DECLINING COMMUNITIES AND CST 67

The 2014 General Chapter requested this paper with the following votes:

VOTE 59: WE DESIRE TO CREATE A COMMISSION TO GATHER ALL THE MATERIAL ON DECLINING COMMUNITIES AND CST 67 THAT EMERGED DURING THIS GENERAL CHAPTER AS WELL AS CORRESPONDING MATERIAL FROM OTHER MONASTIC ORDERS.

VOTE 60: WE WISH THAT THIS COMMISSION, BASED ON THE MATERIAL THEY HAVE GATHERED, OFFER SUGGESTIONS AND PROPOSALS TO THE REGIONS.

PART 1: RECENT WORK

Recent work on these questions within the Order can be found in the following documents:

1. Central Commission discussion (Minutes of 2013 Central Commission, pp. 9–13)
2. Working paper by M. Inès Gravier, Dom Bernardus Peeters, and Dom Richard Purcell (General Booklet for 2014 Chapter, p 49)
3. Working paper by Fr. David Lavich (General Booklet for 2014 Chapter, p. 74)
4. Commission discussions at 2014 chapter (Minutes of 2014 General Chapter, pp. 229–233; 259–264; 277–281)
5. Votes of the 2014 Chapter (Minutes of 2014 General Chapter, pp. 285–286; 290; 295)
6. Conference of Archbishop Carballo of CICLSAL (Confidential minutes of 2014 General Chapter, pp. 82–89)
7. Dom Bernardo Olivera's 2002 conference (Reprinted in General Booklet for 2014 Chapter, pp. 83–87)

The Central Commission of 2013 proposed two separate topics to the 2014 General Chapter: 1) a revision of Cst 67 regarding the 2/3 vote for suppression, and 2) the formulation of a statute on declining communities. At the 2014 Chapter, however, there was insufficient time to treat both questions separately. The commissions of the Chapter presented short reports, mixing the two topics. The results can be summarized as follows:

– 8 commissions wanted a statute or were open to the possibility of a statute.
– 6 commissions wanted only a pastoral document.
– 2 commissions wanted no statute.
– 6 commissions requested discussion on the autonomy of declining communities.
– 2 commissions expressed no clear opinions.

It is significant that the commissions of the 2014 Chapter showed more interest in the topic of the autonomy of declining communities than in the specific question of the 2/3 vote in Cst 67.

It seems important to maintain the separation of these two topics— Cst 67 on the suppression of monasteries and the possibility of a document on declining communities—because houses are sometimes closed for reasons other than decline due to aging and lack of vocations. For instance, the cases of Bela Vista and Grandselve, both closed (although not yet suppressed) do not correspond to what is usually meant by declining communities. Also, among the Benedictines there have been closings in recent years for a variety of reasons (See "Foundations and Closures of Monasteries in the Benedictine Confederation," *AIM Bulletin* 109 [2015]: 9–24).

PART 2: THE PROSPECT OF A STATUTE OR PASTORAL GUIDELINES ON DECLINING COMMUNITIES

The 2014 General Chapter also requested in **VOTE 61**: WE WISH THAT THE REGIONS PRONOUNCE ON WHETHER THEY WISH TO HAVE A STATUTE OR PASTORAL GUIDELINES.

If a document of this kind is formulated, it will naturally draw on recent experiences in the Order. In general, declining communities go through a series of stages:

- **Stage 1**: Initial awareness of serious fragility. Some communities arrive at this awareness on their own. Others need the help of the Father Immediate or the Region. In the recent case of the monks' houses in Ireland, the impetus to face their situation has come from the General Chapter.
    - o It may be useful to list some basic criteria of evaluation and discernment. Here, Dom Bernardo Olivera's 2002 paper, mentioned above, provides a starting point.
    - o At the same time, other factors like the quality of community life can be more important for discernment than objective criteria.
- **Stage 2**: Attempts to re-vivify the community (on its own initiative or with outside help):
    - o Adaptations of buildings, liturgy, work, economy, etc., to the size and capabilities of the community.
    - o Changes of key personnel or perhaps help in personnel from other communities.
    - o Work to promote better communication in the community or to promote reconciliation among its members.
    - o Creation of a special commission (e.g., Commission for the Future).
    - o Other forms of help from the Region.
- **Stage 3**: Continuing decline:
    - o The Father Immediate and perhaps a special commission continue to accompany the community.
    - o The Region continues to show special solicitude for the house in question.
    - o Consideration of alternative plans:

- ▪ Merger with another community or group of communities?
- ▪ Collaboration with another Religious Order?
- o During this and the following stage it is particularly important to assure that adequate health care is provided for the community.
- – **Stage 4**: Terminal decline:
  - o Longer or shorter period of stagnation during which the community is perhaps in a state of denial.
  - o The community is clearly unable to receive and form novices. (In some cases the right to receive novices is suspended by the General Chapter.)
  - o Need for intervention on the part of the Father Immediate (perhaps with help of a special commission or the Region).
  - o Concrete discernment and planning toward closing the monastery:
    - ▪ About the future of the members of the community:
      - • Staying together?
      - • Relocating?
      - • Dispersing?
    - ▪ About the property and goods of the monastery.

No doubt the greatest challenge in formulating such a document would be to take account of different geographical, social, and cultural contexts. Another difficulty with a document like the one just described is the lack of supporting legislation. The existing legislation, Cst 67, deals only with the end of stage 4.

PART 3: CST 67 AND THE QUESTION OF AUTONOMY

Several Regions and several Commissions of the 2014 Chapter have invited discussion on the topic of the autonomy of communities in serious decline. It has often been pointed out that, according to our legislation, the process of granting autonomy to foundations involves several stages, whereas no stages are provided for withdrawing autonomy.

Communities in terminal decline typically lack important conditions for autonomy, especially the ability to provide their own leadership and the capacity to form new candidates. On the other hand, communities in this phase often continue to be economically autonomous. If such communities required financial aid, would the question of their autonomy look different? The Order has sometimes allowed a community that is not fully self-supporting to become a major priory or abbey, because the strength of the community in more essential areas is seen to outweigh its lack of financial independence. In the case of a declining community, does financial independence outweigh serious lacks in more essential areas?

At the Second Vatican Council and in the following years, the Magisterium has several times addressed the problem of communities that do not "offer any reasonable hope of further development." Although these documents recognize the importance of respecting the autonomy

of monasteries, they recommend an active approach in dealing with declining communities. To cite a few examples:

- Vatican II, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 21 (1965): There may be communities and monasteries which the Holy See, after consulting the interested local Ordinaries, will judge not to possess reasonable hope for further development. These should be forbidden to receive novices in the future. If it is possible, these should be combined with other more flourishing communities and monasteries whose scope and spirit is similar.
- Vatican II, *Ecclesiae Sanctae*, II, 41 (1966): Among the criteria that can contribute to forming a judgment on the suppression of an institute or monastery, taking all the circumstances into account, the following especially are to be considered together: the small number of Religious in proportion to the age of the institute or the monastery, the lack of candidates over a period of several years, the advanced age of the majority of its members. If a decision for suppression is reached, provision should be made that the institute be joined "if it is possible, with another more vigorous institute or monastery not much different in purpose and spirit" (No 21 of the Decree *Perfectae Caritatis*). The individual Religious, however, should be consulted beforehand and all should be done with charity.
- CICLSAL, *Fraternal Life in Community* ("*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*") 69 (1994): Problems posed by the growing number of elderly religious become still more striking in some monasteries which have suffered a lack of vocations. Because a monastery is normally an autonomous community, it is difficult for it to overcome these problems by itself. So it is helpful to recall the importance of organisms of communion, such as federations, for example, in order to overcome situations of great need of personnel. Fidelity to the contemplative life requires the members of a monastery to unite with another monastery of the same Order when a monastic community, by reason of the number of its members, age, or lack of vocations, foresees its own extinction. Also in the painful situation of communities no longer able to live according to their proper vocation because the members are worn down by practical labours or by caring for the elderly or sick members, it will be necessary to seek reinforcements from the same Order or to choose union or fusion with another monastery.

It is instructive to consult the legislation and the recent experience of other monastic and contemplative orders in this regard. No doubt, each Region will be able to gather helpful information and examples from religious communities in its geographical area. To cite a few typical examples:

- Several orders of nuns in Spain need to reduce the number of monasteries in a country where there are over 1000 contemplative houses of women. Since their federations have no authority over individual houses, autonomy can pose serious difficulties. More cohesive orders are trying to maintain a monastery in each diocese. In some orders, where

there no support network, declining houses have sometimes shown a lack of vocational discernment in accepting new members; when such houses close, it can be difficult for their newer members to integrate into other communities. In some cases where vocations have been sought from other countries, there is an imbalance between a few aged native members and a larger number of younger sisters for whom the country and its culture are foreign.

− Within the Order of Cistercians legislation differs from one Congregation to another. In some Congregations in Europe houses are reduced in rank as their numbers decrease: abbeys can become priories and autonomous houses can become dependent houses. In some cases houses have been temporarily deprived of their autonomy to allow the Congregation to intervene and solve a particular problem.

− Among the Benedictines in the United States, declining houses are sometimes helped by larger houses in ways that imply some loss of autonomy (for instance in the management of finances or the formation of novices). In cases where a community continues to decline in spite of efforts to help it, congregational presidents and their councils have the authority to intervene and, if necessary, close the house.

It should also be noted that some of our own practices within the OCSO involve a relative reduction or loss of autonomy. The provision in ST 79.B on the suspension of the right to receive novices, although not necessarily intended for this purpose, has been used in several cases involving declining communities. In communities where none of the members are eligible to be elected superior, the suspension of an election and the appointment of a superior *ad nutum* is, to some degree, a reduction of that community's autonomy, given that the community depends on the Father Immediate to provide an appointed superior. The current project of "a community of communities" among the houses of monks in Ireland implies some loss of autonomy (e.g., in economic management, vocational discernment, and formation) for the houses that opt to participate.

PART 4: POSSIBLE WAYS FORWARD

If the Central Commission of 2016 considers it opportune, work could already begin on a draft of a Statute or pastoral guideline be presented at the 2017 General Chapter. At this point, however, the work would need to be limited to stages 1–3 as outlined earlier in this paper. Any significant propositions regarding communities in terminal decline (stage 4) would involve interpreting or revising the current Cst 67.

A possible approach for the 2017 General Chapter would be to give priority to the question of the autonomy of communities in the terminal stage of decline. The Order requires foundations to meet certain conditions before attaining autonomy; are there certain minimal conditions without which a seriously diminished community can no longer maintain its autonomy? Only on the basis of such a discussion will it be possible to approach specific points in C. 67.