

On the Question of Fathers Immediate

US Regional Meeting – Gethsemani 8/26/2021

In accordance with the Charter of Charity, Cistercian communities are united by the bond of filiation. Traditionally filiation has its juridical form in the function of the Father Immediate. Paternity and filiation are expressed through mutual assistance and support. (C.73)

In order that the bond of filiation can remain a living expression of the Cistercian charism in our present context, we need to look courageously at the difficulties which confront us, seek their causes and take the measures that are needed to resolve them. In new circumstances we must find new ways of remaining faithful to the spirit of the Charter of Charity, which from the beginning inspired the ‘new monastery’ and its institutions. Our communities are born of the same transmission of life and have the responsibility to nurture and transmit that life in their turn, whatever the poverty of their situation. (Working Paper: GC-2017)

Let's begin with the obvious. Anyone attempting to follow the somewhat scattered discussions & documents around the question of the Father Immediate quickly realizes this conversation has been going on for a surprisingly long time. Dom Jean-Marc of Bellefontaine in his introduction to the **Presentation on the Question of the Father Immediate** (GC-2017, 12.3) begins by reflecting *“The question of the Father Immediate and of filiation has been on the agenda of the GC for 10 years, ever since the Central Commission of Cardena (2007) had asked the Law Commission to write a working paper on “The structures of the Order and their interactions” for the MGM of 2008. Since then, in one way or another, the question of the Father Immediate has always appeared on the agenda of the GC.”*

Under the heading: **Recent History of the Question** the Central Commission at Roscrea-2016 (**4B.1**) lists these significant historical points in the discussion.

- 2008 General Chapters had begun thinking about the question of the Father Immediate.

- 2011 General Chapters – all mixed Commissions reflected on the role of the Father Immediate and the challenges he faces in carrying out his ministry. Their reflections showed that certain questions required more clarification at the next General Chapter.
A vote was taken to ask that proposals made by the Commissions be studied at the following GC of 2014.
- 2014 General Chapter – a study by Ordinary Procedure of the Regular Visitation of the Father Immediate was put on the program but there was no time to study the question.

It is in the Minutes for the Central Commission (Roscrea-2016, 4B.2) that I discovered the clearest presentation of **The Situation of the Question of Father Immediate** in preparation for the discussion at the 2017 General Chapter.

- There was a pressing need to explore this topic by some Regions and they requested that the question of the Fathers Immediate be studied at the 2017 General Chapter and that the difficulties of finding Fathers Immediate be presented also (USA, ISLES).
- It is not only a problem of one Region: Oriens, with distance and difficulty of language; Europe with fragile communities; and Africa with many complex situations. **ALL Regions**, in fact, are impacted by this problem.
- In view of the difficulty in finding Fathers Immediate and the increased numbers of delegated Fathers Immediate, this topic has become quite **urgent!**
- There is not a uniform model for the role of Father Immediate. The experiences differ depending on the Region of the Order.
- The special case of several **Houses in Africa**, especially in Nigeria, was discussed. There were requests from several Regions that the many unresolved situations of these communities be concretely addressed at the 2017 GC. Some at this stage in their history do not have a Father Immediate. The question of the Father Immediate is extremely complicated in developing countries. ***It was noted that in the last two years many abbots have been approached asking if they would fulfill this role in some of the African houses but for various reasons are unable to accept.***

Three votes emerged from the Central Commission at Roscrea which directly impacted the discussion of this question at the 2017 General Chapter.

VOTE 23

WE WISH THAT THE QUESTION OF THE FATHERS IMMEDIATE BE STUDIED AT THE 2017 GENERAL CHAPTER IN VIEW OF THE NUMBER OF DELEGATED FATHERS IMMEDIATE AND THE DIFFICULTY OF FINDING FATHERS IMMEDIATE.

(unanimously accepted)

VOTE 24

WE WISH THAT THE QUESTION OF FATHERS IMMEDIATE BE TREATED BY EXTRAORDINARY PROCEDURE.

(Yes 23, Abs 1)

VOTE 25

WE WISH THAT A WORKING PAPER BE DRAWN UP EXAMINING THE CURRENT SITUATION AND PROPOSING CREATIVE SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE.

(unanimously accepted)

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF FATHERS IMMEDIATE AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

(Working Paper requested by Roscrea CC, 2016)

We will briefly focus on three sections of this Working Paper.

Actual Problems: section III

- A growing number of monasteries which have several/many daughter houses no longer have the resources to be able to fulfill the responsibilities of being a mother house. Note the precarious situation of several monasteries with large filiations (Melleray, Bricquebec, Mount Melleray)
- The incapacity to take care of their daughter houses can happen rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Someone dies, an abbot resigns, a *superior ad nutum* is named without being given the task of caring for the daughter houses, etc.
- The daughter houses are left to themselves. A temporary delegated Father Immediate has to be found and appointed, hoping that he and his community will want to accept the responsibility to further the Cistercian development of the “new daughter”. The daughter house may not want to accept the delegated Father Immediate that is proposed.

- Sometimes the request to be a delegated Father Immediate is refused because the situation of the abbot's own monastery is too fragile – or he feels incapable of confronting a new situation, perhaps more so if in another culture.
- **Of special Note:** The particular needs of “spontaneous monasteries” that were admitted into the Order without the normal process of foundation by a motherhouse and are the responsibility of the Order that accepted them to provide a Father Immediate and motherhouse.

Possible Proposals: section V

The Working Paper of the *ad hoc commission* (D.Timothy Kelly, M.Martha of Gedona, D. Olivier of Citeaux) began by considering three proposals that have been mentioned most often.

- The General Chapter could be given the power to choose and assign a new Father Immediate when necessary, which the abbot and his community would accept under obedience, *ad experimentum*. After 3 years there would be a vote of the two communities and the General Chapter to confirm the permanent change of paternity.
- The larger filiations of some monasteries could be divided up more evenly among the houses of the Order. At present, 12 monasteries have from 5 – 8 daughter houses, 5 have 4 daughter houses, 14 have 3, 9 have 2, 19 have 1, 34 have none. It is suggested that there be a limit of 3 or 4 daughter houses and the others could be adopted by monasteries that have less than 2. This could be done by decisions of the conventual chapters of the motherhouses, the daughter houses and the new motherhouses, and would need to be confirmed by the General Chapter.
- Separate the role of financial support from the role of paternity. All houses of the Order would need to agree to contribute all funds available for such purposes to the Commission of Aid rather than distributing their funds themselves. A community of limited financial resources would be able to accept responsibility for a daughter house.

Possibilities that we could try to implement without changes in our legislation or structure: section VI

“What is clearly emerging in the situation of increasing fragility is that the way forward is the path of collaboration.” (Conference of the Abbot General GC 2014)

- **Seek collaboration from within the motherhouse.** An overburdened abbot of a motherhouse could, with explicit agreement of the daughter house, delegate the role of Father Immediate and the full pastoral care of a daughter house to a prior, a former superior or other competent member of the motherhouse community, while retaining canonical jurisdiction.
- **Seek collaboration within a filiation.** An overburdened motherhouse of a large filiation could delegate visitations to certain daughter houses to superiors of other houses in his filiation who have some acquaintance with the sister house.
- **Seek collaboration within the Region.** Paternity and visitations that need to be delegated could be given to houses of the same region with the coordination of the President of the Region.
- **Seek collaboration with the nuns.**
To relieve the burden of Fathers Immediate, houses of nuns could ask for delegated Abbess Visitors for 2 out of every 3 regular visitations, with the Father Immediate assuring the canonical link and making the visitation every 6 years. This is already possible under our current legislation.
NOTE: A daughter house of nuns could ask the Father Immediate to be given a house of nuns as its Mother Immediate. (The Father Immediate would retain jurisdictional responsibility.)
- **A special and permanent visitor for the houses of a particular Region.** (Nigeria, West Africa or all of Africa) could be appointed and given abbatial powers. This was done by the GC of 1933 for the Far East because of difficulties of making regular visitations. The prior of Mont des Cats was named to the charge. This shows that a non-superior could be given the abbatial powers for visitations and general overseeing of houses in special situations.

Echoes from the 2017 General Chapter

The austere agenda of this Chapter was evident from the Working Papers. The first paper, on the need to review the Order's structure of Fathers Immediate, observed that reflection on the problem of Fathers Immediate increased our awareness not just of fragile communities, but also of the fragility of the Order as such. It seems we are at a moment in which we are called to a new consciousness of our situation, to seek the spiritual roots of our problems, to admit our mistakes and to pose ourselves questions. (Synthesis of GC 2017; Sr Lucia & Fr Erik)

I deliberately use the word “echoes” in the title above because my sense from reviewing the Commission reports & the discussions in the **Minutes of the Sessions** is continued reflections on **section VI of the Working Paper**. This is confirmed by **vote 77** (GC-2017) which was the only vote dealing directly with the larger issue of structures of filiation:

WE ENCOURAGE THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE PROPOSALS OF N.VI OF THE WORKING PAPER ON THE FATHER IMMEDIATE (cf p.32 of the General Booklet).
(YES 155 NO4 ABS4)

Comments from the Commissions: GC-2017

- *In general our commission favors preserving the current structures regarding filiation and focusing on finding solutions for concrete situations until the next GC.* Comm 1
- *We wish to explore how Regional structures might be used to greater effect for visitations and pastoral support...* Comm 2
- *Do we accept the creation of special visitors for some group of monasteries or for a region in case of necessity?* Comm13: YES 10 ABS 2
- *We advise creativity rather than legislation. This creativity is the responsibility of both motherhouse and daughter house.*
- *We encourage all available possibilities for delegation, etc., to be gathered into **the Vade mecum** for Fathers Immediate. At present they are scattered among many sources.* Comm 4
- *1st vote: We are favorable to the idea that Abbesses could make the regular Visitation in the houses of monks, accompanied or not by an abbot* YES 12 Unanimous Comm 10

- *2nd vote: We are open to the possibility that a study be undertaken in view of a creation of a structure of filiation parallel to that of the monks, for the nuns which would imply the possibility of having Mothers Immediate. YES 12 Unanimous Comm 10*

The main emphasis and focus of the GC-2017 was the setting up of the **ad hoc commission on Fathers Immediate** to look for solutions to individual problematic situations in the area of Fathers Immediate:

- *The concrete role of our ad hoc Commission is to propose names of Fathers Immediate who might exercise this charge until the next GC.*
- *ST 73B specifies that all changes in filiation must be discussed by the communities involved and by the GC. If no agreement is reached the decision rests with the GC.*
- *During the next GC of 2020, it will be the Chapter's task to approve new motherhouses and new filiations should occasions arise.*
- *Page 36 of the General Booklet for the GC lists 22 problematic situations. A revised list raised this number to 27.*

Please see Appendix XXI at the end of this paper. The *ad hoc commission on Fathers Immediate: list of communities who will experience a new situation *ad experimentum.** It is important to note that these experiments have not yet been evaluated.

VOTE 60 (GC-2017)

WE CONFIDE TO THE FATHERS IMMEDIATE AND TO EACH SUPERIOR CONCERNED THE SUGGESTIONS OF THE AD HOC COMMISSION ON THE FATHER IMMEDIATE OF THE GC 2017 AND WE RECOMMEND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION.

YES 149 NO 4 ABS 2

Questions for discussion:

- 1) Are we going to continue plugging cracks in the present structure of Father Immediate and filiation through temporary means? In other words, do we agree on the urgency that structural changes are needed?
- 2) If yes, what are some creative ideas that we envision to adapt the traditional structure of Father Immediate and filiation, to meet the changing needs of our monasteries right now?

3) What concrete votes do we want to take for the Central Commission meeting?

Some examples:

+ That an *ad hoc commission* be appointed to do a working paper for the GC-2022 that lists possible changes to the present structure of Father Immediate and filiation (see **Vote 77**, GC-2017).

+ That the study of the Father Immediate question be treated by extraordinary procedure.

+ That an *ad hoc commission* be appointed at the GC whose work would be to synthesize the concrete suggestions from the Commissions.

+ We urge that the GC-2022 give sufficient time and energy for discussion of this topic.

Appendix XXI

Ad hoc Commission on Fathers Immediate:

List of communities who will experience a new situation *ad experimentum*

Community	Father Immediate	Delegate Father Immediate & Exercise of Pastoral Accompaniment
Abakaliki	Mount Melleray	Bolton + Glencairn
Ajimu	Bricquebec	Cardeña
Awhum*	Genesee	Novo Mundo + the Prior of Genesee
Bamenda	Mount Saint Bernard	
Bethlehem	Mount Melleray	
Bolton	Roscrea	Mount Melleray
Bricquebec	<i>Melleray</i>	Pontifical Commissary + Commission of Aid
Glencairn	Mount Melleray	
Illah	Genesee	D Armand + the Prior of Genesee <i>or</i> Novo Mundo + the Prior of Genesee
Imari	Bricquebec	Cardeña
Koutaba	Aiguebelle	Pontifical Commissary + Mokoto
Maria Frieden	<i>Mariawald</i>	Oelenberg + D Armand
Mellifont	Mount Melleray	
Mount Melleray	<i>Melleray</i>	Val Notre-Dame
Nasu	Bricquebec	Cardeña
New Melleray	Mount Melleray	Guadalupe
Nishinomiya	Bricquebec	Cardeña
Nsugbe	Bamenda	Mistassini
Nunraw	Roscrea	Mount Melleray
Phare	Bricquebec	Tarrowarra
Roscrea	Mount Melleray	
Tarrowarra	Roscrea	Snowmass
Tautra	Roscrea	Caldey

* In the case of Awhum, the names proposed come from the Father Immediate; we do not know what decisions have been reached by the ad hoc commission on Bamenda and we have not met with Dom Matthew

- Some houses have recovered their Father Immediate after a term of delegation lasting until the Chapter (Sept-Fons) or upon the disappearance of another house that exercised the paternity by delegation (Laval).

- We have not had time to address the question of houses who have a large filiation. Twelve houses have more than 5 daughter houses.