

“Choose Life!” (Dt. 30,19)

Working paper for the accompaniment of communities that are experiencing an increasing fragility.

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1. In recent years, the General Chapters have frequently addressed the subject of aging communities, along with the lack of vocations and perseverance. Let us recall especially the report of the Dutch Region at the 1993 Chapter, and the report of the General Secretary of Formation at the 1999 Chapter at Lourdes. Also the letter of Dom Bernardo Olivera on “The Appropriate Attitude toward Aging” addressed to the Canadian Region and the Region of the Isles in 1998, and, not to forget, his conference at the General chapter 2002 on this subject.

Several Regional Conferences—Canada, Holland, Isles, France South West, North and Central Europe, USA—have likewise approached this subject from different perspectives. The Abbot Generals and many Father Immediates have been involved with this subject in various ways, by special Regular Visitations, by taking part in Regional or even special Meetings, and by creating “commissions for the future”. Many creative solutions have been made during these years (see working paper GC 2014) to accompany communities with increasing fragility.

Since the General Chapters of 2005 the focus shifts from precarious communities because of aging toward fragile communities. The Order doesn’t want to see fragility any longer as a calamity but as a challenge towards the transmission of life even when a community has to be closed. Recent documents by the Magisterium affirm the Order in this attitude, especially the document *Vultum Dei Quaerere*.

Every community in the Order, in every continent, may have to face an increasing fragility at a certain moment in its history. It is important in that case not to withdraw in an isolation justified by a false conception of the community’s autonomy, but to see oneself "as part of a true communion which is constantly open to encounter, dialogue, attentive listening and mutual assistance" (cf. VDQ 29). The Charter of Charity also teaches us to look for and to accept concrete assistance "that we may live by one charity" (CC III.2).

2. What do we mean by fragile communities? It is true that every life, including the religious life, is fragile. But still there are objective criteria in order to measure an increase in fragility. In 2002 Dom Bernardo Olivera offered us the following list:

- The last solemn profession was more than 12 years ago.
- The average age of the community is over 70.
- There are less than 12 members.
- More than 5 need special health care.
- The community's attitude is more resigned than hopeful.
- There are no plans for the future.
- Rather than unity, there is tolerant coexistence.
- Those in positions of responsibility hold two or three offices.
- There is a lack of means and personnel for formation.
- At the Opus Dei, attendance is low and quality is poor.
- *Conversatio* is mostly a matter of will-power and/or is lightened by various dispensations.
- Services and livelihood depend on lay help.
- The economy depends on pensions.
- The buildings are disproportionately large.

During several regional meetings and General Chapters people have tried to complete this list. This shows that fragility is not a static concept and that the context of an individual community should always be taken into account.

Besides Dom Bernardo's list, article 8.1 of *Vultum Dei Quaerere* is also helpful to become aware of an increasing fragility. "Juridical autonomy needs to be matched by a genuine autonomy of life. This entails a certain, even minimal, number of sisters, provided that the majority are not elderly, the vitality needed to practice and spread the charism, a real capacity to provide for formation and governance, dignity and quality of liturgical, fraternal and spiritual life, sign value and participation in life of the local Church, self-sufficiency and a suitably appointed monastery building. These criteria ought to be considered comprehensively and in an overall perspective".

As a conclusion we can say that a community is fragile when during a long time there are problems in the area of governance, formation, average age, the number of its members and/or the economy.

THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

3. First of all it is the responsibility of every community together with its superior to look realistically at their situation. 'Realistically' doesn't mean only from a human point of view, but especially from a point of view of faith. An experience of fragility should be accepted as an invitation of the Lord to choose life by entering into the Paschal mystery.

4. The well-being of a community and the quality of the monastic life should be the concern of all the members of a community, "knowing that the good zeal of one is a help to all, whereas bitter zeal is a hindrance" (Cst 16.2). To each one individually spiritual gifts are given according to God's versatile grace. By sharing these gifts the brothers and sisters cooperate with the Spirit in constructing the community.

5. When a community is confronted with an increasing fragility it is encouraged to face the situation honestly. 'In a spirit of docility to the voice of the Holy Spirit' they try to discuss the situation "humbly and forthrightly" (cf. Cst 36.1). After all everyone is called to mutual care, collaboration and obedience. "The light of faith is especially necessary in these times in order to see that, through these difficult periods, one's heart is being formed by the personal (and communal) experience of Christ's cross, death and resurrection" (Ratio 54).

6. Facing the reality of a community, in faith, truth and love, "can take the form of community dialogues, meetings of the Council, or other ways apt to stimulate the collaboration of all" (cf. Stat. RV 14). Communities shouldn't be afraid to make use of external help in this process. Although we should have confidence in the Holy Spirit working in our own midst, the desire to solve our own problems can be a dangerous pitfall (cf. Ratio 54).

7. Creativity in seeking a solution is needed in situations of increasing fragility. It may be necessary to ask for exceptions to the existing legislation. Instead of changing legislation when a certain law is unhelpful in a specific case, a dispensation could be asked for from the competent authority. Help from the Law Commission can be useful in this matter. It is recommendable to look for specialized help as well as for collaboration with the local church and other religious institutes.

THE LOCAL SUPERIOR

8. In listening to the voice of the Holy Spirit the local superior has a special role and responsibility, first of all by his/her prayer and pastoral care. With the required tact and discretion the superior will encourage the brothers/sisters to face the real state of the community (cf. Ratio 54). In doing so the superior tries to take care "that no one may be troubled or vexed in the house of God" (cf. Cst 35; RB 31:19).

9. Confronted with an increasing fragility the local superior will involve the brothers and sisters by means of an open dialogue in taking decisions regarding the well-being of the community (cf. Cst 36.1). By giving conferences on a regular basis and by personal conversations the superior can help the brothers and sisters to face the community's reality.

10. An open and trusting relationship with the Father Immediate as well as with the superiors in the region can enable the local superior to share his burden. Spiritual accompaniment or other forms of accompaniment are important for the superior especially in times of the increasing fragility of the community.

THE FATHER IMMEDIATE

11. "The Father Immediate is to watch over the progress of his daughter houses. While respecting the autonomy of the daughter house he is to help and support the abbess in the exercise of her pastoral charge and to foster concord in the community" (Cst 74.1). The Father Immediate/visitor helps the local superior in seeking solutions to particular difficulties and refers to others if necessary (cf Ratio 66).

12. In a situation of increasing fragility in his daughterhouse he must have the courage to help the superior and the community to face the problem. The regular visitation is the most suitable instrument for this purpose (Stat RV 15).

13. Beside the points mentioned in the Statute on the Regular Visitation §16 the Father Immediate/visitor should pay special attention to whether there is a genuine autonomy in the area of governance, economy, formation and the number of its members. The criteria named in this document under no 2 can be of help.

14. Especially in a situation of increasing fragility the Father Immediate/visitor proceeds with great tact and charity, in a spirit of faith in the work of the Spirit in each person and each community. He/she will suggest to the community opportune ways to stimulate its growth and to help it to resolve its difficulties. The Father Immediate/visitor will do all in his power to get an objective idea of the real situation of the community (cf Stat RV 19).

15. The superior and the community will accept "in a spirit of faith and communion with the whole Order" the vision of the Father Immediate/visitor and they will reflect on their response and on how to put into practice any recommendations (cf Stat RV 25).

16. If a Father Immediate/visitor finds that the community doesn't share his vision of the present situation of the community he mentions the fact to the Abbot General and/or brings it to the notice of the General Chapter. The Father Immediate/visitor can also enlist the help of the superiors of the Region or of neighboring monasteries.

THE OTHER COMMUNITIES OF THE ORDER

17. Autonomous monasteries of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance, spread throughout different parts of the world, are joined together by the bond of charity and by a common tradition of doctrine and law. Their superiors are united by the bond of solicitude for the welfare of each community (C. 71.1-2). The communities of the Order collaborate and give mutual help in many ways, having due regard to their healthy differences and the complementarity of their gifts (C. 72.1).

18. All the communities of the Order share a responsibility for the formation of new candidates, in particular for new foundations and especially those made in young Churches or in isolated regions. They exercise this responsibility by sharing professors, lecturers or novice directors etc. (cf Ratio 72).

19. Communities experiencing fragility in the area of formation are encouraged to seek collaboration with other communities either within the Order or within other monastic Orders (cf Ratio 72). The central and/or regional secretary of formation may play a mediating role (cf Ratio 70-71).

SEVERAL COMMISSIONS

A. THE LAW COMMISSION

20. In all matters concerning canon law the Law Commission of the Order can assist the Order's responsible organs in seeking creative and life giving solutions for specific situations of fragile communities (cf Stat RV 1).

B. THE REGIONAL MEETING

21. Regional meetings are elected occasions for fostering communion and fraternal co-operation between monasteries within a geographical area and in the Order as a whole, and for organizing co-operative projects. They can also assist the houses in facing the challenges of an increasing fragility and in trying to respond to them within the particular culture of the region (cfCst 81; Ratio 69). Particularly communities having to deal with an increasing fragility on the level of the number of its members, formation and economy can be assisted in many ways by the support and the co-operation within the region.

C. COMMISSION OF FINANCIAL AID

22. A community experiencing vulnerability in the area of its economy can, with the knowledge of the Father Immediate, appeal to the Commission of Aid in accordance with the *Carta Caritatis*.

23. This Commission of Aid, together with the local superior and the Father Immediate will do all within its power to look into structural solutions to the economic vulnerability, so that a community may continue as an economically autonomous house according to its rank. The local superior and the community will do all in their power to collaborate in good understanding with the members of the commission and they will take to heart its recommendations.

24. All the houses of the Order are obliged to share of their abundance, be it ever so little, for the support of economically weaker communities by donating a sum to the commission of Aid instituted by the General Chapter.

D. COMMISSION OF THE FUTURE

25. Experience has taught us that setting up a commission of the future may be a great help for a community facing an increasing fragility. A community itself can, through the word of its superior, ask for such a commission, but also the Father Immediate, the Abbot General and the General Chapter may encourage a community to set up a commission of the future.
26. Care should be taken that the commission be composed of at least the local superior, a delegation of the community, the Father Immediate and a member of the regional meeting.
27. A procedure that is transparent to all those concerned is of great importance for the success of the commission. The commission gives a regular report of its work to the community. If the Father Immediate is not a member of the commission he has to be kept informed.
28. Every commission of the future does well to draw up statutes that regulate its work and its procedure.
29. The Abbot General is informed of the setting up of a commission of the future and of its proceeding.

THE GENERAL CHAPTER AND ITS COMMISSIONS

30. By virtue of tradition it belongs to the tasks of the general Chapter "to be informed of the state of each community and to exercise pastoral care in its regard" (St 79A.b; cf CC 7).
31. The commissions of the general Chapter charged with the study of a community's house report have to pay special attention to a community in a situation of increasing fragility. The local superior, the Father Immediate and other persons involved should be carefully listened to in order to be able to exercise the pastoral care of the General Chapter.
32. The commissions of the General Chapter follow the rules given by the General Chapter when treating of communities in situations of increasing fragility. The General Chapter can suspend the autonomy of a monastery, temporarily or permanently.
33. The follow-up of the decisions taken by a Mixed Commission will normally be made by the Father Immediate. If this is not opportune, the Mixed Commission will determine who will be responsible for the follow-up (cf 2.2.3. study of the house report GC2014). A regular report should be given to the Abbot General and his council.

THE ABBOT GENERAL

34. Communities facing an increasing fragility will receive the special attention of the Abbot General who "is a bond of unity within the Order" (Cst 82.1). He will follow up the process of such communities with more than normal attention, respecting the responsibilities of all the parties concerned. By giving a ready ear to the needs of the community, the superior, the Father Immediate and everyone who is involved, he fosters life.

35. "He has the power to dispense in all that pertains to the proper law of the Order" (Cst 82.4). "He cannot make decisions about the goods or the persons of communities", but in case of necessity he can take temporary measures (Cst 82.5).

36. If a community doesn't accept the vision repeatedly pointed out to them in visitation cards or other interventions, the Abbot General can always make use of his right to make the Regular Visitation at all the monasteries of the Order either personally or through a delegate. An additional visitation may be useful to help the community overcome an impasse (cf St 82.2D).

37. The Abbot General can alert the community in question, the local superior, the Father Immediate/visitor, the regional meeting, the General Chapter to the increasing fragility.

CONCLUSION

38. In order to allow the Cistercian life "to remain a vital part of the Church, of significance for the community of believers, it is necessary to take the right measures activating a system of dependence between active and vital communities in the Order and those who, although are no longer able to be an autonomous community, may still be a valuable presence" (S. Paciolla, O.Cist).

39. "If the situation of increasing fragility seems to be irreversible, the painful as well as necessary solution is: the suppression of the monastery, applying the same criterion as mentioned by the legislator for the foundation of a monastery namely the benefit of the Church and of the institute" (S. Paciolla, O.Cist).

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