

SYNTHESIS OF THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF 2017

Character of the Chapter

The austere agenda of the Chapter was evident from the five Working Papers featured in the General Booklet. The first paper, on the need to review the Order's structure of Fathers Immediate, observed that reflection 'on the problem of Fathers Immediate [has] 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' (p. 34). The second, on the accompaniment of increasingly fragile communities, ascertained the widespread reality of fragility, while stressing the Order's wish to see such situations not 'as a calamity but as a challenge towards the transmission of life even when a community has to be closed' (p. 37). The third, a study of C. 67, addressed the need for clearer legislation on the process of closure, given the various circumstances in which prospects of suppression are real. The fourth, revisiting votes 47-50 of the 2014 Chapter, examined the viability of extending exercise of abbatial ministry beyond the age of 75. The fifth, prepared for the Chapter of 2014 but untreated then, since time ran out, reflected on our houses' financial needs. It asked 'why a large majority of communities do not arrive at total self-sufficiency and why a good number have a recurring need for outside assistance' (p. 60). Given this pinpointing of failing resources and collapsing structures, of financial and spiritual poverty, several capitulants said they had looked forward to the Chapter with a degree of dread. It was the more remarkable, then, that, as procedures drew to a close, consensual opinion expressed appreciation for a warm, fraternal atmosphere of trust, for efficient, creative measures taken with delicate pastoral care, for the unanimous affirmation of core Cistercian values, and for a new, forward-looking perspective articulated in terms of 'revitalisation'. One final report even suggested that, in this light, the idiom of precariousness, powerfully present in our shared thinking since 2002, has somehow been superseded, yielding its place to the optic of a new beginning.

Conferences During the Chapter

In his opening conference, the *Abbot General* recalled us to the essential values of our life, asking us to let our charism find life-giving expression in ways corresponding to our times' realities and needs. Referring to the 2017 document *New Wine in New Wineskins* by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, he urged us to pursue unity of content and form in our life by embracing the challenge of continuous conversion. Thus our Order may hope to 'find again [its] place in the Church at the service of humanity'. The image of the 'new wine' remained an important metaphor throughout the Chapter.

Five Capitulants had been asked by the Central Commission to present a 'vision of the Order'. Their conferences brought out a variety of challenges and blessings. Dom Gerard (Genesee) reminded us of the Marian character of our life, ordained to 'make a dwelling place for God in the world' in a 'radical de-centering of self', that we might let our experience and action be

shaped and judged by the Word, Christ, who draws us into his graced, creative work for the 'transformation of the cosmos'. Dom Étienne Harding (Koutaba) put us on guard against inauthenticity in every form, summoning us to a refoundation of observance and contemplative living in pursuit of the 'eschatological humanism of our Fathers' so as to embrace a 'creative force' fit to help us transcend the sterile 'psychology of survival'. M Mariela (Quilvo) reminded us that we lay foundations now for what the Order will be to the next generation, that we are entrusted with a charism of paternity/maternity we must not relinquish for the sake of mere 'guidance', pledged as we are to transmit the life we ourselves have received, allowing gratitude for graces past to shape our lives into life-giving signs of prophecy for today and for tomorrow. M Caterina (Macau) stressed the importance of letting our lives - mind, thought, and senses - be unified in God, spiritualised 'in the crucible of perseverance' that we may truly 'live as a Church', prepared to let go of our comforts, even that of secure establishment in a given place, uniting our self-giving with Christ's 'for the salvation of the world', our life oriented to an all-conquering 'love that seeks its object with a view to being united to it.' Dom Erik (Mount Saint Bernard) asked whether far-reaching changes of the past half-century have resulted in an unintended 'crisis of transmission' through a centrifugal passage 'from idealism to pragmatism', 'from [collective] *praxis* to [individual] spirituality', suggesting that our present task is to explore a hermeneutic of continuity whereby we may 'produce from our treasury things both new and old', pursue integrity of form, 'rekindle our faith in the Benedictine Rule as a sure way to union with Christ', and return with confidence to the sources of our many-faceted patrimony.

The speeches of invited guests strengthened our sense of unity with the wider Cistercian and monastic family. *The Superiors General of the Bernardines of Esquermes and Oudenaarde* spoke of their Orders' life in a context of hospitality and mission. The *Abbot General of the Order of Cistercians* articulated a distinction between retrospect and remembrance: merely 'looking back' keeps us from moving forward, whereas if we 'perform remembrance' the past becomes present reality in the form of 'tradition, transmission, heritage'. We are called to 'assume a paternal responsibility for future generations' and to live our charism as prophecy. The special significance of consecrated chastity was emphasised. The ensuing exchange with the assembly affirmed the growing unity between our two Orders, one expression of which had been the Meeting of the Cistercian Family at Cîteaux in May 2017, described by the *Abbot of Cîteaux* in a vivid summary. The *Abbot Primate of the Order of St Benedict* shared experiences from his first year in office, speaking of his engagement in dialogue with Shiite Muslims and suggesting that openness to other faiths is an important part of monastic hospitality now. Representatives of the *Lay Cistercian Movement* spoke of their love for the Order and their joy in being attached to it. The *Postulatrix for the causes of Saints* gave an account of her recent work, demonstrating the treasures we find in the patrimony of our saints. A separate report was given on the cause of the *Algerian Martyrs*. The impact of the witness of the brethren of Tibhirine was often referred to at the Chapter. In the papal audience on 23 September, the *Holy Father* emphasised our duty to bear witness to 'the things above' by persevering in our contemplative endeavour, interceding for the world's salvation 'well inserted into the communal dimension of the Church'. He said: '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 General Chapter, he reminded us, carries a solemn

responsibility for the ‘safeguarding of the charism’. We have to be deeply rooted in the present, yet ‘situated between grateful memory of the past and the prospects for a future of hope.’

Work of the Chapter

The *Regional Reports* bore witness to serious engagement with fundamental questions. On every continent the erosion of faith pushes monasticism towards society’s periphery. It is where we say we wish to be, but how do we cope with finding ourselves there by relegation? We face the challenge of battling self-pity, of not closing in on ourselves. The witness we give outwardly may be less imposing than it was, but need not therefore be less authentic. The consequences of global society’s materialism, secularism, and individualism are felt everywhere. It was said that a community’s health is a function of its option for a strong common life centred on shared practices and dialogue, in determined pursuit of communion. The status of work is a concern. We must beware of overwork, but our work should be real, not occupational therapy. A warning was sounded that the values of solitude and silence are threatened by busyness. Work can be used as an excuse for monastic negligence. Most regions face realities of fragility and dying. All desire to pass on life. Regarding initial and on-going formation, we wish it to have intellectual integrity, but above all to *be* integral, apt to foster maturity and enable self-transcendence, attentive to societal realities yet rooted in tradition. One region asked: How can we present our charism to the young in ways that reveal it as *desirable*?

The *House Reports* reflected, on the whole, honest self-examination. Signs of diminishment abound: vocations are scarce; communities shrink; the average age rises. Some houses have lost a sense of shared vision. Yet several commissions reported signs of renewed vitality and reduced anxiety, as if communities were shedding an outdated image of themselves, rediscovering first principles in new circumstances, embracing a new fidelity. The importance of the superior’s example and teaching was emphasised: his or her duty to provide a supernatural orientation is of first importance. Many communities, in different settings, spoke of greater engagement with the local Church, resulting in a clearer sense of ecclesial mission. A moving witness was given by communities facing closure with dignity and freedom. To enter death as an act of self-giving in love can bear eloquent testimony to faith’s transforming power.

The procedure of accompanying fragile communities was examined in the light of C. 67, subject to long discussions focused on the status of autonomy. The notion’s juridical, ethical, and practical meaning was analysed on the basis of existing legislation, concrete situations, and recent directives from the Holy See. Each independent house has a right to its autonomy. Yet a commission observed that ‘an aspect of our Cistercian charism is the surrendering of some of our autonomy for the resulting benefit of functioning as an Order’. Orientation votes were taken to assist the Law Commission in the elaboration of a new C. 67, to be accompanied by a Statute. Without being unanimous, the assembly tended towards tempering the present requirement of a two-thirds majority to close on the part of communities deemed irreparably fragile. Ava, Melleray, Holy Trinity, Marija Zvijezda, and Mariawald were closed by the Chapter. Meanwhile, Vitorchiano’s plans for a Portuguese foundation were approved. Nasi Pani was raised to the rank of an abbey, and Las Escalonias and Boa Vista were raised to the rank of a simple priory.

The need to address the pastoral care of *Fathers Immediate* was evident in 2014. We are attached to this structure, but in many instances it is no longer effective: several houses have been without adequate pastoral provision; some Fathers Immediate have been overburdened with too many daughter houses. A Commission *ad hoc* was appointed to examine particular cases. It identified 23 situations requiring attention, proposing workable arrangements for each case. The commission's letter to the communities concerned was approved by the Chapter. The possible delegation of pastoral responsibility to abbesses was canvassed and favourably viewed. In application, though, it met with reluctant responses. There is more work to be done in this area.

Votes 47-50 of the Chapter of 2014, on the eligibility and term of superiors over 75, were felt by many to be unclear. The area concerned is delicate: in some communities a superior approaches the canonical age of resignation, but no one else seems able to assume the succession. It was decided to retake the votes. This made the Chapter's position clear: 'A monk or nun having attained 75 years of age can neither be elected nor postulated.' Though the possibility remains of appointing such a one Superior *ad nutum*.

Special reports were given by *Pontifical Commissaries and Apostolic Administrators*, often revealing difficult, painful situations. The Chapter responded with care. Frank questions were asked: how can we prevent our communities from becoming dysfunctional beyond hope of healing? Crucial factors identified were these: a spirit of faith and discipleship; trustful, obedient openness to the directives of Fathers Immediate, Regular Visitors, Commissions of Aid, and the General Chapter; wise, selfless government; the practice of dialogue in charity and truth. The number of Pontifical Commissariats, paired with several prolonged regimens of Superiors *ad nutum*, provoked discussions on the challenges of the ministry of authority.

Discussions of the Order's *financial needs* were centred on potential disadvantages and advantages of common funds. All monasteries desire, and strive, to be financially independent, but often this cannot be achieved. The Father Immediate's pastoral care extends to the material well-being of daughter houses, but it cannot be presumed that the mother house will be able to provide resources required in times of need. There was broad consensus that the Order-wide Commission for Aid represents a concept that might be developed, though the repercussions of such development would be great. Calls were made for guidelines on the destination of goods from monasteries that close, for a sharing of competent administrative personnel, for an examination of the viability of common funds.

The *Law Commission*, *Commission of Aid*, and *Formation Secretary* gave reports on their valuable work. The Chapter expressed its support for the programme *Experientia*, intended as a tool for ongoing formation 'to facilitate a clearer perception of the identity of the OCSO in the 21st century'. Spontaneous meetings of *Small-Scale Communities* took place, giving regular accounts of their exchanges. Throughout the Chapter, the *Commission of Coordination* did excellent work, so did the regular *Commissions*, and all auxiliaries. As a possible means of easing the load of capitular labour a vote laid down that 'the next Central Commission 2019 may be able to present some topics for the *Regional Procedure ad experimentum* for the 2020 General Chapter'.

Directions for the Future

It was remarked that ‘a new wind of the Spirit blows through the Chapter’. How do we respond? Having stated our allegiance to and love for our patrimony, the challenge is to live it out fruitfully. The essential ‘formation’ of our persons and communities springs from daily fidelity in shared *conversatio* as we seek to know, love, and obey God’s will. Regional Reports drew attention to the work of renewal accomplished in the past fifty years: the articulation of a clear orientation in the Order’s legislative texts; the divulgation of our Cistercian patrimony; efforts to enhance a prayerful liturgy; an increased ecclesial awareness that makes us conscious both of our place in the Church and of the Order as a body of communion; a culture of dialogue. We are grateful for these accomplishments. What emerged from the Chapter, though, was a sense of needing to re-engage with fundamental values, to drink deeply from our wellspring and draw new life from it. This aspiration crystallised in a phrase that was repeatedly invoked towards the end of the Chapter: the call to ‘revitalisation’. Insights that emerged during the Chapter help us see how revitalisation might come about. They could be summarised in a few propositions:

The ‘return to the sources’ central to Cistercian life is, and must remain, a continuous task and challenge in every age, testing our authenticity, spurring us on to conversion.

The primacy of the contemplative life, enshrined in our Constitutions, must be constantly reaffirmed and allowed to mould our life and work, liturgy and *lectio divina*; only if we truly desire the finality of our life, a personal union with God in transforming love, giving all to pursue this desire, will our life be desirable to others.

Each generation is called, as fathers and mothers, to hand on our charism
in fullness to those who come after us, entrusting it to them,
pouring life forth freely without clutching it.

The unity of our communities, of our Order, is a treasure to be lovingly fostered,
and for this unity each of us is answerable.

For our charism to be credibly embodied, artificial dichotomies have to be overcome as we discover there is no opposition between ‘spirit’ and ‘Rule’, ‘observance’ and ‘personal freedom’, ‘obedience’ and ‘responsibility’, ‘spiritual paternity/maternity’ and ‘psychological maturity’: our asceticism, rooted in the power of Christ’s incarnation, enables us to pursue a Christian wholeness that transcends and resolves such dualisms.

Our approach to formation should aspire not just to form minds, but to reform lives and inform an intimate longing for God, enabling grace to circulate among us as a live current, conforming us to Christ in an *icon* with recognisably Cistercian features.

For this we must, united with our martyrs and saints, be ready to lay down our lives
however the Lord ordains, looking beyond self-preservation
to the realisation of God’s kingdom.

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