

THE CURRENT SITUATION OF FATHER IMMEDIATES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

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I. The State of the Question

The Central Commission meeting at Roscrea in June 2016 noted all the work that has been done in the Order on the question of Father Immediates and the Statute on Regular Visitations in recent years. (See page 17 of the CC Report.)

A working paper was prepared for the General Chapter of 2011 on the topic “The Role of the Father Immediate and the Challenge of his Ministry” which gave a synopsis of the responses to a questionnaire. All the Commissions studied this topic and their reports expressed a very positive respect for the ministry of the Father Immediate and its importance in the life of the communities. Some practical suggestions were offered. One pertained to the long debated topic of the need to limit the number of daughter houses any one community can effectively minister to. Another regarded the item mentioned in the Statute on Visitations that invites communities to send a report on the effect of the Visitation to the Visitor a few months after the Visitation had been completed.

It was proposed that the questions and suggestions from the Commissions’ reports be studied at the 2014 General Chapter. Unfortunately there was no time for this at the General Chapter of 2014 so the Central Commission of Roscrea in 2016 put this topic on the program of the General Chapter of 2017 with an increased sense of urgency because of the increased number of delegated Father Immediates and the difficulty of finding Father Immediates. The question has become more complex and urgent because of the diminishment and closing of certain motherhouses and the need to find other Father Immediates. New unexpected situations have developed and it is quite possible that others will follow.

II. Filiations and the Charter of Charity

Our Constitutions explain the service of Father Immediates and the Statute on the Regular Visitation with reference to the Charter of Charity, the 900th anniversary of which we will celebrate in 2019.

In accordance with the Charter of Charity, Cistercian communities are united by the bond of filiation. Traditionally filiation has its juridical form in the function of the Father Immediate.

Paternity and filiation are expressed through mutual assistance and support. (C. 73)

This bond of filiation is an expression of the transmission of life from motherhouse to daughter house, which became the basic structure of our Order as a family of families/filiations. This then becomes the communion which unites all the communities of the Order among themselves with the aim of mutual help, encouragement and support in their various difficulties. This characteristic of the Order is underlined by Constitution 4:

The communities of the Order spread all over the world are gathered into unity by a bond of charity. Through the union that results from this association they can help one another in

coming to a more complete understanding and practice of their common patrimony and they can offer mutual encouragement and support in difficulties. (C. 4.1)

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

III. Actual problems:

1. A growing number of monasteries which have several/many daughter houses no longer have the resources to be able to fulfill the responsibilities of being a mother house.
 - Monasteries who have a superior *ad nutum* rather than an abbot who is often limited by their Father Immediate to the pastoral care of their own community and not the daughter houses. Also their situation is temporary and, if the Superior *ad nutum* is brought in from another monastery, they do not have familiarity with the daughter houses.
 - The precarious situation of several monasteries with large filiations (Melleray, Bricquebec, Mount Melleray)
2. The incapacity to take care of their daughter houses can happen rather suddenly and unexpectedly. Someone dies, a Regular Visitation asks the abbot to resign, a superior *ad nutum* is named without being given the task of caring for the daughter houses, etc.
3. The daughter houses are left to themselves. A temporary delegated Father Immediate has to be found and appointed, hoping that he and his community will want to accept the responsibility to further the Cistercian development of the "new daughter". The daughter house may not want to accept the delegated Father Immediate proposed.
4. Many temporary situations are created which weaken the real possibilities of pastoral collaboration and often cause misunderstandings.
5. Sometimes the request to be a delegated Father Immediate is refused because:
 - The situation of the abbot's own monastery is too fragile.
 - He already has other daughter houses.
 - He feels incapable of confronting a new situation, perhaps more so if in another culture.
 - He feels he lacks the financial capacity to care for daughter houses.
 - Personal health problems.
6. Perhaps an abbot is willing to be a delegated visitor but not a Father Immediate. But what is needed is pastoral care of the community that is more intense than just a visitation every two years.
7. Some daughter houses do not want to give up their Father Immediate even though the motherhouse is no longer able to do the job.

8. The particular needs of 'spontaneous monasteries' that were admitted into the Order without the normal process of foundation by a motherhouse and are the responsibility of the Order that accepted them to provide a Father Immediate and motherhouse to transmit the Cistercian patrimony and encourage their monastic response to the Gospel.

IV. Some Basic Questions:

1. Do we want to be faithful to the original structure of filiation in which houses founded by a monastery become and remain daughter houses of the mother house as intended by our founding fathers?
2. Is it time to face the actual problems of our time with more practical, pragmatic solutions?
3. Is filiation merely a structure or does it express something fundamental to our charism?
4. What values are expressed in our filiations that might be lost if we make changes in the manner of designating Father Immediates?

V. Possible Proposals:

Our concern: the exercise of responsible paternity by the motherhouse without detriment to the life of the mother house itself. At our meeting to work on this document, we started by considering the three proposals that have been mentioned most often.

1. The General Chapter could be given the power to choose and assign a new Father Immediate when necessary, which the abbot and his community would accept under obedience, *ad experimentum*. After 3 years there would be a vote of the two communities and the General Chapter to confirm the permanent change of paternity. This power would be delegated to the Abbot General for urgent cases that arise between Chapters. He could give this task as a temporary delegation to be approved by the following General Chapter.

Pro – This authority is needed in urgent cases because of the difficulty in finding abbots willing to become the Father Immediate of houses in need that subsequently remain without a Father Immediate over a long period of time.

Con – What criteria should be used to choose which community would be asked to be the new Father Immediate? Can such obedience be demanded by the Chapter or the Abbot General?

The power to demand such obedience might be possible by adapting elements of a centralized Religious Institute. This would involve a change in the structure of the Order.

Con – Forced adoptions do not augur well for good relationships of trust.

2. The larger filiations of some monasteries could be divided up more evenly among the houses of the Order. At present, 12 monasteries have from 5-8 daughter houses, 5 have 4 daughter houses, 14 have 3, 9 have 2, 19 have 1, 34 have none. It is suggested that there be a limit of 3 or 4 daughter houses and the others could be adopted by monasteries that have less than 2. This could be done by decisions of the conventual chapters of the motherhouses, the daughter houses and the new motherhouses, and would need to be confirmed by the General Chapter.

Pro – This has been put forth as a simple solution to redistribute the burdens of overloaded houses.

Con – Each house with more than 4 daughter houses would have to decide which ones would be kept and which ones would be ‘offered for adoption’. A new Father Immediate would have to be found for each of the houses to be given away. This would need the acceptance of the conventual chapter of the new motherhouse and the agreement of the daughter house. Some Father Immediates who are overburdened do not want to let go of their daughter houses.

Con – Even if communities were open and agreeable to this proposal, this would entail a huge amount of work, many sided consultations, votes and collaboration between the former Father Immediate and the new one.

Con – The solution would not be so immediate, simple or practical.

Con – Family and filiation ties would be lost. A new Father Immediate would have to take on a completely new situation without knowing the community of the daughter house, its history, and its people.

3. Separate the role of financial support from the role of paternity.

All the houses of the Order would need to agree to contribute all funds available for such purposes to the Commission of Aid rather than distributing their funds themselves. The Commission of Aid will consult the Father Immediate of the community requesting assistance and have access to the financial documents of the said community in order to evaluate the request and make their decision.

Pro – A community with limited financial resources would be able to accept responsibility for a daughter house.

Pro – The Charter of Charity states that it is the General Chapter that gives material support to houses in difficulty.

Con – Some communities may prefer to administer the distribution their funds themselves.

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

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

1. **Seek collaboration from within the motherhouse.** An overburdened abbot of a mother house could, with the explicit agreement of the daughter house, delegate the role of Father Immediate and the full pastoral care of a daughter house to a prior, a former superior or other competent member of the mother house community, while retaining canonical jurisdiction. Actually an abbess could also be delegated by the Father Immediate with the same kind of pastoral care or be delegated as a Visitor, even in houses of monks, while the Father Immediate retains responsibility and jurisdiction. Pastoral care and canonical jurisdiction can be distinguished and separated. They do not have to reside in the same person.

Pro – The councilors of the Abbot General who have never been superiors have been given the right of making visitations. Other non-superiors could be given the same power, based on the discernment of the Fr. Immediate.

Pro – Such an arrangement could be freely decided between the Father Immediate and the daughter house but would not be imposed on any community not in favor of such a delegation.

Con – There is obviously a risk of human error and incapacity as there is in entrusting any new pastoral task.

2. **Seek collaboration within a filiation.** An overburdened motherhouse of a large filiation could delegate visitations to certain daughter houses to superiors of other houses in his filiation who have some acquaintance with the sister house.

Pro – A superior ad nutum at the motherhouse could also retain responsibility for daughter houses by delegating the visitations to one of his other daughter houses where possible. There would be continuity within the same filiation.

Con – Perhaps the filiation is not so united as to make any difference between this and the possibility of delegating someone from any other house. But it could be a motivation for filiations to renew their sense of family responsibility.

3. **Seek collaboration within the Region.** Paternity and visitations that need to be delegated could be given to houses of the same region with the coordination of the President of the Region.

Pro – In some regions the same culture, history, language and proximity could be of help.

Con – Being in the same Region does not necessarily facilitate trust and communication.
(Would this be effective in your Region?)

Con – In other larger regions, similarities of culture and language do not exist.

Con – Filiation ties would be lost. There would be a loss of contact between regions. Our transcultural unity would be weakened.

4. Seek collaboration with the nuns.

A. To relieve the burden of Father Immediates, houses of nuns could ask for delegated Abbess Visitors for 2 out of every 3 regular visitations, with the Father Immediate assuring the canonical link and making the visitation every 6 years. This is already possible under our current legislation and would be a generous contribution of the houses of nuns to lessen the difficulties of the houses of monks.

Pro – It would urge the women superiors to be more active and responsible in our Single Order. It would also promote deeper relations among the houses of nuns and be an incentive to grow in trust.

Con – It is said that some houses of nuns and superiors thereof prefer a monk as visitor.

B. The Charter of Charity, having been written for houses of monks, does not envisage mother immediates. Perhaps the time has come to envisage this possibility. A daughter house of nuns could ask the Father Immediate to be given a house of nuns as its mother immediate. The Father Immediate and his community as well as the other house of nuns requested would have to agree. The Father Immediate would retain jurisdictional responsibility in a collaboration of shared authority.

Pro – A theoretical possibility that has aroused negative reactions in the past could perhaps find expression in a concrete situation and then be evaluated.

Con – A delicate balance would need to be reached in which the clarity of the jurisdiction of the Father Immediate because of his priesthood must be maintained.

5. A special and permanent visitor for the houses of a particular region (Nigeria, West Africa or all of Africa) could be appointed and given abbatial powers. This was done by the General Chapter of 1933 for the Far East because of difficulties of making regular visitations. The prior of Mont des Cats was named to the charge. This shows that a non-superior could be given the abbatial powers for visitations and general overseeing of house/houses in special situations.

(Cf. *"The Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance in the 20th Century – From 1892 to the Close of the Second Vatican Council – Volume One"*, page 174)

6. Some of these possibilities can be tried and explored. They may open up new pastoral collaboration of shared authority but they will not solve all the problems. At the Central Commissions there was a strong plea for a change of attitude for more generosity and solidarity in the Order, more willingness to make sacrifices and take risks in order to help communities in need, in the spirit of the Charter of Charity. *"If there is not a change of attitude in terms of the level of mutual obligation, these questions will remain without a solution... the situation deteriorates rapidly."* We cannot assume that other monasteries can do what we feel we cannot do. No monastery is in a situation of such great strength as to feel able to help others so we must learn to give from our poverty as the poor widow in the gospel.

VII. The Current Situation

We feel the scope of this document is not just limited to examining material situations and proposing material solutions but must also examine spiritual realities and make creative suggestions for the future.

Our discussions about concrete situations revealed more difficulties than had been imagined. Reflecting on the problem of the lack of Father Immediates increased our awareness not just of fragile communities but also of the fragility of the Order as such. It seems we are at a moment in which we are called to a new consciousness of our situation, to seek the spiritual roots of our problems, to admit our mistakes and to pose ourselves questions. The final sentence of the 2014 document on the State of the Order states: *"The call to change is addressed not to structures but to human hearts"*. We are faced with a call to conversion. Chapter 72 of the Rule reminds us : *"Let no one follow what he thinks useful for himself but rather for others as well"*. 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)

After all the documents, working papers, questionnaires and discussion about the role of the Father Immediate there are still questions of what is expected from him. There is a growing consensus that the most important thing for an effective pastoral relationship of a Father Immediate with his daughter house, or of a Visitor with the visited community, is a common vision of monastic life held by the Visitor and the visited. Do we have a common vision of our Benedictine-Cistercian charism that can be the basis of discernment? Do we have the courage to ask the questions that need to be asked and say the things that need to be said?

The Charter of Charity successfully achieved equilibrium between the autonomy of the local house and the need for faithful adhesion to the common vision of belonging to the larger family, the Church of Cîteaux, wherever it was present. There was a shared responsibility to support and maintain that balance in which the good of each house and the good of the whole were not felt to be in opposition.

We live in an age of autonomy in which that balance has been lost because of claims to autonomy, fear and rejection of authority and exaggerated diffidence about interfering in the matters of an autonomous house. Difficult situations can become blocked because of hesitation to use rightful authority and unwillingness to accept advice, suggestions or new decisions. We need to admit that the influence of modern thought and culture has weakened our vision of faith as regards the authority of Christ 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. The 'crisis of Father Immediates' would seem to be due to a lack of faith.

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. Perhaps the celebration of the 900th anniversary of the Charter of Charity could be an occasion in which we renew our commitment to the gift of our common charism and strengthen our solidarity as prophetic witnesses of new humanity in Christ.

THE FATHER IMMEDIATE
Some current problematic situations

FATHER IMMEDIATE	PRESENT SITUATION	AFFECTED DAUGHTER HOUSES
Melleray	Dispersed community	Bricquebec Laval
Bricquebec	Superior <i>ad nutum</i>	Phare Nishinomiya Imari Nasu Ajimu
Mount-des-Cats	Superior <i>ad nutum</i> (D. Marc-André was elected 10.XII)	(until 2017 Chapter) Tilburg to Orval Frattochie to Tamié Fille-Dieu to Sept Fons
Mount Melleray	Claustral Prior Bolton delegate of FI	(no permanent arrangements) New Melleray Roscrea Mellifont (Pontifical Com) Bethlehem Kopua (delegate Tarrawarra) Glencairn Abakaliki
Mariawald	Claustral Prior (Tilburg delegate of FI until 2017)	Marija Zvijezda (Pont. Ad.) Maria Frieden (Scourmont until 2017 Chapter)
Genesee	(For health reasons unable to function in remote areas.)	Awhum (Pontifical Com) Illah (Scourmont for finance)
Bamenda	Pontifical Commissary	Nsugbe