

THE CHARTER OF CHARITY

1 On the Charter of Charity

[Prologue]

2 **B**efore the Cistercian abbeys began to flourish, the
abbot, Dom Stephen, and his brethren ordained
that, in order to avoid any cause of conflict
between bishop and monks, in no way would abbeys be
founded in the diocese of any bishop before he had ratified
and confirmed the decree drawn up and confirmed
3 between the monastery of Cîteaux and the others which
had issued from it. In this decree, then, the aforesaid
brethren, taking precaution against future shipwreck of
their mutual peace, elucidated and decreed and left for
their posterity by what covenant, or in what manner,
indeed, with what charity their monks throughout abbeys
in various parts of the world, though separated in body,
4 could be indissolubly knit together in mind. They
considered that this decree should be called the Charter of
Charity, because, averting the burdensome levying of all
exactions, its statute pursues only charity and the
advantage of souls in things human and divine.

1

Here begin the chapters

- 2 I. That a Mother Church is Not to Require from a
Daughter Church the Exaction of any Material
Advantage
- 3 II. That the Rule is to be Understood and Kept by All
in One Manner
- 4 III. That All are to have the Same Liturgical Books
and Customs
- 5 IV. Of the General Statute between Abbeys
- 6 V. That the Mother is to Visit the Daughter Once a
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- 7 VI. What Kind of Reverence is to be Shown the
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- 8 VII. Of the General Chapter of Abbots at Cîteaux
- 9 VIII. Of the Statute between Those who Issued from
Cîteaux and Those whom they have Begotten;
and that All are to Come to the General Chapter;
and of the Punishment of Those who do not Come
- 10 IX. Of Abbots who Show Contempt for the Rule or
the Order
- 11 X. What the Law is to be between Abbeys of
Different Filiations [*literally*: which did not Beget
the Other]
- 12 XI. Of the Death and Election of Abbots

1 **Here begins the Charter of Charity.**

Chapter I

2 **That a Mother Church is Not to Require**
 from a Daughter
3 **the Exaction of any Material Advantage**

3 **B**ecause we know full well that all of us are
servants, albeit useless servants, of the one true
4 King and Lord and Master, we therefore impose
no exaction of earthly advantage or of temporal goods on
our abbots and brother monks whom, through us, the most
wretched of men, God in his loving kindness has
5 established in divers places under the discipline of the
Rule. For, desiring to profit them and all the children of
holy Church, we purpose to enact in their regard naught
which will burden them, naught which will diminish their
substance; lest, while wishing to gain abundance from
their poverty, we be unable to avoid the evil of avarice
which is, as the Apostle attests, a “serving of idols”. We
do wish, however, for the sake of charity, to retain the care
of souls, so that should they ever attempt to turn aside ever
so little — which God forbid! — from their holy resolve
and the observance of the Holy Rule, they may be able to
return, through our sollicitude, to the straight path of life.

Chapter Two

1 **That the Rule is to be understood and kept
 by all in one manner**

2 Now, however, we will and we command them, that they
3 observe the Rule of the Blessed Benedict in everything
 just as it is observed in the New Monastery. Let them not
 introduce a different meaning in the interpretation of the
 Holy Rule; but as our predecessors, the holy fathers—that
 is to say, the monks of the New Monastery—understood
 and kept it, and as we today understand and keep it, so let
 them too understand and keep it.

Chapter Three

1 **All are to Have the Same Liturgical Books
 and Customs**

2 And because we receive in our cloister all their monks
 who come to us, and they likewise receive our monks in
 their cloisters, it therefore seems to us opportune, and this
 also is our will, that they have the usages and chant and all
 the books necessary for the day and night Hours and for
 Mass according to the form of the usages and books of the
 New Monastery, so that there may be no discord in our
 conduct, but that we may live by one charity, one Rule,
 and like usages.

Chapter Four

1 **The General Statute between Abbeys**

2 When, however, the abbot of the New Monastery comes to any of these monasteries to make a visit, the local abbot should give him precedence everywhere in the monastery, in token of the fact that the church of the New Monastery is mother of his church; and, as long as he remains there, the visiting abbot should take the place of the local abbot, except that he eats, not in the guest house, but with the brethren in the refectory in order to preserve discipline—unless the local abbot is absent.

3 Indeed, all visiting abbots of our Order should do likewise. But if several should be visiting, and the local abbot is absent, the senior of them should eat in the guest house.

4 This too is an exception: the local abbot should bless his own novices after the [period of] testing prescribed by the Rule, even in the presence of his abbatial superior.

5 Also, the abbot of the New Monastery should take care not to presume to deal with anything or to give orders about or handle anything concerning the material goods of the place to which he has come, against the will of the abbot and the brethren. But if he realises that the precepts of the Rule or of our Order are being violated in that place, then, with the advice of the abbot and in his presence, he should charitably apply himself to making correction. But if the local abbot is absent, he should nonetheless correct what he finds amiss.

Chapter Five

That the Mother is to Visit the Daughter Once a Year

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Let the abbot of the senior church visit once a year all the
2 monasteries he has founded; and should he visit more
often, let them for that reason rejoice all the more.

Chapter Six

What Kind of Reverence is to be Shown the Daughter when she Comes to the Mother Church

1

Now when an abbot of any of these churches comes to the
2 New Monastery, let him be shown the proper reverence;
let him occupy the abbot's stall, receive the guests, eat
with them—but only if the abbot is absent. Should he be
3 present, however, let him do none of these things, but let
him eat in the refectory. However, let the local prior
4 manage the affairs of the monastery.

Chapter Seven

Of the General Chapter of Abbots at Cîteaux

1

- 2 Let all the abbots of these churches come to the New Monastery once a year on the day they decide among themselves, and there let them treat of the salvation of their own souls; if something is to be emended or added to in the observance of the Holy Rule or of the Order, let them so ordain it, and let them reestablish among themselves the good of peace and charity.
- 3 But if any abbot proves to have been less zealous for the Rule or too intent on things secular, or habitually prone to any vice, let him there be charitably proclaimed. Let the one proclaimed prostrate and fulfil the penance assigned him for the fault. But only abbots are to make this proclamation.
- 4 But should any church fall into intolerable poverty, let the abbot of that monastery take care to make this matter known before the whole chapter. Then let the abbots, one and all, enkindled by the most intense fire of charity, hasten to relieve the penury of that church, according to their resources, from the goods bestowed on them by God.

Chapter Eight

- 1 **Of the Statute between Those who Issued from
Cîteaux
and Those whom they have Begotten;**

**and that All are to Come to the General Chapter,
and the Punishment of Those who do not Come**

2

But when any of our churches has grown by the grace of God to such an extent that it can construct another monastery, let them observe between themselves the same agreement we observe between ourselves and our brethren.

This, however, we do will and do reserve to ourselves: that all the abbots from every region are to come to the New Monastery on the day they decide among themselves, and there they are to obey in everything the abbot of that same place and the Chapter in the correction of things amiss and in the observance of the Holy Rule and of the Order.

3 But they do not have an annual chapter with those whom they have begotten.

4 However, should on occasion bodily infirmity or the blessing of novices prevent one of our abbots from being able to come to the aforesaid place of assembly on the appointed day, he should send his prior thither, who will take care to make known to the Chapter the reason for his staying away, and who will also, should we decree or change anything, bring this information back home to his abbot and brethren. But should anyone for any other

5 excuse ever presume to stay away from our General Chapter, let him prostrate for his fault at the Chapter of the following year, and make satisfaction by the penance for a less serious fault for as long as the master of the Chapter judges.

Chapter Nine

Of Abbots who Show Contempt for the Rule or the Order

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2 But if any of the abbots is found to show contempt for the Holy Rule or for our Order or if he is found to be consenting to the vices of the brethren committed to his care, let the abbot of the New Monastery personally, or through the prior of his monastery, or else through letters, apply himself to warn him four times to emend.

3 But if he show contempt for this, then the abbot of the senior church should take care to make his error openly known to the bishop in whose diocese he lives, and to the canons of his church. Upon summoning him, and upon diligently examining his case with the aforesaid abbot, let him either correct him or else remove him from the pastoral charge as incorrigible. But if the bishop and clergy attach little importance to the violation of the Holy Rule in that monastery, and are unwilling to correct and depose that same abbot, then the abbot of the New Monastery and some abbots of our congregation whom he takes with him should go to that monastery and remove from office the transgressor against the Holy Rule; and the monks of that place, in the presence of the abbots, and with their advice, should elect as their abbot another who is worthy.

But should the abbot and monks of the local church be contemptuous of the abbots who come to them, or be

4 unwilling to emend in deference to them, let the be
subjected to excommunication by the persons present, and
from then on, should one of these wrongdoers come to
himself and wish to flee the death of his soul, and desiring
to change his life for the better, come to his mother,
namely, the New Monastery, for permanent residence, let
the monk be welcomed as a son of that church. When,
however, this is not the case—and our brethren should
5 make every effort to avoid it!—we receive no monk of any
of these churches for permanent residence without the
consent of his abbot. For neither do they welcome our
monks for permanent residence. We do not introduce our
monks into their church for permanent residence against
their will, nor do they introduce theirs into ours.

But if the abbots of our churches see their mother, that is
the say, the New Monastery, growing listless in her holy
6 resolve, and swerving from the most straight path of the
Holy Rule or of our Order, let them, through three of their
fellow-abbots, and in the name of the other abbots—that
is to say, the abbots of la Ferté, Pontigny, and
Clairvaux—admonish the abbot of that place up to four
times to emend, and let them zealously carry out in his
regard the other things which we have judged should be
done in the case of other abbots if they stray from the
Rule—except that, even if he does yield, they are not
themselves to replace him with another; nor, if he resists,
are they to impose an anathema upon him. For if he does
not acquiesce to their advice, let them not put off notifying
the bishop and canons of the church of Chalon of his
7 contumacy, asking that they summon him into their
presence, and that, after having examined the complaint,

they either send him back utterly rebuked, or else expel him from his pastoral charge as incorrigible.

8 Upon his expulsion, the brethren of the same place are to send three messengers—or as many as they like—to the abbeys immediately founded by the New Monastery, and these are to convoke as many abbots as they can within a two-week period; and with their advice and assistance, let them elect for themselves an abbot, as God has foreordained. In the meantime, the Lord abbot of la Ferté should preside over the church until the shepherd, having
9 been converted from his error, has been restored to it through the mercy of God, or else has himself become subject to another chosen to replace him according to the Rule.

10 But if the bishop and the clergy of the aforesaid city neglect to examine the person committing the violation in the manner we have said, then all the abbots [of those houses] which have originated directly from the New Monastery are to come to the place where the transgression has occurred, and depose that transgressor from office; and straightaway, in their presence, and with their advice, the monks of that church are to set an abbot over themselves. But should that abbot and his monks be unwilling to receive our abbots and obey them, let these not fear to strike them with the sword of
11 excommunication, and cut them off from the body of the Church catholic. But afterwards, should any of those who have committed such violations, recover his senses at last and, wishing to save his soul, flee for refuge to any of our
12 three churches—la Ferté or Pontigny or Clairvaux—let

him be received as a member of the household and fellow-heir of the church, until eventually his own church has been reconciled, and he can be restored to it, as is only just. In the meantime, however, the annual Chapter of abbots will not be celebrated at the New Monastery, but wherever it shall be provided for by the above named three abbots.

Chapter Ten

What the Law is to be between Abbeys of Different Filiations

1

This will be the law between those abbeys of different filiations. Each abbot is to give precedence everywhere in the monastery to any of his fellow-abbots who come there, so that the text may be fulfilled: In honour outdoing one another. Should two or more come at the same time, the senior of those arriving will take the higher place. All except the local abbot shall eat in the refectory, however, as we have said above. Otherwise, wherever they assemble they will take their rank according to the date of the abbeys, so that the one whose church is older will be the senior, but with this exception: that should one of them be vested in alb, he will carry out the function of the senior in its entirety, standing ahead of them all in the left-hand choir, even should he be junior to all. Wherever they sit down together, however, they make a bow to each other.

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Chapter Eleven

Of the Death and Election of Abbots

1 Upon the death of their father, the brethren of the New
Monastery are to send three messengers to the abbots, as
we have said above—or more should they so wish—and
2 are to gather there as many as they can summon within
two weeks; and with their consent, let them appoint as
their shepherd one whom God has foreseen. In the
meantime, however, the Lord Abbot of la Ferté is to take
the place of the deceased abbot in everything, as we said
earlier regarding a different matter, until another abbot
3 may, upon being elected, receive with the help of God
both the place and its pastoral care. Also in the rest of the
monasteries widowed in whatever manner of their own
pastor, let the brethren of that place convoke the abbot of
that church which gave them birth, and in his presence and
4 with his advice let them elect for themselves an abbot from
among their own brethren or those of the New Monastery
or from the other churches. For Cistercians are not
allowed to take to themselves an abbot from churches
outside [the Order], or to give their own monks for the
same purpose. But whatever person the monks elect from
5 whatever monastery of our Order, let them receive him
without opposition.