

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

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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 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

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.

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, 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

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

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

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.