

The Interaction between consecrated life and the New Evangelization – a monastic response.

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The monastic point of view that is expressed here is that of a member of the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance (OCSO), more generally known as Trappists in this part of the world. We are a small part of the great Benedictine family. The OCSO has its origin in that monastic tradition of evangelical life that found expression in the Rule for Monasteries of Saint Benedict. The founders of Citeaux (whence the name Cistercians) gave this tradition a particular form in the 12th century with their desire for a simpler and poorer life, with more solitude and a more exact observance of the Rule of Benedict. This particularity was further accentuated in the strict observance movement that was associated with the monastery of La Trappe in 17th century France (whence the name Trappists). The monks and nuns dedicate themselves to the worship of God in the monastery and under the Rule of St. Benedict. In the context of the present discussion the following quote from our Constitutions gives our orientation:

“Fidelity to the monastic way of life is closely related to zeal for the Kingdom of God and for the salvation of the whole human race. Monks bear this apostolic concern in their hearts. It is the contemplative life itself that is their way of participating in the mission of Christ and his Church and of being part of the local church” (C. 31).

The life is lived within the monastery and is made up of worship (Eucharist and Divine Office) personal prayer and lectio divina and work (often manual) and service of the brethren. For the monk then the perspective on evangelization is somewhat different to the minister of the word in that it is in his faithfully living out the monastic conversatio, his seeking of God in community and in the rhythm of community life, of work, prayer, service, fraternity, that he exercises this zeal for the Kingdom of God, rather than in an active ministry. While the focus is the seeking of God the orientation is personal conversion of self and of the community in its life. How can we live better our calling to seek God in this place and in this give a community (ecclesial) witness of the reality of the Church?

There are 169 autonomous communities in the Order (97 of monks and 72 of nuns) spread over 44 countries made up of 2083 monks and 1736 nuns. The supreme authority in the Order is the General Chapter made up of the superiors (monks and nuns) of the autonomous monasteries of the Order as well as regional delegates. In fact we had a General Chapter in September and some of what I have to offer in these reflections will be coming from what emerged there.

The “**Lineamenta**” for the XIIIth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops entitled “The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith” is a document of three chapters entitled: Time for a “New Evangelization”; Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Initiation into the Christian Experience and has a Preface, Introduction and Conclusion. The **Preface** speaks of the

missionary mandate received from the Risen Lord, the term evangelization and its usage in post Vatican II times, and states that “the new evangelization is primarily addressed to those who have drifted from the Church in traditionally Christian countries.” It goes on to say that “the aim of the approaching synodal assembly will be to examine the present situation in the particular Churches and to trace, in communion with the Holy Father the new methods and means for transmitting the Good News to people in our world today with a renewed enthusiasm proper to the saints ...” The Conclusion states that the new evangelization does not mean a “new Gospel” but rather a new response to the needs of humanity and people today. It is a new vision for a new situation which brings joy and sets people free. It means to share the world’s deep desire for salvation and render our faith intelligible by communicating the logos of hope. The obstacles to the new evangelization are precisely a lack of joy and hope among people... which affects the very tenor of our Christian communities”. And the concluding aspiration is that the “world of our time be enabled to receive the Good News not from evangelisers who are dejected, discouraged, impatient or anxious, but from ministers of the Gospel whose lives glow with fervour ...”

There is recognition here of a changed world, a loss of faith in the traditionally Catholic parts of the world, a desire among people today for a message of hope; a realisation that the witness of the Church is not what might be expected and a desire to stir up and raise witnesses to the Gospel that will pass on its message of life.

The **Introduction** is important because it situates evangelization in God himself who takes the initiative in communicating himself to us in Jesus Christ, so, while there is, here and there, an admonitory tone about the need for the Christian to evangelise, the deeper thought in the text is the reflection of the theological truth – that God communicates himself to people who are not looking for him! (“I have been found by those who did not seek me: I have shown myself to those who did not ask for me” [Rom. 10.20]). So we are not simply talking about techniques here – ways or skills that will be effective in the work of evangelisation - but rather about the free and gracious initiative of God who speaks to us. The minister of the Gospel, the Christian is one who has been touched by God and, as a result wants to share his experience, his faith, the joy he has found. He is at the service of a gift given not its master. The work of evangelization is the work of the Holy Spirit, we are its servants. This brings us back to the validity of our own faith and how much we believe the things which we profess with our lips! It will lead us to question the quality of our presence in the Church and to others. God speaks to us to call us to communion with him and with each other in Him. This is not just an idea but a reality lived in faith and in practice. If we are not living this communion with one another but merely preaching it then our words will be hollow and will fall flat. We are talking here not so much about strategy as about a quality of presence – how we are to others and how we are with them. The text raises a question about the Church and its capacity to become a real community, a true fraternity and a living body. I presume that the difficulties we have in our Order are, in general, not unlike the experience of many of you: speaking generally, our communities in the West are mainly elderly with few young people (there are some striking exceptions); they have difficulty in finding suitable people for leadership at many levels, have problems with their economy, increased

lay help, large buildings and the list goes on. There are growth areas in parts of Asia, in Africa and much of Latin America, and the communities in these regions have other challenges. But the biggest challenge for all communities is that of loving one another. It is relationships – living in a loving way with my brothers or sisters. Many communities have worked much on dialogue, on group dynamics with facilitators and experts in counselling and personal therapy. And there is no doubt that in most cases the quality of relationships has improved. This is something to be grateful for, but it is not enough. The foundation of our love as Christian monks and nuns is our faith (and hope) in God. This is the only way that we can meet the challenge of the question raised above about the Church and its capacity to become a real community, a true fraternity, a living body. Such a faith shows us the value and dignity given us by God and given to all people. This realisation humbles us and gives us the patience that is at the bottom of all true love.

In the **first Chapter** (Time for a “New Evangelisation”) the concept is once again discussed and at more length. Here it is clear that the issue is a renewal of spiritual effort to meet the challenges which today’s society and cultures, undergoing rapid change, pose for the Christian faith, and not just in Europe, but all over. The text remarks that the expression “new evangelization” is not accepted fully within the Church and among other Christians. It is seen as a negative judgment on the Church’s past, another way of proselytising and a possible change of attitude towards non-believers. I am not sure of the import of the first point concerning the Church’s past. One would hope that it is not a presumption that we are the ones that have the light, are fervent and have all the answers, in contrast to our past. I can see how this “call to action” could well be seen as a type of crusade that could threaten others. A lot depends on the attitude of the Church. That proposed by Pope Benedict, in the image of the ‘Courtyard of the Gentiles,’ seems to speak of a humbler mode of presence to others which is highly desirable. A concern for all peoples, believers and unbelievers emanating from a desire to be of service to the mystery for which and from which the Church lives is the motivation out of which the Church needs to act. The repeated concern enunciated here for self-evaluation, for purification and for ongoing discernment gives hope that the spirit that animates this present effort at revitalization will avoid the pitfalls mentioned above.

The document goes on to outline the sectors of contemporary society that pose challenges for evangelization and there is a good summary of the issues as we find them in today’s world: secularism and its effects; migration and globalization; information technology and the means of social communication; the north/south divide and the persistent economic crisis; the advances in scientific and technological research, both the benefits derived from them and the challenges they pose; civic and political life and the changes taking place in global politics with the emergence of new economic, political and religious forces and the consequences of this.

The description of the contemporary world is not new in the areas it mentions. It describes possibilities and dangers in the present situation and then goes on to offer ways in which the Church and the Christian community needs to respond to these challenges. The remedy offered is to overcome fear and to engage in a critical discernment of the situation in the light of the Christian gift

of hope. These new challenges which call us into dialogue require turning a critical eye towards our manner of life, our thinking, our values and our means of communication. They call us to a self-evaluation which can lead to a better understanding of ourselves as Christians today. It is a call that will result in practical strategies for evangelization, courage in speaking of God and a sustained effort at giving a common witness as Christians to the power of the Gospel.

In the course of our recent General Chapter (September 2011) we studied, as usual, house reports from all of the communities of the Order and I would like to share with you some of the main findings that emerged which show something of how communities are facing that world that is presented here. Apart from particular problems of communities, there are some indications of a spiritual renewal in different parts of the Order, including houses in regions marked by ageing. The vitality of a community does not depend so much on the age or number of members as on their manner of living the Cistercian life. Some communities, despite being precarious, show evidence of a great desire to live, of great hope and true serenity. Cistercian life is lived authentically where you find the evangelical values of forgiveness, reconciliation, mercy and unity fostered in a genuine way. It seems that two things are necessary for a community to be able to live and move forward, or at least to persevere with a dynamic faith: 1) the ability to call oneself into question or the awareness to be continually throughout life in a process of formation or development and so, to have the interior disposition to fight against individualism and to lead a happy life. 2) The ability to give expression to a vision or to outline a project that comes from the heart and is owned by the community. Thanks to such dispositions a good number of communities have been able to find effective resources to face up to their situations.

On the other hand it is clear that some communities are stuck and don't have a clear view of their own situation. Other communities have serious difficulties or internal divisions. At a more concrete level, some communities, after having spent years adapting buildings, improving the quality of fraternal life and faithfulness to monastic values, and having done all this in a well thought out and calm way, have come to realise that all of that has not substantially changed their situation, and are questioning themselves about new ways forward. Others again have worked on interpersonal relationships and now find that they lack a spirit of interiority and are trying to redress this balance through revitalizing the main monastic values. Use of modern media of communication is still an unresolved issue for many communities. Dialogue between monasteries in the same region has been helpful in opening some communities up and bringing them to realise that they cannot resolve their problems alone. These reports give some indication of how the communities of our Order are responding to the challenges of today's world.

Consecrated life is seen as having a great role to play in the section dealing here with spirituality and the changing sense of religion among people today, as well as in dialogue with the great world religions. Many of our monasteries are finding that significant numbers of lay people are interested in not only visiting monasteries but in deepening their knowledge and understanding of Cistercian spirituality in such a way as to help them lead fuller Christian lives in their own parish and diocese.

Some monks and nuns on both sides of the Atlantic are involved in East/West dialogue but they are a minority though good efforts are being made in the Benedictine world to broaden the interest and involvement here. We have a small and discreet presence in the Muslim world and of course the witness of the monks of Tibhirine got much publicity as a result of the film “Des Hommes et des Dieux”.

The **second chapter** of this document on **Proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ** is for me the most striking and important part of the document. It is this because it focuses on the goal of passing on the faith which is the realization of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ, in the Spirit, thereby leading to an experiencing of his Father and our Father. Transmitting the faith in Christ means to create the conditions for a faith which is thought-out, celebrated, lived and prayed: in short, this means participating in the life of the Church. What is not believed or lived cannot be passed on. It is only by being with Jesus and living the experience of the Father in the Spirit that we can speak of our life. This is a gift and a task for all who come to Jesus and believe in him. This happens through the sacred scripture and the living Tradition of the Church. Catechesis and the catechumenate are the means for passing on this tradition, through teachers who can lead people into the Scriptures and the knowledge of the Lord through their own teaching and example. The aspect of **Christian initiation** is treated in more detail in the **third Chapter**. This is a wonderfully clear statement of what coming to faith in Jesus means.

The fact is that there are many challenges to the Church’s capacity to do this due to a scarcity of priests and the state of many families bowed by the struggles of faith in today’s world. The document seems to look to groups and ecclesial movements to make up this lack.

In our monastic circumstances, as I mentioned earlier, many communities, have difficulties similar to those of the Church in passing on the life they have received. Some of them have difficulty in finding suitable members for formation roles while others who have people in formation have difficulty in finding people who model the life well. But there are those who have the resources and the experience and reports from our General Chapter reflected their experience in formation. The community is the first formator when the search for God is alive and present in the members. Each one is responsible for passing on the monastic values to the next generation. A happy and coherent example of the older members is vital for the younger ones to persevere. They will follow what they can see and touch. A community vision is also important, sustained by the teaching of the superior. A community needs to be united and what makes this happen is true dialogue. This is where hearts are changed and grace works. The reality of candidates today requires, more than in the past, a serious and humble discernment in regard to the candidate’s vocation or the community’s ability to form him. Even though the community is not perfect it can still make demands on the novice in relation to his following of Jesus. The capacity to give oneself is part of any authentic call to follow the Lord. We should not give in to the illusion that in making life easier or lowering our ideals we can expect to find the person fulfilled. The formator’s role is to help each person integrate what he receives so that he can interiorise it and be transformed by it. Because of this initial formation should be more about

immersing the person in daily life and in lived monastic values rather than about intellectual formation. It is more about bringing the person into contact with Christ than about catechesis. The formator needs to be somebody who is at ease with his abbot and community and so he can help the novice to enter into a similar relationship with them and with God. This experience echoes well what is said in this chapter and its conclusion that the Church must become a community of witnesses to the Gospel. It is refreshing too to note that another fruit of such a renewed Christian living is “the courage to recognise and admit our faults!”

These are some reflections that occur to me on reading this document. I hope that they may be of some service to the meeting.