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ORDO
CISTERCIENSIS S.O.

ABBAS GENERALIS

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I Hear in My Heart: “Seek my Face” (*Circular letter to the members of the Order*)

January 26, 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This will be my last annual letter as Abbot General. As everyone knows, I intend to offer my resignation during the next General Chapter, and I am sure it will be accepted.

Eighteen years have gone by since the first time I wrote you. That first letter was a sort of self-introduction in which I opened my heart to show what was there: Jesus, Mary, the Gospel, the Church, the Rule, Cîteaux, Man. This last word was absolutely inclusive, meaning both man and woman. These seven words led to a second letter on the Cistercian School of Charity. Both letters were youthful and passionate testimonials.

Today, having experienced the many things that have happened, I feel completely the same as before and yet rather different. The passing years do not fail to have their effect, even though what is most essential and most proper to me remains the same.

In this letter I would like to share with you what has remained constant in my monastic identity and what has become a characteristic of my identity as a person. I intend to be both testimonial and traditional in my approach. Using the words of the Fathers, I will speak to you about what I have been doing ever since I entered the monastery and even more so since I was asked to take on the service of general authority.

I hope what I say will be of use for reflection and self-evaluation before the mirror of the Lord, just as it has been for me while writing this letter.

1. Invitation and Response

A word of the Lord that has dwelt in me since the time of my novitiate is: “Seek me and you will live” (Am 5:4). Perhaps that is why I always hear in my heart: “Seek my face” (Ps 27:8).

And this seeking is neither fruitless nor empty; rather, it revels in the promise of meeting or finding: “You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart” (Jer 29:13;

Dt 4:29). As we can see, this promise is all-demanding: “when you seek me with all your heart.” Or, to use the words of the Psalmist that so often echo in our prayers:

- O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water. (Ps 63:2)
- Like the deer that yearns for running streams, so my soul is yearning for you, my God. (Ps 42:2–3)

But the most important thing for me has not been so much my effort in seeking as my gratitude for encountering. For, “God is good to those who seek” (Lam 3:25). Moreover, he comes to take us to himself (Jn 14:3), and goes so far as to ask us frequently, “Whom do you seek?” (Jn 20:15).

Monastic life in all times—and in my own life, which has fed on this great tradition—has understood itself in this pair of terms: to seek and to find. Two Biblical texts point the way:

- “Such are they who seek him, seek the face of the God of Jacob.” (Ps 23:6)
- “Upon my bed by night I sought him whom my soul loves [...] I will seek him whom my soul loves [...] I found him whom my soul loves.” (Sg 3:1–5)

Saint **Benedict**, in his Rule for monks and nuns, considers sincere seeking as one of the fundamental criteria for vocational discernment: “The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God” (RB 58.7). And the main characteristics that guarantee the truthfulness of this search are “eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and trials” (*obprobria*, according to Saint Basil’s Rule 6, means ‘household chores’). In other words, this seeking means concrete commitment to everything that makes monastic life a life oriented toward pure and continuous prayer and a school of divine service and fraternal communion. The concrete search for God translates desire into praxis, thus showing that one’s desire for God is genuine.

An obvious prerequisite here—for novices and for all of us persevering on the monastic way—is a faith-filled certainty that God has sought us out and continues to seek us out in order to make us happy: “Seeking his workman in a multitude of people, the Lord calls out to him and lifts his voice again: ‘Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days?’” (RB Prol. 14–14; see also 27:8–9).

Our **Cistercian Tradition** has always considered the Song of Songs to be a contemplative and nuptial poem. This was how Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, Gilbert of Hoyland, John of Ford, and Geoffrey of Auxerre saw it. And it was experienced as such by Lutgard, Matilda, Gertrude, and so many others. And this is the way I have been discovering it over time, in progressive openness to the gift of God. In more precise terms: “to seek God for his own sake alone, this is to possess a face made most beautiful by the two elements of intention [i.e., the object: what is being sought; and the cause: why one is seeking]. This is the bride’s own special gift...” (Bernard, SC 40.3; CF 7:201)

Our Fathers often use Psalm 23:6 to describe the identity of monks. The following passage from Saint Bernard has always spoken to my heart:

We do not stand here all the day idle. We know what we are looking for and who it is that hired us: We seek God; we await God. [...] See, the time for seeking and the day for

finding are at hand: “Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near” [Is 55:6]. [...] “How good you are, Lord, to the soul that seeks you” [Lam 3:25]. And if you are good to those who seek you, how much more to those who find you! [...] Seek him, brothers, “Seek the Lord and be strengthened, ever seek his face. [Ps 104:4] Seek the Lord, and your soul will live” [Ps 68:33]. “And my soul will live for him,” because it is dead to the world. The soul that lives for the world does not live for him. Let us seek so as never to stop seeking him, so that, when he comes to seek us, he will say of us: “Such is the generation that seeks the Lord that seeks the face of the God of Jacob” [Ps 23:6]. (Bernard, Div 4.1 and 4.5)

From those who have ruminated on the writings of the Abbot of Clairvaux for many years, I have learned that his doctrine comes down to this: mutual seeking between God and the human person created for love. And that is why his teaching is the narration of a love story. This whole adventure of love-filled seeking is nicely summarized in sermons 80–85 on the Song of Songs, sermons that comment on the words of the Canticle: “I sought him whom my soul loves” [Sg 3:1].

The theoretical and practical program of the Cistercian *Schola caritatis* likewise focuses on this mutual and loving search, rooted in the image of God and in the lost likeness that is restored through conformation with Christ. Experience has taught me that my “interior life” consists in this: *attention-to* the Lord and *tension-toward* him who seeks me and loves me. I seek by desiring, and I find by loving. The monastic observances are at the service of—and at the same time manifestations of—my seeking-finding and reciprocal love with the Lord.

William of Saint-Thierry, a good friend of my friend Bernard of Clairvaux, has taught me to pray as follows:

Lord, I will seek your face and continually search for your face as much as I can and as much as you render me capable of doing. Lord my God, my one hope, hear me lest exhausted I lose the will to seek you. May I ardently seek you always. Give the strength to seek, you who have given the desire. And when the strength is sufficient, add to the desire which you have given. May I always remember you, understand you, and love you until, faithfully remembering you and prudently understanding you and truthfully loving you, O Triune God, according to the fullness which you know, you reform me to your image in which you created me. (Enigma of Faith 23; CF 9:55–56)

2. Prayerful Seeking

Prayer, in all its forms and expressions, has been a priority for me in this experience of seeking and encountering God in Christ. Saint Benedict, who is quite clear in this regard, thus recommends: “First of all, every time you begin a good work, you must pray to him most earnestly to bring it to perfection. [...] What is not possible by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace (RB Prol. 4 and 41). And, putting it more briefly: “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (RB 43.3); “Listen readily to holy reading, and devote yourself often to prayer (RB 4.55–56).

I would like to dwell a moment on the monastic experience of prayer as relation, communication, and communion with God.

This experience has its foundation in our being as persons. As human persons, we are persons in relation, and therefore dialogical beings. Our inherent capacity for communication requires existential communion. Our demand for communion is satisfied solely in union with Absolute Being, i.e. God.

And yet, prayer is not predominantly a psychic or psychological activity; rather, it is a God-centered activity. Prayer begins in God and, by his grace, continues in us as participants.

When we pray in the state of grace, as God's friends or brides, we relate to him through living faith, that is to say, a faith that is enlivened by love or a faith that has fallen in love. On the contrary (and God forbid!), when we pray apart from grace or in a state of sin, for having denied the Lord, we pray with faith but without love, that is, a faith that is dead, because it is not enlivened by love.

The essential forms that give shape to our life of prayer are the Celebration of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina*, and *intentio cordis*. The liturgy especially shows forth the spiritual aim of our monastic life, and is extended and interiorized through *lectio* and silent personal prayer. In two earlier letters I spoke to you about the Eucharist (1994) and *lectio divina* (1993). Consequently, I will limit myself here to speaking briefly about the Liturgy of the Hours and *intentio cordis*.

2.1. The Liturgy of the Hours

The Liturgy is clearly both the backbone of our monastic day and one of the mainstays of our continuous prayer. The Liturgy thus tends to become a matter of routine for everyone except aspirants and novices. It is therefore useful periodically to motivate ourselves, in order that this sacrifice of praise and intercession be carried out in spirit and truth, that is to say, in communion with our brothers and sisters and with Christ the High priest.

Ever mindful of our weakness, it is the Patriarch Benedict who provides me with two bits of advice for avoiding this automated habit or custom we call routine.

The first piece of advice, taken from the Word of God, is best presented in Latin: *Psallite sapienter* (RB 19:4). Translations of Psalm 47 (46), where these words are found, tend to be very different one from another, and the same diversity is noticed in translations of the Rule. What is it that Abbot Benedict is advising here? What I was taught, what I learned, and I what I have in turn taught to others is the following:

- To chant with reverence, respect and fear of God, which is a form of humility and the beginning of wisdom. These attitudes place us correctly before the presence of God.
- To organize and execute everything artfully (Psalm tones, silences, readings, etc.), in order to be at peace and content in the *Opus Dei*. Spontaneous interventions are discerned according to their usefulness for the edification of one's neighbor and the assembly at prayer.
- To taste and savor the spiritual meaning (allegorical, tropological, and anagogical) of the Psalms we sing, which does not mean doing exegesis during the office, but, rather, letting Christ make himself present to us.

- Giving priority to the Lord's pleasure in hearing us over our own pleasure in singing to him. Our attention is thus centered away from ourselves, freeing us from self-interest.

Some think that these two words, *psallite sapienter*, are merely a foretaste of what immediately follows, that is, the second piece of advice Saint Benedict offers us: *Ut mens nostra concordet voci nostrae* (RB 19:7). I have always found in these words an ascetical-mystical itinerary that begins with attention and ends with communion. To put it succinctly:

- To pay attention to the words, and realize how tremendous the truths are that we speak and that the Lord causes us to speak: cursing Psalms included!
- To take serious what we say, in order that the Psalms translate into behavior and shape our way of life: "God helps those who help themselves."
- To be in tune with the voice of the brothers celebrating the *Opus Dei*, in order to attain a single mind and single heart among all, until we are raised all together toward eternal life.
- To be in tune with the Voice of the One who alone prays, so that there be only one Person at prayer: this is the moment in which there is a great silence in heaven.

The following text from the Abbot of Clairvaux helps me summarize what I have been saying, and likewise helps me move into the theme that follows. Note how Bernard applies what Benedict says about individual prayer to both the *Opus Dei* and private prayer:

From what was just read in chapter, the authority of the Holy Rule has called your attention to reverence in prayer, and I take it as an opportunity to say a few things on this subject of prayer. To put it briefly, I think that not a few of those who pray occasionally experience dryness and a kind of dullness of mind, so that, praying only with their lips, they do not pay enough attention to what they are saying or to the One to whom they are speaking. The reason for this is that they came to prayer as out of habit, with less reverence and care than is fitting. Of what should a brother who goes in to pray be thinking, if not the words of the prophet: "I will go to the place of the wonderful tabernacle, unto the house of God" [Ps 41:5]? Indeed, at the time of prayer, we must enter altogether into the heavenly court, that court where "the King of Kings is seated on a throne set with stars," surrounded by an innumerable and unspeakable army of the spirits of the blessed. [...] With what reverence, what fear, what humility must he come forward, this vile little frog [*vilis ranuncula*], creeping out from his swamp? How fearful, supplicant, and humble, how carefully and with what total attention of soul [*sollicitus et toto intentus animo*] will this poor little fellow appear before the divine majesty, in the council and assembly of the saints and in the presence of the holy angels? Therefore, in all our actions, but especially in prayer, there is need for utmost vigilance of soul. As we read in the Holy Rule, the eyes of God are upon us at all times and in all places, but especially when we are at prayer. For, although we are always seen by him, at the time of prayer we also present ourselves and show ourselves as if speaking face to face with God. God may be everywhere, but we must pray to him in heaven, and it is there that our thoughts should turn at the time of prayer. Our minds should not be held up by the roof of the oratory, or the atmosphere, or the thickness of the clouds, but we should pray in the way Christ taught us: "Thus shall you pray: 'Our Father, who art in heaven'...." (Bernard, Div 25.7–8)

2.2. *Intentio cordis*

The first Benedictine mystic, i.e. Saint Benedict himself, is no “theoretician” of personal and private prayer. Being a practical man, he instead offers us some pointers that spring from his experience, both personal and in community. These pointers are found especially in the chapter of the Rule dedicated to the *oratorio* of the monastery (RB 52). The Patriarch’s simplicity, in contrast to the artificiality of so many modern methods of prayer, won over my heart from the very first day: “...he may simply go in and pray...with heartfelt devotion” (RB 52.4).

What Benedict suggests and teaches about praying privately with greater recollection, I understand, in communion with the Cistercian tradition, in terms of desire, affection, and loving adherence brought about by divine grace. Here are two texts that endorse my way of understanding:

Prayer is the affection of one who clings to God, a certain familiar and devout conversation, a state in which the enlightened mind enjoys God as long as it is permitted. (The Golden Epistle 179; CF 12:71).

Prayer fulfils the function of both myrrh and incense. First it gathers and binds together into yourself your affections when you pray; then it releases them to transmit them to God. What is more like myrrh, when there is such an outpouring towards union with God? What is more like incense, when there is such an effusion towards some perception of God? (Gilbert of Hoyland, SC 28.7; CF 20:348)

This prayer must be frequent and timely, that is to say, assiduous and at the proper times. On this latter point, Saint Bernard wrote toward the end of his life:

A time of leisure is best and most convenient, the deep silence when others are asleep is particularly suitable, for prayer will then be freer and purer. “Arise at the first watch of the night, and pour out your heart like water [*effunde sicut aquam cor tuum*] before the face of the Lord, your God” [Lam 2:19]. How secretly prayer goes up in the night, witnessed only by God and the holy angel who received it to present it at the heavenly altar! How pleasing, how unclouded it is, colored with the blush of modesty! How serene, how calm, free from noise and interruption! How pure it is, how sincere, unsullied by the dust of earthly care, untouched by ostentation or human flattery! Therefore the Bride, as modest as she is cautious, when she desired to pray, that is, to seek the Word—for they are the same—sought the privacy of her bed at night. (Bernard, SC 85.3; CF 40: 213–14)

Let us notice that, in this Bernardine text, search for the Word takes place especially in prayer; therefore, to pray and to seek are one and the same thing. Let us also take note of the image of “water poured out,” with reference to heartfelt devotion or *intentio cordis*.

The teaching of Abbot Gilbert of Hoyland is similar to that of the Abbot of Clairvaux, in that the hours of the night are thought to foster this heartfelt devotion or *intentio cordis* in prayer:

But not even the intervals at night between the hours of common prayer are unoccupied. O God of goodness, how unlike night is that hour of the night, how that night is an illumination in delights [Ps 138:11]! Those prayers are made in private but they make

petition for nothing private. The voice is indeed more subdued but the mind is more intent [*sed mens intensior*] and silent prayers are full of inspiration. Often indeed passionate prayer outstrips the voice; it neither needs nor uses words, for it is borne on the winds of pure and full affection. Love alone, beating on the ears of the Lord, disdains the sound of articulate words, which though they spur the beginner only impede one whose prayer is perfect. (Gilbert of Hoyland, SC 23.3; CF 20:287)

I recall one day, when I was Abbot of Azul, explaining the Order's Constitution 22, that a brother put me to the test by asking: "in a few words, what is *intentio cordis*?" In order to hide my ignorance, I took some time before answering, and consulted an Australian monk, who referred me to the tradition. Here is my answer for both then and now. The references we find to *intentio cordis* in John Cassian's *Conferences* and *Institutes*, as well as in the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 18.1; 35.17; 48.18; 58.6), allow us to conclude that, when the Patriarch recommends heartfelt devotion, he is inviting us to pray with a unified heart, reaching out to God. Breaking it down into its different headings, we have *attention*, *motion*, and *fervor*:

- Integrated and fervent movement of the heart toward God.
- Intense outpouring of a heart that is undivided and directed toward God.
- Taut and relaxed inner attention to God.

This was precisely the disposition of Bl. Gabriella Sagheddu on the day of her monastic profession: "I thank you with complete outpouring of my soul, and, as I pronounce the holy vows, I abandon myself entirely to You" (Prayer written for the day of her profession, October 31, 1937). In short, it is a matter of the pure prayer of a heart that is trying to live a pure life, which leads to continuous prayer.

Considered in this way, *intentio cordis* is the twin sister of spiritual desire, which finds fulfillment solely in the Life and happiness of God. It is this that Saint Benedict teaches me and that daily motivates me in my seeking: "Yearn for everlasting life with holy desire" (RB 4.46).

It is already time to conclude. Some of you have asked me what I plan to do after my resignation. I am surprised by the question. The answer seems obvious to me: to go back to my community of profession and continue seeking and finding the Lord for his glory and our happiness!

With a fraternal embrace in Mary of Saint Joseph,



Bernardo Olivera
Abbot General