

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!

