that of life, pain and care. Her maternal quality is a free gift of self to another and a fullness which is reached through self-loss and acceptance of the other with all that person's limitations. It is the natural capacity to know how to wait for what needs time to come to fruition.

3. By her **femininity**, which is a general mode and feature of "being woman." It implies being centered on caring for, and remaining present to, the other. It is the capacity to foster, by sympathy and adaptation, the other person's self-manifestation. Life is conceived as the possibility of meeting another person "face to face" in such a way that each one's personhood will grow from it.

Mother Church, and our Order within her, still have much to learn about how to live and act as mother, spouse and female caregiver, as these qualities are lived and experienced by a woman. To ignore one half of humanity is the most appalling form of lack of self-knowledge!

We can no longer doubt that one sign of our times is the strengthening of the role of women in our present society and culture. This fact leads us back to a fundamental element in the teaching and life of Jesus: something we should never have forgotten. It affects not only women, but also men: "The new awareness on the part of women helps men to revise their own mental criteria, their way of understanding themselves, of judging and interpreting their place in history, of organizing their life, whether this be on a social, political, economic, religious or Church level." (*Vita Consecrata*, 57)

If we look at our own situation, we find that many nuns of the Order understand themselves and the charism inside them in terms of "fecundity." They have chosen the better part and it is to be mothers and sisters of Jesus, listening to his word and putting it into practice. Their whole being beats to the rhythm of welcoming others, being fruitful, giving life. They join Guerric of Igny to tell us: "*Oh faithful soul, open wide your bosom, expand your affections, admit no constraint in your heart, conceive him whom creation cannot contain! Open to the Word of God an ear that will listen. This is the way to the womb of your heart for the Spirit who brings about this act of conception.*" (Second Sermon for the Annunciation [27],4)

We long for the hour when our nuns will teach us to read Sacred Scripture from their own contemplative heart. With their eyes transformed by love, may they re-read for us the tracts of theology, morals, monastic spirituality, and the Cistercian charism and identity. When they reformulate our formulations, there will be born a new, inclusive form which will create many new formulas. And all this will flow from the riches of Christ, even though for many of us it implies a challenge of conversion. It will not come from easy accommodation to the spirit of our times.

Just as "in the fullness of time" (Gal 4:4) everything depended on the consent of a human creature - Virgin, Spouse and Mother, - in a similar way at the threshold of the third millennium, the hope of a new humanization depends on the "feminine genius".

Nine centuries of Cistercian history come to an end at the same time as the first twenty centuries of Christian history. A new millennium opens before our eyes: not only a new age, but also the change of an age. What will the face of the Order be in the near future? How will it serve the Church and the world? Will everything we have held as essential until now remain so? What surprises does the Spirit have in store for us? Questions such as these - and many others - do not have a reply at the present time.

But we do know the gift we have received: our vocational charism. It is for the sake of serving many others. We ardently want this charism to be fruitful according to the divine favor and our own poor collaboration. Our hope is unconquerable because God is Faithful and shares his fidelity with us.

Creative fidelity to our own identity - and the desire to enrich it by integrating all the capacities and gifts received - prepare us to strengthen the communion existing in the Cistercian family. And may they weave a network of friendship with the immense number of baptized who recognize the same gift in their hearts.

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