



3rd Single General Chapter

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Papal Audience: Greeting to the Holy Father, Abbot General

Most Holy Father!

I am not speaking only for myself, but also on behalf of the members of our General Chapter and of all those who provides services at it, when I say it is a great joy for me to thank you from the heart for having made it possible for us to spend some time in your company.

We come to you, the successor of Peter, to strengthen our faith and to receive the light and encouragement that your person and your word can offer us.

And we have a request. From your perspective as a Jesuit and as a pastor with broad experience—not to mention everything that has followed since your access to the See of Peter—we kindly ask you to share with us something of your vision of monastic life, your expectations of this life, and how you conceive our mission in today's Church.

At present, in many of our monasteries, we can easily witness responsibility, good will, and an authentically lived monastic life. But, in a growing number of these same monasteries, new members are few and as a result the brothers and sisters there are often overburdened despite all the adaptations and renewals accomplished. This can affect the health of some or simply make them feel discouraged, without many possibilities of change in the horizon. How can we live such situations in the joy of the Gospel?

Finally, in a world that is changing so swiftly, there are certain areas in which our deficiencies are often more in evidence than our competences: I speak, for instance, of how we can attract new members, how we can relate to them with true understanding, and how we can engage in a process of discernment adequate to our way of life. Nevertheless, the Gospel remains the source of a truly human life. Discovering where God is leading us, deciding the things we should change and how to do it, reading the signs of the times: these are some of the issues that arise.

Most Holy Father! Now we gladly await your words. Many heartfelt thanks!



Papal Audience
Address of Pope Francis to the Order
On the occasion of the Papal Audience, 23rd September, 2017

Below is the Vatican Press Office – provided translation of the Pope’s address to those present:

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you with joy on the occasion of your General Chapter. I thank each one of you for this visit, starting with the Abbot General who has acted as interpreter for all of you, also illustrating the purpose and objectives of your assembly. Through you I would like to send a cordial greeting to the brothers and sisters of your monasteries throughout various countries. I go with my heart and mind to your silent cloisters, from which the prayer for the Church and for the world continues ceaselessly. And I thank the Lord for the irreplaceable presence of the monastic communities, which represent a spiritual richness and a constant call to seek first of all “the things up above”, so as to live earthly realities to the right extent.

In these days of reflection and exchange of experiences, you are called upon to identify goals and paths to live with greater authenticity your vocation and your consecration, taking into account the needs of the present moment, so as to be witnesses of assiduous prayer, of sobriety, of unity in charity.

Your contemplative life is characterized by assiduous prayer, an expression of your love for God and reflection of a love that embraces all humanity. Following the example of Saint Benedict, you do not place anything before the opus Dei: I urge you to give great importance to meditation on the Word of God, especially the lectio divina, which is a source of prayer and school of contemplation. To be contemplative requires a faithful and persevering journey, to become men and women of prayer, ever more pervaded by love for the Lord and transformed into his friends. They are not “professionals” – in a negative sense – but lovers of prayer, considering fidelity external to the practices and norms that regulate it and mark the moments not as the end, but as a means of progressing in the personal relationship with God. In this way you become teachers and witnesses who offer Him the sacrifice of praise and intercede for the necessities and the salvation of the people. And at the same time your monasteries continue to be privileged places where you can find true peace and genuine happiness that only God, our safe refuge, can give.

From the very beginning, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance have been characterized by a great sobriety of life, in their conviction that it was a valid help in concentrating on the essential and in reaching more easily the joy of the spousal encounter with Christ. This element of spiritual and existential simplicity preserves all its worth as testimony in today’s cultural context, which too often leads to the desire for ephemeral goods and illusory artificial paradises.

This lifestyle also favors your interior and exterior relationships with the monastery. You do not live like hermits in a community, but as cenobites in a unique desert. God manifests Himself in your personal solitude, as well as in the solidarity that joins the members of the community. You are alone and separated from the world to advance on the path of divine intimacy; at the same time, you are called to make known and to share this spiritual experience with other brothers and sisters in a constant balance between personal contemplation, union with the liturgy of the Church, and welcome to those who seek moments of silence so as to be introduced into the experience of living with God. Your Order, like every religious institute, is a gift made by God to the Church; therefore, it is necessary that he lives well inserted into the communal dimension of the Church itself. I encourage you to be a qualified witness of the search for God, a school of prayer, and a school of charity for all.

The “Charter of charity”, a document that sets out the ways of your vocation duly authenticated by the Church, establishes the essential features of the General Chapter, called to be a sign of unity in charity for the whole Institute. This unity in charity is the paradigm of every religious family called upon to follow Christ more closely in the dimension of community life, and is expressed first in your

individual monastic communities in a climate of true and cordial fraternity, according to the words of the Psalm: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (133,1). In this regard, the invitation of Saint Benedict is always present: "No one is disturbed or saddened in the house of God".

Unity in charity is also expressed in fidelity to spiritual heritage, that is, to the identity of your Order. In this regard, the General Chapter is a propitious occasion for renewing, in a climate of dialogue and mutual listening, the communion of intent in seeking the will of God. I urge you to question yourselves with serenity and truth about the quality of your testimony of life, dynamic fidelity to the charism, on how it has been lived by your monastic communities, as well as by single monks and nuns. The safeguarding of the charism is indeed one of the main responsibilities of the General Chapter and it is a vital experience of the present, situated between grateful memory of the past and the prospects for a future of hope.

Your Order, in the events of its history, has known times of grace and moments of difficulty; however, it has always persevered in faith in following Christ, with the objective of the glory of God and the good of the people. Following in the wake of your spiritual tradition, you are able to read the current state of the Order in its moments of light and darkness, and in the newness of the Spirit, identify with courage new possibilities and opportunities to bear witness to your charism in the Church and in society today.

I hope that this witness will be made even more eloquent by an increasingly organic coordination between the various branches of the Order.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, model of every consecrated life, accompany the works of your Chapter and the path of the Order with her maternal intercession. With such vows, as I ask you to pray for me, I impart to you my apostolic blessing, which I extend to all the monks and nuns of your communities. Thank you.



Homily for the Opening Mass of the Chapter (Dom Eamon)

In the opening words of his letter to the Colossians we learn something of the joy of Saint Paul as he rejoices in the Christians of Colossae, the saints, because of their faith in Christ, their love for the community of believers and their hope for a future with God in heaven. Like Paul himself they have understood what God's grace really is – the joy of being saved by God, not because of anything they have done but out of God's gracious love for them. The message of God's love for us is the truth that possesses Saint Paul and so he is so happy when others can know what it is to be loved by God. He can trust in the goodness of God because he has known it in his life. And he can offer it to others with assurance. This is not a theory Paul is talking about but an experience, an experience that has taken over his whole life. He knows that he is loved by God, and that is his life, and he wants to share it with others so that they may have true life. And like Jesus before him he is one sent by God – an apostle of the goodness of God for all that he has made.

Paul's intensity can at times be a deterrent for us who may feel somewhat overwhelmed by it. The Gospel reading offers us in the person of Jesus a gentler entry of God into our lives. Jesus comes to us, sent by God indeed and God himself present but a healing presence and we see him healing Peter's mother in law. But we need to remember too that this healing is a struggle against evil. The fever is "rebuked" and leaves her so she is made whole and well and she puts herself at the service of Jesus and his companions. This shows us in a more modest key how the Good News frees us up for service. It is a response to the goodness of God towards us. At sunset, after the heat and the labour of the day people bring their suffering and diseased friends to Jesus for healing and he cures them and delivers them from evil. But next morning he is on his way because he has a mission, he was sent to proclaim the Good News and he must move on. Jesus follows God's agenda.

In Jesus and in Paul the servant of Jesus we see the Spirit of God at work, preaching, teaching, healing and giving new life. We pray that the same Spirit may make our service pleasing to God, bless our Chapter, our work and our fellowship and accomplish his purposes for us.



Conference of the Abbot General

"The Order in 2017 and Some Horizons for the Future"

My dear sisters and brothers it is usual for the Abbot General to say something about the Order but how to say it was the question for me, without doing a tour of the world and talking about statistics which we all have a general idea of anyway. The idea came to me to speak of two communities, one of them a traditional community and the other its small prefoundation. My experience of visiting them this year gave me a perspective that I didn't have on previous visits. Perhaps this sharing might contribute something to the reflection and sharing we are supposed to do today as we begin this General Chapter.

In May of this year I made the Visitation at Cîteaux and Munkeby its prefoundation in Norway, assisted by the abbess of Rivet, France. There are 26 monks in the community, 24 solemnly professed and two postulants, with 6 solemnly professed absent – 3 of them in Norway). They have two familiars and two guest monks so there are 24 living in the community. While decreasing in numbers there is good vocational movement since the early years of this century. There is a good age spread in the community with a good core of able people and some younger ones. They have a good liturgy, a responsible work ethic and lead a serious and simple monastic life.

They have a dairy farm and forests and the milk produced goes for cheese production in the abbey. They have a shop where the cheese is much sought after. While practically nothing from the 12th century remains they have buildings from the 13th 15th and 18th (as well as 19th and 20th) centuries. How to manage these buildings is an issue the community is facing in collaboration with members of the Cistercian family?

The evening before the Visitation I asked myself the question: what did we ask them to do at the last Visitation and how did they respond? I was quite impressed with the result. We had recommended:

A change of officers; the need for a dialogue with the brothers of Munkeby; to get some outside help for their own dialogues; a better organization of work; to do something to improve the entrance to the monastery. And all of these points were addressed: there were six changes of officers – some of these requested by the brothers themselves for one reason or another: among them the prior; NM; guest master; infirmarian and some changes with the cellarer's department. The dialogue with the brothers of Munkeby had to do with misunderstandings or disagreements over the years about the foundation which we considered needed dialogue. And so the brothers came from Munkeby for a week, and with outside facilitation and discernment there was a very fruitful dialogue though not without its difficulties and tensions. Some brothers at Cîteaux also felt that their own dialogues needed to be a bit more spontaneous and free and again help was sought and availed of. The organization of work was related to a diminishing work force, the formation needs of a brother responsible for the cheese production, and the needs of their industry, as well as the overall complexity of managing a business in today's world. An audit was done but as far as I know the options are still under consideration. Other elements that are worth noting are: the programme – seekers of happiness – a programme which allows guests and possible candidates to live in the community and share the life of the monks for a period which gets steady responses; they now have also lectio divina weekends a few times a year in the guesthouse which have a good following and are working well – guided by two of the brothers, I think; the community has also made a house on their property available for refugees who are managed by the local government with a monk as contact person. They have also made contact with other monastic groups for ecclesial occasions as well as ecumenical encounters. With this snap-shot we can get some idea of the elements that engage the life of a traditional monastery in today's world. The things I note here are: they took the Visitation seriously; the community spoke and the visitors listened to them. The abbot and community listened to what the visitors had to say and acted on it. They are also listening to the Church in terms of responding to the needs of the world today: the monastery is open to people and also showing openness to the poor (and to other religious and monastic

communities). But they are struggling too with living in today's world as monks: earning a living; dealing with their heritage; learning and willing to learn about living together and providing space for people and the issues of vocation and formation in today's world. This is a community that is alive and what its future holds only God knows but they have a listening ear.

Munkeby is small community (3 monks at the time of our visit) with two brothers present who were interested in transferring to them. One has since made the transfer and I don't know about the other. Founded from Cîteaux in 2009 there were mixed feelings in the community about it though a majority favoured the foundation. The brothers live on a very small property in a timber house in a relatively remote part of Norway. The house has six small but pleasant bedrooms with a tiny chapel a large apse window with a small sacristy, a shower room, a small scriptorium and a kitchen cum dining room as well as a basement where they make their cheese. It is a modern house, warm and comfortable but with very little space. But one feels oneself in the 21st century. Within the house the ambience is that of a family and while we were there we talked at the main meals. But the place is solitary and silent and while there are other houses nearby one sees few people. The brothers are doing well in terms of insertion into the culture and the church in Norway but vocations are few though a few will go a long way there in this community of human proportions. What was interesting in the course of our visit was to hear the observations of the transfers on their experience: they appreciated the balance in the life with time for prayer and reading; the Rule is taken seriously here; the work is discussed daily and the different needs are addressed; once a week they meet for thanksgiving, reconciliation and correction; people are respected, helped and listened to. There is a sort of family atmosphere; there is a sense of shared responsibility; there is an ecumenical dimension and a healthy openness to the local people. The community was just completing a new building (3 rooms for guests, a cheese factory; a kitchen for the guests and a reception and meeting room).

I was struck in a way I was not before by how the building, the numbers, and the new members seemed to fit into this monastery for 21st century people. The buildings were of the time not modernized 19th century and fitted with the people and their aspirations. They made a unity. Again only God knows what the future is for this community but it seemed a monasticism of its time and may well address the needs of the people of our day. The brothers here come with a tradition but they are without the excess baggage of the traditional monastery and can live more simply in our time. The "human regulations" have less weight here it seems while the essential is not lost. In a recent book about him Pope Benedict has a wonderful quotation from Tertullian which runs as follows: "Jesus did not say that I am custom but I am the truth".

In this frame of mind, I would like to offer you now a flavour of a document which I only came across a week ago but which was published early this year in Italian and is now available in English entitled: *New Wine in New Wineskins*. A document published in book form by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. It is the result of a plenary meeting of that Congregation and the fruit of the meetings and sessions held at Rome during the Year of Consecrated Life. It offers guidelines for the consecrated life and its ongoing challenges since Vatican II. I found it a very outspoken and hard-hitting document which addresses many of the difficulties we are dealing with today.

The saying of Jesus ('new wine in new wineskins') is found in the three Synoptic Gospels and emphasizes the newness of the message and person of Jesus. While in Jesus there is continuity with and fulfillment of the promises of God to his people there is also newness and radical change. Traditional religious forms and practices are challenged by the manifestation of God's mercy in the person and practice of Jesus. The way in which Jesus proclaims the kingdom of God is based on the law of freedom. The saying is a call to flexibility in regard to ways of religious practice that become all too easily institutionalized and devoid of the meaning which they once expressed. The document notes that "a renewal process that cannot affect and change the structures, in addition to hearts, will not produce real and lasting change" (p. 15). The document sees the renewal that followed on Vatican II as an expression of this "new wine" that saw new ministries, new forms of government and different expressions of solidarity that were previously unimagined. But this does not mean that old habits and ways of thinking and acting did not continue. This is normal because genuine change is never automatic and it takes time to deal with the inevitable conflict. The work of the Holy Spirit in us is never painless.

The document acknowledges the important role of consecrated life in the new season of openness and dialogue with the world that followed on Vatican II which benefitted the whole Church. But it also acknowledges the fragility and fatigue which it says need to be recognized so that the journey continues but with increased fidelity and creativity. In all of this we need to remember that the document is addressed to all in consecrated life and so concerns itself greatly with ministries that have changed and continue to change due to rapid changes in society. But what it talks about is not foreign to our experience. It mentions the danger of focusing on strategies of survival when what is needed is the freedom to launch new processes. To do this a capacity to foster collaborative effort is needed. What the document aims at is encouraging renewal. It is about having a new aspiration to holiness which is unthinkable without a renewed passion for the Gospel. The second section of the document addresses **ONGOING CHALLENGES**. It notes that every stabilized system tends to resist change and works to maintain its position (“they say the old is good” as Jesus noted). This can be done by concealing inconsistencies or by denying reality and differences in order to keep the peace and so on. Unfortunately, there is much behaviour that is merely formal without true conversion of heart.

The question of **vocation and identity** is looked at because the Congregation is very concerned about the continuously high number of departures from consecrated life, which happens both among young professed and among older members in every cultural and geographic context. While the moment of departure may involve emotional crises the roots of the problem are often the result of an inauthentic community life. What is being taught and what is experienced are so different that it can provoke a crisis of faith. Too much emphasis on work or ministry and not meeting the deeper needs of young members does not help. Often the impression given is that the formation process is more about imparting information than about changing behaviours and how we live. Integrating different cultures can prove a challenge to continuing with classic forms of doing things.

Caring for the **harmonious growth** between the spiritual and the human dimensions requires real attention to people. To be effective formation must be based on strictly personal teaching and not just having one solution for all. It is a matter more of initiation which requires contact between the master and disciple, walking side by side in trust and hope. It must also take place in fraternal life where one learns acceptance of others. Continuous formation gets mention too in terms of the need to develop a culture of it, in that it should be, not just theoretical concepts, but the ability to review and verify the real lived experience within the community.

The final section in the area of challenges considers what it calls “**relation in the humanum**”. I take this to mean relationships as human and personal. Here it talks about three kinds: reciprocity between man and woman; the service of authority and finally relational models. In talking about **men and women** relationships it states that “we are heirs of the ways of life, organizational and governing structures, languages and collective imagination of a mentality that emphasized profound differences between man and woman, to the detriment of their equal dignity” (n. 17). “Despite the progress we have made on this journey, we must recognize that we have yet to reach a balanced synthesis, and a purification of the patterns and models inherited from the past” (n.18). A true reciprocity is lacking in the sphere of consecrated life. So VC and the Church still have a long way to go in practice.

The **service of authority** is also problematic today with insufficient subsidiarity and so weak or inefficient co-responsibility in the practice of government. In serious matters to resort to majority votes according to the law without efforts to explain, provide honest information and clarify objections is not wise practice, much less having alliances of interest groups. This is opposed to the charismatic communion of the institute and militates against a sense of belonging. No authority figure, not even a founder, is the exclusive interpreter of the charism nor is that person above the universal law of the Church. The document goes on to speak of recent experiences in some institutes, especially recently founded ones of manipulation of the freedom and dignity of people. Infantile attitudes are not to be encouraged – it does not lead to maturity. Authoritarianism is detrimental to the vitality and fidelity of consecrated people! Fraternal life is to be defined in such a way as to be a mutual support for all in fulfilling the vocation of each. Concluding this section on the service of authority it says that those who do not exercise this ministry with a patient listening

and a welcoming understanding leave themselves without any real authority among their brothers and sisters. Our model is the Christ who came not to be served but to serve.

Relational models: The change that is implied in the image of becoming new wineskins involves effort, skill and willingness to change. So there needs to be a generous willingness to renounce every form of privilege. Outdated models of authority especially need to be let go so that new possibilities may arise in government, common life, managing of goods and mission. Examples of this blockage are: the persistent centralization of decision-making power and the lack of turnover in the governments of communities and institutes. It is also clear that the clericalization of consecrated life has intensified in recent decades. Obedience and the service of authority have become more sensitive matters because of the profound changes in cultures. Today the words superior and *subject* are no longer suitable. This is the language of a pyramidal context and not that of communion. (*A personal aside. Many years ago, twenty-five years ago, the Conference of Major Superiors of Ireland issued a statement that touched the government and we had a rather wily and smart Prime Minister at the time. He said, "I would be very wary of giving much attention to a body that has the words "major" and "superiors" in their title. So after that the Conference of Major Superiors became the Conference of Irish Religious, so he knew what cords to pluck on the harp of today's people.*) There is a common impression that the evangelical foundation of fraternity is sometimes missing in the relationship between superiors and members. More importance is given to the institution than to the people it is made up of. The section ends with a recalling of the ecclesial nature of the management of an institute. The goods of an institute are ecclesial goods and serve the same evangelical purpose of promoting the human person, the mission and charitable and supportive sharing with the People of God. A common commitment to the concern and care for the poor can give new vitality to an institute.

The third and final part of this document speaks of preparing new wineskins and talks about formation continuous and initial as wells as evangelical relationships. I would like to finish with what I think is a very significant quotation on continuous formation.

"Continuous formation must be oriented according to the ecclesial identity of consecrated life. It is not just a matter of staying up-to-date on new theologies, ecclesial norms, or new studies relating to the story and charism of one's institute. The task is to strengthen, or often, find again one's own place in the Church at the service of humanity. This work often coincides with that classic *second conversion* that is common during life's decisive moments such as middle age, a moment of crisis, or the withdrawal from active life due to illness or old age. We are all convinced that formation must last a lifetime. Nevertheless, we must admit that a culture of continuous formation does not yet exist. This absence is the result of a mentality that is partial and reductive when it comes to continuous formation; hence, sensitivity towards its importance is insufficient and involvement of individuals is minimal.... The idea that formation is truly continuous only when it is ordinary and carried out in daily life is struggling to catch on. There is still a weak or sociological interpretation of continuous formation that ties it to a simple duty of adaptation or a potential need for spiritual renewal, instead of a continuous attitude of listening and a sharing of calls, problems and horizons. Each individual is called to let himself or herself be touched, educated, provoked, and enlightened by life and by history, by what he or she proclaims and celebrates, by the poor and excluded, and by those near and far".

This statement has resonances for me with the fundamentals of our monastic calling, and especially with ch 7 of the Rule of Benedict and its call to live in the memory of God and in short in continual prayer. I encourage you to get this document and to take and read!



1st Conference of “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

Dom Gerard of Genesee

The topic for this presentation is ‘A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century’ I am afraid I do not have a visionary or strategic mind. What I will try to attempt is a statement of what we, as Cistercians, are all about in terms of some fundamentals.

The primary fundamental is the transformation of the cosmos begun with the death and resurrection of Christ. This transformation which is happening now gives an eschatological urgency to everything. Cistercian conversatio is a total response to this urgency. The particular form of our Cistercian life will never make sense without this eschatological urgency. Louis Bouyer said about monasticism, ‘monasticism alone gives to the life of faith, to life in faith, the fullest development of which it is capable here below’ When we look at the Cistercian conversatio we perceive a form of life that arises from what Bouyer calls ‘a totalizing faith’ in this cosmic transformation being wrought by the Spirit of Jesus.

Another fundamental is that what is most true and most real is accessed by faith and not by sight and what is most true, Pope Emeritus Benedict tell us, is that the real center of history is Christ and His Church –Church not as a sociological abstraction but Church meaning the creature’s fusion with its Lord in spousal love. This aspect of spousal love dictates that Church, in its deepest reality is personal because God cannot enter into spousal love with sociological abstractions or collectives. The life Christ came to bring us from above must therefore, first be received by a concrete person. In which case, the exemplar of the creature’s fusion with its Lord in spousal love is seen concretized in Mary. She is the first Church. And since Her Fiat is according to the very Word of God, Mary can only be pure receptivity. She can only surrender and be the ‘given away’. After all what other purpose is there for ecclesia than to make a dwelling place for God in the world?

In the light of these theological facts, the Church will always be Marian in its shape. Always feminine and fundamentally receptive in contrast to what you could characterize as the masculine, activist model which captivates us these days with its productivity, power and results. But ecclesia, Marian in shape is primarily making space where God can disclose Himself as God. This is why, we Cistercians should see ourselves at the heart of the Church because our life form is markedly Marian. I would like to focus on this, the Marian form, the making space for God, as the key to a greater appreciation of the form of Cistercian conversatio.

In one of his conferences to Benedictines, (a conference I shall make use of here) the former Master General of the Dominicans, Fr Timothy Radcliffe, pointed out that when the Israelites came out of the desert, God came with them seated in the space between the wings of the cherubim. The throne of glory was a space and a void and ‘no thing’ which means that the glory of God can only show itself in an empty space.

If Cistercian life is predominately Marian in shape, then we can be sure that all elements of our life will conspire to create space at the heart of the monastery and in each heart where God and His Christ can be disclosed as the true center. We, poor banished children of Eve, will experience the oppression of this space as the void, as boredom, but this is not a mistake that we should hasten to rectify nor a problem we should flee from. It is the obverse side of making space for God.

Constitution 3 speaks of our life as ordinary, obscure and laborious. In contrast to congregations with specific missions, we seem to have none. There is no explicit specialization that justifies our place in the world of good works in contrast to the mission of the Jesuits or the Dominicans. The void, the space in this case is living for no explicit purpose in the world. And this space discloses God as the hidden and secret purpose of our lives. If we had a specific mission, the disclosure of God in our form of life would somehow be ambiguous. The lack of a specific mission discloses

clearly that God alone could be the secret purpose of life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious. I would like to quote von Balthasar here. He says 'There are great missions that are given for the sake of exterior activity in the Church. However, God can also give great missions for the sake of self-surrender alone, with or without extraordinary graces of prayer. These latter missions though not recognized and canonized, can have an equally great, albeit, hidden and anonymous, impact on the Church and the world.'

If there is one area where the space is disclosed it is the Opus Dei which is the center of Cistercian day. It is probably the area of our life which has the least utility in the eyes of the world. Yet St Benedict puts this thing of great inutility at the very center of our lives. Nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei. It is this very inutility of the Opus Dei which discloses that God is not an object in the world. But this inutility also has the greatest utility for if we pursue the Marian analogy – then the 'useless' space of the Opus Dei is the very opening where the Mystery of Christ can enter into the world. This was brought home to me by a section in a conference of Dom Mauro Giuseppe on the Rule of Benedict and specifically on Chapter 7. I cannot be sure I have understood clearly what he had to say but whatever I gleaned from him did impress itself on me and that is what I hope to share. Chapter 7 on humility is the centerpiece of the Rule. At the apex of the steps of humility we have St Benedict saying 'The twelfth step of humility is that a monk always manifests humility, in his bearing no less than in his heart, so that it is evident at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or wherever else and wherever else or ubicumque is therefore, I would like to think, cosmic in its extension.

What should be noted is the very deliberate arrangement of the places where the monk displays humility. At the heart of it all is the Opus Dei. Now what is interesting is that St Benedict did not collapse the two – the oratory and the Opus Dei. He makes the distinction deliberately - first the Work of God and then the oratory. The Work of God is not a place. It is the void, the 'useless' work from which all the radiation begins and starts the concentric circles of radiation that widen and widen past the monastery – first the Work of God, then the oratory, still wider in the monastery, then on to the garden, then the journey outside or a field and finally everywhere else. The glory of God in the void of the Divine Office is that intangible vibration or costly perfume that discloses God's presence to those who come to our monasteries.

The Cistercian life form also hollows out space in the heart of the community and in each human heart. This hollowing out flows from the centrality of the Eucharist in our monasteries because we do not gather for the Eucharist but the Eucharist gathers us. The hollowing out, the breaking down of barriers and defenses that keep us apart in the community is how we also become the Eucharist. In this light we can understand why Chapter 7 on Humility is the very heart of the Rule. In following the thought of Fr Radcliffe, humility is a radical de-centering of self. For St Benedict humility is not a self-willed project of improvement. It is intimately related to building up community. I become, you become humble by building up our community, because building up community means emptying myself of selfishness. The community St Benedict is envisaging is one where there is no ego center. Where we live for another. Where we live lives of mutual help and support, mutual obedience, respect for each other. Where we respond to the pull of grace rather than to unredeemed appetites. Here no one is at the center. And the center is the space where the glory of God can be revealed. The community then, is no longer a mere help to allow individuals in their quest for self-perfection. The community is ecclesia, the space where each person in community encounters the mystery of Christ refracted in and through the other.

Silence and solitude, vigils, the serious observance of enclosure mediate the interior desert. This very crucial desert is the space where the guises of sin and especially the rebellion of pride is unmasked. The painful interior trials which arise from such a confrontation effect that radical de-centering of self. Today everything conspires to flee the void - curiosity, noise, distractions and busyness. Accedia, that quiet despair, has become a condition of the world. Pope Francis has asked us to move to the peripheries. We must see this call within the shape of our conversatio. Our very life constrained and shaped by solitude moves us swiftly to the peripheries where sub personal forces must be confronted with the armor of faith and hope. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. This spiritual combat is not just for ourselves but for the life of the world. Moving to the peripheries also means moving, in so far as this is possible, toward the

marginal in community, those who are difficult to love, those who try our patience, the sick brothers and sisters who are dependent and are not productive. Moving to the peripheries means offering hospitality to those come to us seeking healing and hope. Living at the peripheries of the interior also means that we are sentinels who keep vigil for the in-breaking in of resurrection light into the darkness of our world and share this in a mysterious manner throughout the Body of Christ. In his letter to St Gregory Nazianzen, St Basil speaks of that purification that occurs in solitude, so that the heart may receive every impress of divine doctrine. Silence and solitude is where wisdom is born as our Constitution 3 puts it.

I want to draw attention to *lectio divina*, as that space of disclosure of God. As the First Letter of Peter points out, all of us enter the monastery in bondage to the futile ways of our ancestors – layers upon layers of prejudices, assumptions, memories, sensibilities – that are unconverted by the encounter with faith. *Lectio* is purification by the fire of doctrine. This also means a de-centering. To listen to the Word means that I must jettison my own mundane word and accept and acknowledge that God's word is the decisive factor in my life. The Word must shape and judge experience and it is not the other way around. This means living by faith and not sight. No wonder *lectio* is a discipline and a necessary one. The fascination with information, an ever present escape in our age, must be resisted firmly if the transformation by the Word is to catch fire in our lives. Through this immersion in the Word and the centrality of this desire for the Word, the mystery of Christ grows in us so that our eyes cannot but be on the Lord.

Manual and simple labor linked as it is to obedience and poverty hollows us out. In the world, work is identity. Work is about self-fulfillment. Workaholism is a virtue. In our life work which is shaped by obedience puts us at the service of others. We are expected to live by the work of our hands and this is our expression of poverty. This 'poverty' puts us in solidarity with those who cannot live off rents and accumulated capital. Monastic work immerses us in the limitations of the community and its work program and its burden of history, sometimes a very inefficient and dysfunctional history. Work and self-support are great graces of our vocation. They rescue us from the Neoplatonic disdain for labor and engage us in the Holy Spirit's transformation of the cosmos in Christ. Our industries give us the opportunity to witness to our employees this transformation so that in the sphere of the practical affairs we are not split personalities. Catholics at prayer and capitalists at work.

I know this is not an exhaustive listing nor is it an original, creative restatement of Cistercian life but it is meant to be a reminder of some important elements of our *conversatio* assembled under the rubric of making a habitation for God. As I said, this space can be oppressive but if we persevere, then this space becomes the hundred fold for it discloses to each of us, the mystery of Christ. This sustained encounter with the Lord is the heart of and the hidden secret of our joyful perseverance in a life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious.



2nd Conference on “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

M. Caterina of Macau

(This reflection is the fruit of community reflection, discussion and written input from each sister that was then unified into a single document.)

Our Gospel Mission

The Gospel tells us about the requirements for following Christ: the primacy of God’s love and the need to love God in our neighbor. Everything has meaning in love when God is in the first place, even a glass of water. We are called to give a privileged testimony of this constant search for God, of a unique and indivisible love for Christ and neighbor, and of absolute dedication to the growth of his kingdom.

Humanity is lost in a network of non-values because of the lack of any real points of reference. Monastics living in community, united in the love of God, can become witnesses that adherence to Christ can truly unify their life in God by integrating all their faculties, purifying their thoughts, spiritualizing their senses, in the crucible of their perseverance. In short, they witness that there is hope, there is meaning and there is God.

How can we give this witness in the 21st century?

“We are faced with a call to conversion. 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.... Our motivation to transmit the Cistercian charism to new generations needs to be stronger than the desire of individual communities to survive in their present situation.” (Cf. Abbot General’s Conference General Chapter 2014)

We found a strong meditation on this call to conversion to deeper monastic commitment in the 2017 Pentecost Letter of Dom Mauro Lepori OCist:

“Troubles and infidelities in monastic life are often the final result, sometimes tragic, of the refusal to live our vocation: accepting, for Christ, to renounce goods, affections, personal projects, personal conveniences, personal pride....Christ does not ask anything more than that to which he has called us: the renunciation of ourselves and of everything for Him. And that is what repairs and rebuilds our house, our Order, our Church, and even the society in ruin.... The renunciation made in order to correspond to Christ’s love is never negative... because it opens up to the gift of the freedom of love, of giving one’s life. And this is the perfection, the fulfillment of every life and vocation.... Jesus never demands our renunciation except in order to prefer Him, the Lord of life....”

We found some questions in the Global Vision of the Order GC 2002 that are still relevant:

*“God wants to work through us so that we may be the incarnation of his Love in the world today.”
God wants to be present to the world in and through us. How do we let ourselves be used by God in this moment of history? How aware of our mission are we? How are we incarnating the love of God in our communities? How is that love being communicated to those around us?*

In VDQ the Church tells us what is hoped for from a Contemplative Order:

“Be beacons to those near to you and, above all, to those far away.

Be torches to guide men and women along their journey through the dark night of time.

Show us the One Who is the way, and the truth and the life, the Lord Who alone bring us fulfillment and bestows life in abundance. (6)

... may your communities become true schools of contemplation and prayer. The world and the Church need you to be beacons of light for the journey of the men and women of our time. This should be your prophetic witness.” (36)

Our vision starts from our reality

In this time of globalization when the culture of relativism becomes the globalization of indifference, unity in the family becomes almost impossible. Many young people suffer from the absence of family life and values. There is hunger for companionship, love, attention, mercy and respect. They live in a world of competition that makes them despair. They don't know who they are or why they are living. They look for the meaning of life and desire to see the beauty of unity and love; to find someone really credible, someone who does what she says, an integrated person that they can trust and follow.

In the midst of this culture, we are called to incarnate Christian humanism and to be the authentic family of God, living witnesses of Jesus for each other. We are brothers and sisters, we belong to each other, to the community. We support each other so that God's will can be done in each one of us. We remind each other to live in the way of holiness, especially in the obedience of faith, as a concrete way of life. Our life consists in many choices and, whether we are aware of it or not, because we are one Body, our choices have an impact on others. We learn solidarity together, to give space to one another, to have compassion, to learn from our mistakes. But in the School of Divine Service, we also learn that it is not enough to serve, or to get the job done. We are created to live in relationship, to live as a Church. It is not enough that we pray the Divine Office seven times a day as son and daughters of God. He wants us to live the “sonship” of Christ in a concrete way through the presence of a vicar of Christ, a spiritual father/mother that gives us the opportunity to obey and challenges us to grow. Filial obedience is not just a matter of doing what is demanded but it is what allows us to enter into God's life and his plan of redemption: communion with him and with all mankind.

Our reality

In Macau, we are a “homeless” community. When the news that our request to the local government for a land concession was rejected, humanly speaking we felt shaken. But the bishop who brought us the news, with deep concern and mercy, was a real presence of Christ for us. “Don't worry! You can continue to use the place where you are now as long as you need it. I promise to find a place for your future monastery.” In response, our superior said: “We have found our stability in the Bishop's heart!” At the same time the bishop told us not to be too attached to this place because it is not big enough, however that is no reason for us to refuse newcomers. There is no love without sacrifice.

We renewed our commitment to remain here where we already feel rooted: in the will of God, without knowing our future. But isn't that the situation of every community, of every person? We have no permanent home in this world; we are citizens of heaven, journeying towards the Father's house.

In times when we depended on agriculture, monasteries needed large properties. In the industrial age they become a luxury, a problem. Sacred architecture is part of our charism and heritage. But when we applied for a small piece of land, one of the objections was: why do you need so much space, so many large rooms for only 20 people, when others live 10 people in one small apartment? In this moment of history when there are so many refugees who have no home, we are blessed to have this small and precious place. We live in a wealthy society but in solidarity with the poorest: no land, no property and very little income, in a borrowed house without enough space for a “usual” Trappist community. We are missionaries in a country that refuses permission for land concessions or construction for religious purposes. Our sisters at Rosary are in a much worse situation. There are similar restrictions in other countries of our region and perhaps there will be more and more in Western secularized society. Other communities live in areas threatened by violence. It is not the exception any more.

Life in today's world is insecure. How can we demand security that others do not have?

Perhaps the Order has gotten too stable, too comfortable, too secure, too rich in property and the Lord is waking us up to a new consciousness?

Prophetic Gaze

Our experience teaches us to live with a prophetic gaze on our reality. We come to understand that there is no ideal monastery in today's world. We live in the modern desert: solitary life, integrally dedicated to contemplation, in the midst of the city and its noise, where people live, struggle and suffer, as a sign that God is very close to the people of our city.

Therefore, the important thing is not the place. The 'place' we live in is our community as the Body of Christ, the kingdom already present among us. So rather than design buildings, we need to build up community life through conversion, struggle, and death to self. We need to renounce even our desire for a monastery surrounded by the beauty of nature in order to follow Christ. We believe that our sense of mission will overcome all the crises that we will have to face. If we truly love Christ, we cannot avoid suffering. This is our participation in His sacrifice for the salvation of humanity. Jesus never promised to free us from suffering, but on the contrary, He invited us to take up our cross. He is there accompanying us in our sufferings and struggles. We do not need to be afraid of our fragilities, our weaknesses.

What the Church asks of us as contemplatives is to be a living witness of the presence of the living God, to be experts of communion who keep alive the fundamental questions of human life. In the School of the Lord's Service, we learn every day through our prayer and lectio, how we can become instruments of God's Word. We lend our voice to pray the psalms, to let Jesus pray to the Father through our lips. The word of God educates us seven times a day. At work time, we also lend our mind, heart and body in obedience to let Jesus fulfill the will of the Father in us. We learn from Jesus how to please the Father and how to be authentic human beings. We learn to know Him more in order to love Him more. For in the School of Love, through lectio and liturgy, we gain knowledge that is practical: the knowledge that turns to love. Love seeking its object with the view of being united to it. Our way of life preaches the gospel in silence. **We can live it anywhere.**

Our mission in the Church is to live and transmit the Benedictine charism of humility and obedience, as understood and lived by the Cistercian Fathers, as a concrete path toward mystical union with God in the School of Love. (Working paper on the Father Immediate 2017)

For that *"We need people and communities that rededicate themselves to the path of a conversion, of a "conversatio morum," that respond day by day with joy to the demand to leave all for Christ." (Lepori)*

Each year thousands of people visit our church which is also the last station of the annual diocesan procession of Our Lady of Fatima. We believe that our life, our future, the future of the Order and of the world is in the hands of Mary, the Star of Hope. So our vision is a vision of hope by living our reality, embracing our vocation and mission here and now for the glory of God and the salvation of the human race.

Community of Our Lady Star of Hope – MACAU



3rd Conference on “A Vision of the Order in the 21st Century”

Dom Etienne of Koutaba

1. My personal vision of the Order today feels poor and limited, for the simple reason that my experience is poor: I am a young monk and a young superior. In Africa as elsewhere, proverbs insist that wisdom dwells in the heart of the old. The elder is custodian of traditional secrets and guards the transmission of perennial values against the storm of passing modes and eroding values. Because of this, the elders are vested with the duty to conserve and protect the vital memory of the family, the clan, the tribe and the ethnic group. The younger generations are called upon to enhance and oversee the progress of this memory. This poses the problem of the relationship between memory and inter-generational conflicts, on the one side, and ideological interpretations, on the other. These conflicts go far beyond opposition between the younger and the older. They comprise other horizons or spheres of life as well – those relative to the rich and the poor; to those who are closed in on themselves and those who are open to others. Church history – and the Order’s – is lived and written on this type of opposition, which could seem a bit artificial in the end. However, it does express a real struggle, especially when we consider what Dom Armand calls “the cultural mediation of the religious experience.”¹

2. This difficulty is that we may become like the scribe, who can authentically draw the new from the old, but not the other way around. A difficult and delicate art it is! But the entire Order is involved in this, and it is already yielding fruit in several areas, such as the liturgy, the observances, in formation and in organizational structures. This fruitfulness comes from our response to the needs of healthy pluralism, whose requirements make it possible for our different communities to drink from the one Cistercian source with their own cultural vessels. This Source is the ideal of a Contemplative life that is integrated – lived in a climate of authentic fraternal communion, in the light of the Rule of Saint Benedict and the teachings of the Cistercian fathers down the centuries. Still, in our time, so pregnant with imperial domination and structural fragilities at the personal or community levels, the problem remains. This is despite the undeniable achievements already attained – the authentic answers we have given; the solutions we have proposed and are elaborating within the Order; aiming at a wholesome contemplation; and living in today’s fully and vigorously missionary Church.

3. One of the graces of youth is said to be its sense of authenticity. Today’s young dislike falsification and the unconfessed betrayal of defended ideals! In the Order’s evolution, a lack of authenticity has become evident. “We have opened a space in which we no longer assume the sacrifices of a strict separation from the world. We accept the world’s advantages, if we don’t actually defend them.”² Wouldn’t we need to review the addition of “Strict Observance” to our name? Many of our observances are no longer as strict as the name implies. We are, in fact, like deflated tires on a car, swerving between demonizing and glorifying a culture whose basic elements root us in time and space. We are in search of a lost balance between charismatic values – individual and community; solitude and communion; silence and speech; etc. In view of today’s excessive relaxation of certain observances, “we have an urgent need to reflect deeply on the link between silence and interiority,”³ in the words of Dom André Louf. Certain demands of fragility and precariousness work against contemplation by skewing the balance of these values, on which our Fathers built an eschatological humanism. Finding a new balance presupposes a renewed and much

¹ Vie Consacrée, N° 2, April-May-June, 2015, pp.128-141.

² Sr. Collette Friedland, cited by Sr. Marie-Pascale Ducrocq, in the article, ‘What Future for Contemplative Life’, N° 3, July-August 2012, p. 200.

³ Cf. L’O.C.S.O. Au XX-ème siècle, Vol 2, P.206.

deeper relationship to our memory – a less ambiguous one than we live now, amid a 'turning point in anthropological reflection' in which biotechnological prowess proclaims 'the obsolescence of man'. Our Fathers' teleological humanism allowed them the freedom of spirit to create a sub-culture that adroitly navigated the culture of their time, neither passionately rejecting it nor idolatrously condoning it. "We need to take enough distance to develop the freedom to create a sub-culture of our own,"⁴ as Michael Casey puts it. Would it not be better for the Order to create such an avenue, a space, a school ('university') of formation – to assimilate and transmit Cistercian observances and values in a way coherent with our sub-culture – rather than to leave this effort up to marginal and regional implementation?

4. In Africa today, the fast growth of the Order's numbers is evident. However, its contemplative quality is tested by many internal and external factors opposed to gospel values, stemming from our socio-cultural, political, economic and religious context. But the toxic agents of these counter-evangelical values are not simply 'natural.' They are also linked to economic forces and the political domination of the continent. It is humbling to confess the "anthropological impoverishment of Africa." The Gregorian partition of Africa is well known. But it can just as well be transformed into Gospel spirituals! The systematic linking of these factors affects patterns of behavior while nurturing a taste for power and conflict. This situation misdirects the authentic transmission of monastic values. Instead of allowing Africa's dark shadows, originality, difference and diversity enrich other communities, the excessive westernization of monastic life alternately holds these qualities in esteem or underestimates them. African communities will need more freedom for constructive creativity, at the same time as great prudence and courage in their search and in researching new sources of income and mutual relationships to boost their economies. The aim here is solely to diminish the spirit of involuntary asceticism and humiliation in situations of permanent begging. There is little or no dignity for those in a perennial state of expecting everything from others while contributing little or nothing.

5. Boosting African monastic economies, no matter how fragile they are, will give evangelical nobility to their monastic poverty through the very sharing. It will surely also change the Father Immediate's problematic in our region and perhaps elsewhere. Whether we like it or not, even with possible future adjustments, this problematic in such a valuable pastoral structure as the Father Immediate is fed by the power of financial backing – "the deceptive power of money." This tendency challenges our communities to deepen and rekindle the often-disturbed contemplative tension among the values of our Cistercian monastic charism.

6. This contemplative tension is lived by joining dream and prophecy, which Pope Francis sees as a way out of simplistic strategies and away from focusing on our communities' survival. "The psychology of survival" saps our charism's strength and domesticates it by leading it by the hand and depriving it of its original creative force. This psychology of survival tempts us to concentrate on protecting spaces, buildings and structures, rather than facilitate new processes. We forget the action of grace and become professionals of the sacred, not fathers, mothers, and brothers of hope – as we are prophetically called to be. A climate of survival hardens our elders' hearts and deprives them of the capacity to dream, which also renders sterile the prophecy which the younger generation is called to announce and to fulfill."⁵

7. The Church, the Order, and our communities need witnesses who have labored to garner, from the source of the fathers, true prophecy and not simple fantasy. These witnesses, far from being overpowering personalities, are charismatic. In this light, we may be getting poorer and poorer in general, especially in Africa (and perhaps elsewhere) – where we have a growing younger generation that is yet to be well cemented in monastic wisdom. Well born souls do not normally rush to the cloister, to see that their wisdom does not correspond to their age. Far from saying that others are not well born, their reality is one that only proves character and endurance amid human,

⁴ 'A benedictine decalogue,' *Collectanea Cisterciensa*, 73 (2011), pp. 305-320.

⁵ Homily, 2 February, 2017, *The world Day of Consecrated Life*.

social, ideological and spiritual trials – in what amounts to a continuing labor of birth. What is most to be avoided in the Church, the Order, the regions, and our communities worldwide is ending up living only according to our own promises, and not according to the biblical, evangelical promises of the Beatitudes that pave our way and guide our journey. Living mainly by the promises presupposes a deep obedience of faith weakened by personal and collective individualism – a thousand-tentacled octopus that feeds the grotesque cult of self. As the working document on the 'Fathers Immediate' says, "We need to admit that the influence of modern thought and culture has weakened our vision of faith regarding Christ's authority present in the Church and in the Order, causing deep confusion about the meaning of monastic obedience for the individual as well as for communities." In this question, as in many others about the relationship of people and / or communities with each other and with authority, it often seems as if the part were greater than the whole, space greater than time, and time greater than eternity. The relation between these sets of elements, which enjoy a mutual reciprocity, is certainly not a superiority of degree but of kind, as our *conversatio* humbly proposes.

8. These real difficulties do not prevent a vision of faith about the future of the Order. At the same time, it's not about playing "Cassandra"⁶ and announcing prophecy which is beautiful but not true to our life, or which is too pessimistic. On the contrary, it means entering a path of many-layered obedience – charismatic obedience that always chooses life in the Spirit, and more so, a life of contemplation. Though the resurrected Christ dies no more, He daily gives us the choice to faithfully and serenely celebrate the funeral of our individual and community dying to "self," so that our true selves and those of others may have life in all its fullness. The charismatic obedience of which I speak is synonymous with charismatic listening. It's a listening of the Spirit and in the Spirit, which is always polyphonic – respecting and enhancing the symphony of personal and community differences. The Holy Spirit is the sole creator of a future in which the conversion of structures does not overlook the true conversion of hearts; where the concern for organization does not harden the heart, stiffen the neck, or disturb the source of our life.



⁶ "Playing Cassandra" is a French idiomatic expression as briefly explained in the text.

4th Conference on “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

M. Mariela of Quilvo

Dear Fathers and Mothers of the General Chapter,

We could innumerate various factors that affect our time and that could have a certain part to play in our vision of the future: modern means of communication, the ideology of gender identity, extreme fundamentalisms, the loss of credibility of the Church because of sexual scandals, the phenomenon of immigration... I think we are all witnesses of this multicultural transformation, and we cannot stay out of it.

“Genealogy of Jesus Christ, Son of...” (Mt 1, 1-17)

The question about the future of the Order is, for me, a question of the **“transmission of life”** and of the **“present”**. The future are the “sons” and “daughters”. “May you see the children of our children,” says the psalm.

Before I entered the monastery, when I was a catechist in a parish, I heard a priest that gave the talks of preparation for the sacrament of Marriage say this: “You begin to educate your children 20 years before they are born.” That phrase made a big impact on me, and was lodged in my heart. That first time I heard it, I thought right away that the children will be what I am now; I thought about responsibility... Invited now to say something about the vision of the Order in the XXI century, that thought has become very intense in me.

I have started talking about the transmission of life because time, past, present and future, in the Bible is expressed in family trees, genealogies, real human histories in which the important thing is that God intervenes, interacts with fragile, sinful humans; He weaves history with the threads of his plan of love. So history is not a bunch of facts related with each other; history is God intervening, **giving a promise and a blessing**. The promise and the blessing are transmitted by the very transmission of life, by generation. History for the Bible is a chain of generations, of persons who have inherited the divine blessing and who must conserve it and transmit it to their descendants.

The fundamental thing in the transmission of the promise and of the blessing is generation. The key word here is the verb “to generate”, verb of Jewish tradition. This word links one life to another - persons, whole peoples; it unifies and guarantees the authentic transmission of the promise. But the verb “to generate” signifies not only the communication of human life, but also, and above all, as a fundamental value in Sacred Scripture, the transmission of the divine blessing. Generation that transmits the blessing is not necessarily carnal; it can be spiritual or of adoption. The important thing is the participation in the blessing and the sense of belonging –“one is the son of”. In your own case, who has engendered you in faith and in monastic life?

It is impressive how the Sacred Scripture presents persons by way of a genealogy that connects each with an origin, from which each receives a face.

You don't invent identity; nobody gives himself his own identity; you receive it. From the biological ambient we know that in the very act of being generated, of being called into life, each one receives an ADN, a genetic code that is unique and irrepeatable, that contains the whole of what the person will be; this acid also contains the genetic data that will be hereditary, that is to say, that will be transmitted from one person to another.

The same thing happens with the blessing that is the Cistercian, monastic charism, with its ADN, which, ever since the Spirit breathed it into the Church, courses through the blood of generations and generations of monks right up until today; it shows us that the future is here in this day... And if we apply the phrase of that good priest, “the education of your children begins 20 years before

they are born", we can draw our conclusions and grasp the great challenge of the conversion of spiritual paternity and maternity that would permit us to connect with an origin and push forward to a destiny.

Analogies are valid. In a world of anti-birth, full of the strangest methods of anticonception... We can see a filtration of this mentality into our spiritual life. To carry a child means time and waiting; the trauma of giving birth, cutting the umbilical cord... It's hard to be parents; we resist; maybe it's because there have been abuses in the exercise of parenthood, transforming it into power that debases the other even to the extent of immorality; and then the terrible fear; abandoning our genuine monastic tradition, we stop being *abba* or *amma* calling ourselves "spiritual guides". Or maybe it's a pendular reaction, swinging between the figure of the authoritarian father of former decades and the modern absent father.

In a world that is living a tremendous existential "orphanity", -not only because of the disintegration of the family and of everything that implies taking roots, but also because of the fall of those certainties that give meaning and form to life, -there is a great hunger and cry for paternity; that might be another way of saying a hunger for meaning, for transcendence, origin and eternal destiny.

The monastic tradition of *paternity and filiation is a focus of light*, a real answer in a world so deprived of roots, and, for that reason, of identity... I have always been impressed that the relation between the houses of the Order, according to the Charter of Charity is so strong that we give it a juridical expression (const. 73) as paternity and filiation. It's the way we say what we are; it is the way our Order is bound together. Each one can think about the lineage of his or her monastery... Can you follow the line of your generation?

But it's not a question of **paternalism or maternalism**: nor of an aseptic neutrality, nor of a pan-psychological vision by which we try to not dirty ourselves with an affective dependence that would create an infantile relation. It is a question of paternity and maternity that are spiritual and charismatic.

Just as we know Jesus from the Gospel, so can we understand something about the **paternity of God** of which we are called to be a mirror. Jesus, the Son, is the Person that is truly free, that gives without fear and without making calculations; Jesus is the one who learned, by way of suffering, to obey. This is important. We must be instruments of God's paternity; we must love persons "unto God", and not fall into the trap of gratifications, be able to go a step beyond just reciprocity. The sacrifice of Isaac frees us and purifies us from every distorted view of paternity.

"Your sons and your daughters will profess, your ancients will have dreams and visions".

(Joel 3,1)

At this point I would like to refer to a homily of Pope Francis for the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, the XXI World Day of Consecrated Life, February 2, 2017. In this homily he cites the prophecy of Joel 3, 1: "*I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, Your sons and your daughters will profess, your ancients will have dreams and visions.*"

We have received the inheritance of our fathers and mothers of yesterday and today; we are children of their constant, daily dedication, of their praise made flesh; we have received their dreams and visions, and thanks to them we know that they are our guarantee, that "hope does not fail," that "He does not deceive us."

Dream and prophecy go together. The memory of how our ancients -our fathers and our mothers- dreamed; the audacity to carry forward prophetically that dream. **Memory and prophecy go together; maybe it is only by that connection that there is a true transmission, a true engendering.**

This attitude will make us fruitful (because it pertains to all of us in the community, not just to the person directly in charge of formation); but above all it will protect us from the temptation of survival, which can render sterile our consecrated life; an evil that can get installed in our interior,

in the heart of our communities. The attitude of survival makes us reactionary and fearful; slowly and silently it shuts us up in our houses and in our schemes.

It's a hot issue for us who for some time now have been reflecting on fragility in our houses. We have to discern when a certain type of simplifying structures becomes simply nailing ourselves down in a framework of survival. It directs us to the past, to the glorious -but past- achievements which, far from awakening the prophetic creativity born of the dreams of our founders, looks for defenses to avoid the challenges that today are beating at our doors.

Pope Francis says that **the mentality of survival** robs our charism of its strength, because it leads us to tame it, sucking out the creative force that the Spirit Himself breathed into it in the beginning; rather than **facilitating new processes**, it makes us protect frameworks, spaces, buildings and structures. The temptation to survival causes us to forget grace; it leaves us rancid; professionals of the sacred, but not fathers and mothers of the hope to which we have been called to prophecy.

This ambient of survival dries up the heart of our elders, depriving them of the capacity to dream, and, in this way, it sterilizes the prophecy that the younger ones are called to announce and to make real. To say it briefly, the temptation of survival transforms into a danger, a threat and an obstacle that which the Lord is presenting to us as a door to life.

Summary

Of all that could be said about the future of the Order in the XXIst Century, my vision of it is in the following:

- **The return to the charism of spiritual paternity and maternity.** The lack of vocations and the lack of spiritual fatherhood would seem to be bound together in some measure.
- **The challenge of memory and prophecy.** Confidence in the prophecies of the younger ones is in risk; they are going to prophesy, and sometimes they will be mistaken. Let them prophesy and open the way to new times. Believe in the memory of the elders that connects us with our roots and gives us our identity. Here too, is the challenge of a new inculturation in our communities, if I may say it that way, where the accent is shifted: we no longer speak so much about founders and the founded, but about the relation of older ones and younger ones. It's a global world; in one same community there is an enormous ethnic and cultural wealth. How we integrate the old and the young. How we live this generative aspect of the community, where paternity and filiation have two-way movement, not only from the old to the young, but also in the other direction from the young to the old; we are sons and fathers of one another.

"I will bless you to the full, and I will multiply your descendants so much that they will be more numerous than the stars of heaven or like the sand at the sea shore... and because you have obeyed my voice, all the peoples of the earth will be blessed by way of your descendancy." (Genesis 22, 17-18)



5th Conference on “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

Dom Erik of Mt St Bernard

VISION

The letter inviting me to give this address instructed me: ‘write a paper [...] on your vision of the Order for the 21st century’. The pronoun was underlined. I will speak in subjective terms, then, from within my frame of reference: such is my brief. My topic is a vision *of* the Order *for* the 21st century, not *for* the Order *of* the 21st century. I take this to mean that I should speak of what I see when I look at the Order. It makes sense. Any future vision depends on an appraisal of the *status quo*. To establish it, we must speak, and listen, to each other. A vision presupposes a point of view. In this assembly, I am a worker of the eleventh hour. Many of you, if not most, have been monks and nuns since before I was born. You can trace patterns I cannot perceive. From this I have much to learn. What *I* can do, I suppose, is to offer a different kind of retrospect, the vision of one more recently arrived of what has been passed on to him. In so doing, I feel gratitude. I also feel perplexity. My perplexity springs from what I see as a crisis of transmission. It is on this I wish to reflect.

When I entered the monastery in 2002, I was conscious of entering a flow of continuous life. I was no less conscious of entering a history of rupture. The story was told anecdotally daily. Most aspects of observance and liturgy invited comparison with former times, which for some, I gathered, represented a primitive stage in monastic evolution, when the law had not yet been tempered by grace; others spoke of it as a lost Eden barred by fiery swords. Whatever the emotional charge of ‘now’ and ‘then’, the gap was evident. The decree of unification had altered the community’s structure; the re-definition of silence alongside the abandonment of dormitories and scriptoria had affected the nature of fraternal relations; liturgical life had been comprehensively reimagined; evolving positions in theology had recast the very nature of Cistercian life. People had come and gone, not just in the novitiate and juniorate. From 1950 to today, our community has seen 60 solemn professions. In the same period, 30 brethren in solemn vows have left monastic life. Even the topography of the house is eloquent. Hardly a room functions now as it did fifty years ago. For a novice, the sea change was bewildering. Amid such upheaval, which were the lines of continuity that mattered? Much that was branded ‘tradition’ went no further back than to fraught community meetings of the 60s, when the brethren were often divided down the middle, with changes introduced *ad experimentum*, to placate the aggrieved.

At this point, let me be clear: I am not attempting to introduce some artificial (and tedious) dichotomy between pre- and post-conciliar Catholicism. Even less do I position myself on a spectrum from ‘conservative’ to ‘liberal’. Tottering as I am on the brink of stolid middle age, I am too old to be charged with the romantic nostalgia supposed to afflict today’s youth. What I see affecting us is a hub of issues that is cultural rather than theological. Ringing in my mind is an English monk’s journalistic account of monastic life in the 1960s. It speaks of the Spirit then making all things new, acting ‘like a cruise missile’. For being racy, the expression captures a mood felt by many. A cruise missile leaves great emptiness behind. The possibilities inherent in this void engendered vast creative efforts. These were coloured by their time, an exceptional time, in the hope of making an ancient tradition speak contemporary language. Lasting achievements were made relationally, spiritually, intellectually. But certain adjustments show their age. Many texts, tunes, interior designs and community manifestos that may have seemed ‘relevant’ then appear touchingly antiquated now, monuments to the ephemeral. If they are still with us, it is not least because our recruitment has, for a half-century, been sporadic at best: within our microcosm,

sensibilities have remained fairly constant. Further, time-bound forms have perdured on account of the titanic effort that went into them. In my monastery, there was, by the time of colour television's triumph, a pronounced creativity-fatigue. The brethren were dizzy with change, tired of talk about change, wounded by conflicts change had caused. They wanted things to stay as they were. When I entered, I encountered a palpable anxiety. The message was clear: 'Don't tamper with things, don't re-release the furies!'

I honour the good wrought by *aggiornamento*: the review of over-meticulous usages; the shedding of liturgical accretions; the strengthening of fraternal bonds; the fostering of sound conversation; the divulgation of our literary patrimony. I am moved by the intention to renew our life that it might be a sign to our times. Yet hopes for a new spring have, for many of us, been unfulfilled. We find ourselves in a state that is decidedly autumnal. There are complex reasons for this. But surely there are questions we must ask, given the scope of the reform in whose wake we sail. Which of its accomplishments are transient, which timeless? How does this graced but trying, by intervals euphoric and tormented, endeavour fit into a longer narrative of shared identity? What have we become? I know that, to some, such questions seem an outright provocation. But I do not ask them to provoke, much less to offend. I ask because I need an answer. When I consider our heritage, I feel frankly overwhelmed by a paradigm of interpretation I often cannot follow because it rests, ultimately, on an unsharable experience: on having been there at the time. The last generation who *was* there is gracefully fading away. How do we latter-born make *our* return *ad fontes* in order to take our charisma into the future? This, to me, is a burningly practical concern. With it in mind, I offer some thoughts on what strikes me when I look at what has been handed on to me.

- A. First, I note a passage from idealism to pragmatism. Monasticism, like other institutions, defined itself in the mid-nineteenth century by rigorous first principles on the basis of which material, experiential phenomena were defined. A century's experience of absolutisms made this approach as unpalatable in the cloister as elsewhere. Reflecting on itself, a community such as mine came to ask rather: What meets our needs? What can we manage? What helps us? These were timely questions. Yet the more they are brought to the fore, the vaguer our sense of finality becomes. Caught up in where we are now, we may lose our sense of where we are going.
- B. This prompts a second observation, of a referential change from objective to subjective criteria. A confrère used to relay what his novice master told him in the late 1940s: 'Keep the Rule and up you go!' The saying occasioned mirth. It was meant to show up a primitive legalism consisting of rubrics and regulations. We were told that we, by contrast, enjoyed a charismatic freedom to listen to the Spirit. I share this Pentecostal expectation, yet a paradox befuddles me: when did Spirit and Rule come to stand in opposition? Such narrative discontinuity poses special problems in the lineage of Cîteaux, which has been described - to my mind brilliantly - as an aspiration to pursue 'the spirit that only the authentic letter can set free.'
- C. As a function of the two factors named, I am struck by a shift of emphasis from *praxis* to spirituality. It presents itself in banal ways. In our community, we are quite muddled, now, about ordinary ritual: what counts as right comportment in regular places and common exercises? How do we move *together*? No one is certain. For decades we have had no norms. There was an allergy to codes of conduct; a warning not to fix on externals and to focus instead on the spirit within. I observe that this shift can be corrosive of shared identity. I observe, too, that many monks, the young not least, find our mystical tradition and patrology difficult to access. They yearn to be

given something to *do*. I do not think this springs from crypto-Pelagianism. I think it evidences a desire for a whole life that engages both soul *and* body, a yearning to see oneness emerge from multiplicity.

- D. This evokes a tendency I would call centrifugal. If I may refer again to our community: we have had to work hard to recover basic elements of common life such as daily chapter, shared *lectio* and mental prayer, a culture of shared meals. This unifying work was conducted in the teeth of a scattering trend, evident even in the way our abbey had come to be organised: nothing much went on in the middle; life happened on the periphery. This caused vitality to drain from the *corpus monasterii*. For life to thrive, it seems essential to consolidate the centre.

The ultimate centre of our life is Christ, of course. A crucial objective has been to 'start afresh' from him. This is wonderful, as long as we do not construct our calling in too generic terms, losing sight of Christ's embodiment in forms that are peculiarly our own. Pains have been taken to inculturate our life, be the culture in question simply that of our own community. This, too, is good, as long as we beware of too subjective renderings. In the climate of today, may one risk forgetting that monastic life in each generation is received, not created? Our Fathers stressed the outward expression of inner values. They believed in the power of observance to foster identity and safeguard unity. I perceive that our life has become more formless than it was. I note that we no longer speak readily of observance as 'form'. What we do speak about a lot is the need for more formation. But how can we form people to a form that is elastic to the point of sometimes becoming diffuse? Abbot Cuthbert Butler once commented on the elasticity of Benedictine life. It is a 'very good term', he conceded, then added:

elastic, unless it is worn out, ever tends, as the pressure of [external] forces wanes, to return to its original condition, and when the forces cease to operate, it does re-assume its native form. It is in this property that elasticity lies, and that elastic differs from putty.

My sense is that ours is a time of such release of pressure. I consider the return to form a primary challenge - an exciting, joyful challenge! Fifty years ago, the Order was intensely aware of being caught up in renewal. Dom J-B Porion O. Cart. wrote of an encounter with an unnamed member of the OCSO in November 1967. He summed it up as follows: 'They believe that, through an unprecedented explosion of grace, the charism of the founders is now as widely available as the ability to drive a motorcar.' Our present self-confidence is probably more modest. The task, meanwhile, is no less great: to produce from our treasury things both new and old; to build bridges where connections have been lost; to rekindle our Fathers' faith in the Benedictine Rule's orientation and tools as a sure way to union with Christ; to affirm that this unifying process acquires uniquely lovely features from our patrimony, which is not only literary, but composed of chant, ritual, architecture, agriculture, and an art of forming a living communion in harmony and beauty, ardently contemplative, 'with no discord in our conduct, [...] by one charity, one Rule, and like usages'. Thus we shall be equipped for our mission in the Church. May our sights be set high, our longing be profound, our outlook be well thought-out and hospitable. Such would be my vision. Forgive me for not being able to account for it more briefly.



Conference of Dom Mauro Lepori, Abbot General O. Cist

The Monastic Charism in the XXIst Century

I feel happy and grateful to be able to see you again for the third time now in a General Chapter. It is, for me, a peak moment in many other meetings among members and communities of our Orders, and within the Cistercian Family; meetings which remind us always of our common vocation. Not always, truth to tell, in the lived vocation, because we are always in debt in respect to that to which Christ called us; but, even so, drawn by the call of Christ and stimulated by the Spirit.

If someone or a community says: "I am living our vocation well!", that means he is not living our vocation, because vocation is never a finished or accomplished process, if you really want to follow Christ walking ahead of us, not dragging him behind us like the soldiers that brought him to Caifas or to Pilate.

Jesus walks ahead of us freely, and in the monastic life as well, although in a type of vocation where one easily runs the risk of thinking that the road has been fixed since always and for always.

I think that we should reflect on our vocation and on our ways of following it in the light of the perception that St. Paul had of his fidelity to the vocation received from Christ:

"Certainly, (...) not that I believe that I am perfect; rather I continue my course to see if I can reach him, as Christ has reached me. For my part, brothers, I don't consider that I have already secured it. Nevertheless, I forget what I left behind and I throw myself forward to what lies ahead, running to the goal, to the prize to which God called me from on high in Christ Jesus. So all of us who are perfect should have these sentiments; and if in any point you think differently, God will make you see that as well. For the rest, from whatever point to which we may have arrived, let us continue on in the same direction." (Flp 3,12 -16)

This thought strengthens me, because we are frequently preoccupied with fixing out future plans looking behind, to the past. Maybe in this sense, Christ also invites us to follow him without looking behind (cf. Lc 9, 62). Looking behind hinders us from advancing, perhaps because of a miserable past, sown with ruins; or, worse still, because of a glorious past; as you know, a history that is glorious and flattering is much harder to leave behind; but we can't run forward looking behind.

This time, your Preparatory Commission sent me, by way of your Abbot General, a topic to reflect on, namely: *The monastic charism in the XXIst Century*. So you also are inviting me to look forward more than behind.

Having said that, I must also say that the past is not without its importance in our journey. The past sustains us like the roots sustain a tree that grows in height and broadness to embrace time and space, straining towards heaven.

We don't want to look behind, but rather *keep the memory of*. And this means that the past shouldn't stay behind: it should accompany us, it should remain permanently in us, and remain always living in us. This way, the past changes into tradition, transmission, heritage, which means that the past, by way of us, can go beyond us, go ahead of us, pass beyond our life, and even become transmitter of our life, progenitor.

So the point is: to be aware today of our responsibility to engender, our paternal and maternal responsibility towards the coming generations.

The XXIst century, and even the third millennium, is not so much a space of time as it is *a descendance*. God promised to Abraham and all the patriarchs and kings not so much a temporal future, which was too abstract for the Jewish mentality, but rather a future of descendance, which is to say, a future that is human, living, personal and cultural in the best sense. And a future that depends also on the fact that I be a link between my fathers or mothers and my sons and daughters.

I always feel uncomfortable when I observe that the desire to have vocations is frequently not so much an interest in fecundity as it is a worry about being able to keep the house going, or the business, the monument, the property. It's as though we would want to have vocations only in function of the structure, instead of wanting to transmit life to them, the vocation as life.

The sign of a desire for a real fecundity is to not forget that we are called to a virginal fecundity that remains always mysterious, because it only passes by way of our human means in the degree that these means are dedicated to the service of the work of God, of the Holy Spirit, just as Mary put at God's disposition her body, soul, spirit, life, relations; also her relations with Joseph.

The virginal relation with reality allows God to act as he desires. It is openness of the heart to a fecundity that is not ours, that we do not understand, and therefore is a greater fecundity than our own. "Yes, I say to you that everyone who has left his house, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and property for my sake and for the gospel, will receive, already in this time, a hundredfold in houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and properties, with persecutions, and, in the future world, eternal life." (Mc 10,29-30)

We should not forget that virginal fecundity is more solid than carnal fecundity, because it is free of immediate conditionings. The fathers that do not have children will not have descendance. On the other hand, our fecundity can extend over generations, can continue to engender after our death or after the death of a Community. How many Cistercian monasteries have died and then arisen after decades or centuries!

This virginal and evangelical way of thinking about the fecundity of our life, our communities, our Orders, and, in general, our monastic vocation, is a crucial point, that, in my opinion will decide our life in the upcoming decades.

I say "our life" and not "our survival", because Christ did not promise us survival but resurrection. Since survival is nothing. "Do not the publicans and pagans do the same? (Mt 5, 46-47).

Our faith is not based on the resurrection of Lazarus, of the daughter of Jairo, of the son of the widow of Naim; but on the final resurrection of Christ, which, by way of baptism, has become our eternal life. To live for survival is, at base, an option for death, moved by fear, that makes us lose the joy of living, living this today as a moment in which the Eternal God makes us participate in his Being which is Love. Is it possible, then, to have a fullness of life greater than this moment? And this, even if the next moment would be the moment of my death, or of the end of my community. If we didn't have this evangelical virginity, what good news could our monastic charism offer to the world of today?

The man of the XXIst century, having lost the meaning of eternal life, lives in order to survive. All the political and social programs and those of the religions "a la carte" propose means of survival. To survive the ecological catastrophe, survive epidemics, depression, accidents, terrorism, invasion of immigrants...

What does our charism offer to this world, to this culture of globalization of the XXIst century, that we find everywhere, in Europe, America, Asia, Africa and Oceania?

St. Benedict insists a lot on choosing life as the profound motivation of our vocation. In the Prologue of the Rule, the only vocational propaganda he makes is to ask, as God and the human heart ask, if the candidate "loves life and desires to know happiness every day" (RB Prol. 15), and then he gives the answer that to love life means to love "true and eternal life -veram et perpetuam vitam" (Prol. 17).

So it is not a dreamy life, a mere survival, and above all not a comfortable life realized in immanence. It is, rather, life here and now, eternal, eternal life which is ours in the present life.

The whole Rule illustrates this true and eternal life; it is that "road of life" which "the Lord Himself, in his goodness, is showing us." (Prol, 20)

If we don't propose this, if our communities don't live for this, if they are not a school of true and eternal life, then we are not offering our charism, and we are not really fruitful.

To bear fruit means to transmit life, and we are called to live and transmit the true and eternal life which the Paschal Christ communicates to us by Baptism.

I say all this because this visión permits us to live our weaknesses and our dyings as an opportunity to give witness of the true life and true fecundity that Christ always makes possible. The fecundity of the martyrs was manifested in the exceptional way they died.

This is a direct inheritance of Christ crucified: "The centurion that was there in front of Jesus, seeing that he had expired, declared:

"Truly this man was Son of God." (Mc 15,39).

What did this pagan man find so convincing in the death of Christ? He had the grace to see that Jesus died with a sentiment and a love that made this death a witness of a greater life, of a meaning of life stronger than death. It is not a coincidence that St. Benedict should put, one after another, three instruments of good works that speak of life and death:

"To desire eternal life with all the ardor of the spirit.

To keep death present every day.

To keep watch at every hour over the actions of his life.” (RB 4.46-48)

In the desire of eternal life everything acquires meaning: every moment of temporal life as well as inevitable death. Nothing is a more evident proof of eternal life than a living and dying that find in that desire their meaning and fulfillment.

The XXIst century is the century of a culture in which man no longer knows how to give meaning to life and death, because it is a culture of immanence that has lost the meaning of eternal life.

Do we have a desire of eternal life in our monasteries, in our liturgies, in our fraternal living, in our receptivity toward others, in our silence, in our word? Do we see in our life and in our death that the Risen Christ has conquered death and thus gives an eternal meaning to life?

We understand that these questions cannot be answered by a moralizing effort. It is not a question of doing something more, something different or better. Saint Benedict makes us see that it is rather a question of working on desire, the interior gaze, keeping watch over the heart, in order to give a profound meaning to ordinary, human life, which is what we live in the monastery just as everywhere else our brothers and sisters do.

Monks and nuns that have transmitted this patrimony to us are not lacking. If we are monks and nuns as best we can be today, it is because we have been engendered as best as possible in this vocation. Just as I am certain that I am linked to Adam and Eve by an uninterrupted chain of generations, so too, if today I am a Cistercian, it means that a mysterious spiritual chain connects unceasingly my vocation to that of the first abbots and monks of Cîteaux, and, by way of them, without interruption, to St. Benedict. When we met at Cîteaux in May, to look together at the possibilities of collaborating as Cistercian Family in the maintenance and utilization of our place of origin, in particular of the Definitory and of the traces of the first church, it was evident that the Spirit permitted us to find, in all its freshness, the source of a life that is engendering us today.

I think that in this sense we will have to find a way to live together the 900th anniversary of the Charter of Charity with a kind of filial piety that could regenerate us in order to engender, for our part, a Cistercian descendance more concerned, like Abraham, to be a blessing for the world of today, than to be a judgement that would condemn ourselves in first place.

Every charism is, before all else, a grace, and continues to be a charism if it continues to be received and transmitted as a grace. No one is the owner of a charism; sometimes they are the so-called guardians of the charism, but in fact they are just its kidnappers. We haven't received our charism to make it a hostage of our thirst for power, of our vanity or of our fear of losing our life for Christ.

Rather, charism makes prophets; to be a prophet means to be a servant of a gift that is given. It is like having a spring of water: I keep it if I let it flow far from where I am; otherwise the spring becomes a stagnated puddle.

I was struck recently by a phrase of the prophet Amos, read at Vigils: “When the Lord God has spoken, who will refuse to be a prophet?” (Amós 3: 8)

In the history of our charism, many accepted to transmit the Word that God confided to them. I am referring to our spiritual authors, our saints, the monks and nuns that have known how to relive in a way that is particularly sensitive and visible the flame of our charism.

After having provoked a little here, six years ago, a common effort to have Saint Gertrude recognized as a Doctor of the Church, we have come a long way, maybe not much in the sense of that cause, but in the cause of meaning. I mean to say that the studies, meetings and sessions which this cause provoked convinced us that what we desire for the Church is already a reality for us: Gertrude is for us a prophet of a word of God that can speak to the man of the XXIst century and can give meaning to his life by means of a living and loving relation with Christ, and, through Him, with the Trinity.



Conference of Dom Gregory Polan, Abbot Primate of the Benedictines

"Unity of God- Unity in God:" Monastics and Muslims in Dialogue
Nairobi, Kenya
2-7 September 2017

1 September 2017, proved to be an auspicious date for the arrival in Nairobi of Shi'a Muslims and monastic men and women to participate in DIMMID's first interreligious conference in Africa. For Muslims, it was Eid al-Adha, "Feast of the Sacrifice," the feast that honors the willingness of Ibrahim (Abraham) to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience to God's command. Eid al-Adha is the second of two Muslim holidays celebrated worldwide each year, and considered the holier of the two.

For Kenyans, September 1st was the day on which the Supreme Court of Kenya announced its ruling on the contested presidential election that took place in August. Determining that there was sufficient evidence of tampering with the vote count, the Court decreed the election null and void and called for a new election to be held within 60 days (the date has now been set for October 17). By deciding not to declare either of the top two vote getters the winner, the court averted the strong possibility that its decision would be met by massive and potentially violent protests throughout the country.

This meeting of monastic men and women with Shi'a Muslims was the fifth gathering in which DIMMID has been directly involved. The previous four took place in Rome (2011), QomjIsfahan (2012), Assisi/Rome (2014), and QomjMashhad (2016). They were preceded by three smaller meetings organized by Dr. Mohammad Ali Shomali and Abbot Timothy Wright (Ampleforth); two were held in England and one in Iran.

The site of this year's meeting was the Subiaco Center of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in Karen. The ten Shi'a participants came from Iran, England (Iranians, Americans, and a Kenyan), and Canada. Fourteen Benedictines, including the present and the former Abbot Primate, came from six countries in Africa (Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Tanzania, and Uganda), Australia, Belgium, England, Germany, Italy, and the United States. Also present was a German theologian, a correspondent for Bavarian radio, who lives in Italy and who has participated in and reported on previous conferences. Although the delegates to this meeting came from fourteen different countries, and most of them were new to this dialogue, all agreed that in the short space of six days we experienced a depth of interreligious friendship and a widening of our hearts (*Dilatato Corde!*) that was truly a gift of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful.

The theme of this year's meeting obviously goes to the very heart of the faith of Muslims and Christians. Both share a belief in the Oneness of God, but the way they express that belief is profoundly different. The Christian faith, as defined by the first ecumenical council of the Church (Nicaea, 325) and as formulated in the Nicene Creed, professes belief "in one God, in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God ... consubstantial with the Father.... [and] in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son...." Some 300 years later, the Prophet Muhammad narrated the revelation he had received: "AU praise be to Allah Who has neither taken to Himself a son, nor has He any partner in His kingdom, nor does He need anyone, out of weakness, to protect Him" (Qur'an 17:111).

In the not so distant past, the most common way to deal with such radically different expressions of monotheistic faith was by means of apologetics—defending or "proving" the truth of one's own

religious doctrines through systematic argumentation and discourse. At best, this approach led to a polite standoff (agreeing to disagree), at worst, to increased hostility toward those whose way of expressing their faith in the Oneness of God differed from one's own.

The goal of our gathering in Africa was to provide a space in which Shi'a Muslims and Catholic monastic men and women could speak openly to one another about the ways we express and understand our faith in One God. We resonated with the statement of Christian de Chergé, your Trappist brother, a witness to all, and a friend of Muslims who believed that "To speak of God in a different way is not to speak of a different God (*Dire Dieu autrement n'est pas dire un autre Dieu*)".! Even more, we wanted to speak with one another about the ways our faith motivates us to work for unity, whether that be within our own communities of *faith*, with people of other faiths, or within society at large.

We devoted much of our time together to small group or plenary discussions during which we were urged to speak in the first person about our faith, religious experience, and spiritual practice—in other *words*, to speak not so much in terms of "Catholics believe," or "Muslims believe," but rather, "I believe." Discussion also provided opportunities to ask questions of one another and so come to a better understanding and appreciation of experience and practice that differs from, but can often be seen to complement our own. It was a rather touching moment when the comment of a Muslim participant said he did not agree with those who said that Christians were polytheists. You share our belief in One *God*, he said, but the way you express your faith in the Oneness of God is Trinitarian. He did not understand this, but he accepted the honesty and sincerity of Christians who assured him that belief in the Trinity did not weaken or compromise their belief in the Unity of God.

Running throughout the conference was the growing conviction that our dialogue about the unity of God should go beyond coming to a better understanding of and respect for one another. We need to find ways to work together to deepen our unity with God and our unity with one another as brothers and sisters in the one human family and as "cousins" in the Abrahamic family of faith.

His actual words are (in my translation/paraphrase) "To speak of things in a different way does not mean that one is speaking of different things. Likewise, to speak of God in different way does not mean that he is another {God}, but that he is Utterly Other, in other words, different from all others." « Mais voir les choses différemment ne signifie pas qu'on ne voit pas les mêmes choses. De même, quand Dieu se dit autrement, il ne se dit pas autre, mais Tout-Autre, c'est-à-dire autrement que tous les autres » (*L'invincible espérance*, p. 127).

In addition to the presentations given and discussions held at the Subiaco Centre, the conference included participation in an interreligious afternoon at the Jaffery [Shi'a] Islamic Centre in Lavington, Nairobi; courtesy visits to the Apostolic Nuncio to Kenya, Arch bishop Charles Daniel Balvo, and to the Auxiliary Bishop of Nairobi, the Most Rev. David Kamau Ng'ang'a; brief presentations to the staff and students at the house of studies for African Benedictine; an extended visit to and discussion with the Benedictine community at Prince of Peace Monastery (Tigoni); and two public events at Tangaza University College, a Catholic University College jointly owned by twenty or so member religious congregations, among them, the Benedictines. On the first day at Tangaza, after welcomes from academy administrators and an introduction by the Abbot Primate, Dr. Newton Kahumbi Maina, Ph.D., of the Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies at Kenyatta University, Nairobi, spoke on the state of interreligious dialogue in Kenya. The second day was devoted to the specific characteristics and goals of monastic interreligious dialogue.

The contact established between DIMMID and Tangaza is especially promising for the future of Monastic-Muslim dialogue in Africa. The newly-appointed Vice-Chancellor Designate, the Rev. Prof. Stephen Mbungua Ngari, and the Head of the Mission and Islamic Department, Fr. Innocent Maganya, M. Afr., expressed their eagerness to collaborate with Shi'a academic institutions in Iran to offer courses and workshops, both at Tangaza and throughout East and South Africa. Fr.

Maganya also expressed his readiness to work with DIMMID to provide formation programs in interreligious dialogue for monks and nuns in this region. He thinks that similar formation programs for French-speaking monks and nuns could be developed in collaboration with a center run by the Missionaries of African Bamako, Mali.

To conclude on a very personal note, one of the most eye-opening experiences for me was to realize how much my own sense of the Muslim religion, Muslims in general, and the fringe fundamentalist Muslims has been influenced by the media, who, more often than not, look for the shocking, violent, and deadly experiences carried out by Muslims. This was brought home to me when one of our young German volunteers at Sant Anslemo met me at the airport upon my return to Rome. And he, matter of factly, asked me, "Why would you ever want to meet with Muslims, who I see at terrorists?" Though I tried to gently explain a few things to him, it was dear, his mind was made up; I can only hope that some of the things said to him might be recalled in the months and years ahead. So together, my dear sisters and brothers, let us pray for peace and understanding, let us listen with open hearts, let us read carefully, and let us seek together paths of understanding and peace.



Homily for the Closing Mass of the Chapter (Dom Eamon)

In these days at Mass we hear of the return from exile and the rebuilding of Jerusalem and its temple. Today we find Ezra in a sorry state at the time of the evening sacrifice as he meditates and prays on what has befallen his people, God's people. Punished because of their unfaithfulness to God and his law and scattered over the face of the earth they are now receiving mercy and new life. The exile seemed like and was a disaster for those who suffered it but the hand of God was in it and he never abandoned his people, despite what seemed like so much evidence to the contrary. In fact, out of the exile came the Diaspora, a fertile ground for the spread of the Gospel. Out of the exile Judaism was born, the synagogue had its roots and the study of the law took a central place in the life of God's people. And above all out of this renewed faith came Mary and Joseph and Jesus our Lord and Saviour. In this land of exile God is to be thanked and his greatness is to be made known, says the psalm.

And in the Gospel we find the Twelve being entrusted with the mission of spreading this good news. They are given power and authority over evil, to cure diseases, to let it be known that God rules, to heal and make whole. It is a power that is carried in earthen vessels that are indeed fragile containers. They are people who are dependent – who live for today, who travel light and who rely on the hospitality and welcome of others. They have only themselves and the Good News to offer. But their message brings blessing or judgment and it goes on achieving what God wants to be brought about by his word of salvation.

Some truths that emerge from this word today:

- The presence of God with his people: nothing can separate us from the love of God!
- What appears like a disaster can be a blessing – the Cross is a constant reminder of this.
- We are weak but in God all things are possible.

In the faith and hope that this word evokes let us celebrate these sacred mysteries.

