

# 1st Conference of “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

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The topic for this presentation is ‘A Vision of the Order for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’ I am afraid I do not have a visionary or strategic mind. What I will try to attempt is a statement of what we, as Cistercians, are all about in terms of some fundamentals.

The primary fundamental is the transformation of the cosmos begun with the death and resurrection of Christ. This transformation which is happening now gives an eschatological urgency to everything. Cistercian conversatio is a total response to this urgency. The particular form of our Cistercian life will never make sense without this eschatological urgency. Louis Bouyer said about monasticism, ‘monasticism alone gives to the life of faith, to life in faith, the fullest development of which it is capable here below’ When we look at the Cistercian conversatio we perceive a form of life that arises from what Bouyer calls ‘a totalizing faith’ in this cosmic transformation being wrought by the Spirit of Jesus.

Another fundamental is that what is most true and most real is accessed by faith and not by sight and what is most true, Pope Emeritus Benedict tell us, is that the real center of history is Christ and His Church –Church not as a sociological abstraction but Church meaning the creature’s fusion with its Lord in spousal love. This aspect of spousal love dictates that Church, in its deepest reality is personal because God cannot enter into spousal love with sociological abstractions or collectives. The life Christ came to bring us from above must therefore, first be received by a concrete person. In which case, the exemplar of the creature’s fusion with its Lord in spousal love is seen concretized in Mary. She is the first Church. And since Her Fiat is according to the very Word of God, Mary can only be pure receptivity. She can only surrender and be the ‘given away’. After all what other purpose is there for ecclesia than to make a dwelling place for God in the world?

In the light of these theological facts, the Church will always be Marian in its shape. Always feminine and fundamentally receptive in contrast to what you could characterize as the masculine, activist model which captivates us these days with its productivity, power and results. But ecclesia, Marian in shape is primarily making space where God can disclose Himself as God. This is why, we Cistercians should see ourselves at the heart of the Church because our life form is markedly Marian. I would like to focus on this, the Marian form, the making space for God, as the key to a greater appreciation of the form of Cistercian conversatio.

In one of his conferences to Benedictines, (a conference I shall make use of here) the former Master General of the Dominicans, Fr Timothy Radcliffe, pointed out that when the Israelites came out of the desert, God came with them seated in the space between the wings of the cherubim. The throne of glory was a space and a void and ‘no thing’ which means that the glory of God can only show itself in an empty space.

If Cistercian life is predominately Marian in shape, then we can be sure that all elements of our life will conspire to create space at the heart of the monastery and in each heart where God and His Christ can be disclosed as the true center. We, poor banished children of Eve, will experience the oppression of this space as the void, as boredom, but this is not a mistake that we should hasten to rectify nor a problem we should flee from. It is the obverse side of making space for God.

Constitution 3 speaks of our life as ordinary, obscure and laborious. In contrast to congregations with specific missions, we seem to have none. There is no explicit specialization that justifies our place in the world of good works in contrast to the mission of the Jesuits or the Dominicans. The void, the space in this case is living for no explicit purpose in the world. And this space discloses God as the hidden and secret purpose of our lives. If we had a specific mission, the disclosure of God in our form of life would somehow be ambiguous. The lack of a specific mission discloses clearly that God alone could be the secret purpose of life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious. I would like to quote von Balthasar here. He says ‘There are great missions that are given for the

sake of exterior activity in the Church. However, God can also give great missions for the sake of self-surrender alone, with or without extraordinary graces of prayer. These latter missions though not recognized and canonized, can have an equally great, albeit, hidden and anonymous, impact on the Church and the world.'

If there is one area where the space is disclosed it is the Opus Dei which is the center of Cistercian day. It is probably the area of our life which has the least utility in the eyes of the world. Yet St Benedict puts this thing of great inutility at the very center of our lives. Nothing is to be preferred to the Opus Dei. It is this very inutility of the Opus Dei which discloses that God is not an object in the world. But this inutility also has the greatest utility for if we pursue the Marian analogy – then the 'useless' space of the Opus Dei is the very opening where the Mystery of Christ can enter into the world. This was brought home to me by a section in a conference of Dom Mauro Giuseppe on the Rule of Benedict and specifically on Chapter 7. I cannot be sure I have understood clearly what he had to say but whatever I gleaned from him did impress itself on me and that is what I hope to share. Chapter 7 on humility is the centerpiece of the Rule. At the apex of the steps of humility we have St Benedict saying 'The twelfth step of humility is that a monk always manifests humility, in his bearing no less than in his heart, so that it is evident at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or wherever else and wherever else or ubicumque is therefore, I would like to think, cosmic in its extension.

What should be noted is the very deliberate arrangement of the places where the monk displays humility. At the heart of it all is the Opus Dei. Now what is interesting is that St Benedict did not collapse the two – the oratory and the Opus Dei. He makes the distinction deliberately - first the Work of God and then the oratory. The Work of God is not a place. It is the void, the 'useless' work from which all the radiation begins and starts the concentric circles of radiation that widen and widen past the monastery – first the Work of God, then the oratory, still wider in the monastery, then on to the garden, then the journey outside or a field and finally everywhere else. The glory of God in the void of the Divine Office is that intangible vibration or costly perfume that discloses God's presence to those who come to our monasteries.

The Cistercian life form also hollows out space in the heart of the community and in each human heart. This hollowing out flows from the centrality of the Eucharist in our monasteries because we do not gather for the Eucharist but the Eucharist gathers us. The hollowing out, the breaking down of barriers and defenses that keep us apart in the community is how we also become the Eucharist. In this light we can understand why Chapter 7 on Humility is the very heart of the Rule. In following the thought of Fr Radcliffe, humility is a radical de-centering of self. For St Benedict humility is not a self-willed project of improvement. It is intimately related to building up community. I become, you become humble by building up our community, because building up community means emptying myself of selfishness. The community St Benedict is envisaging is one where there is no ego center. Where we live for another. Where we live lives of mutual help and support, mutual obedience, respect for each other. Where we respond to the pull of grace rather than to unredeemed appetites. Here no one is at the center. And the center is the space where the glory of God can be revealed. The community then, is no longer a mere help to allow individuals in their quest for self-perfection. The community is ecclesia, the space where each person in community encounters the mystery of Christ refracted in and through the other.

Silence and solitude, vigils, the serious observance of enclosure mediate the interior desert. This very crucial desert is the space where the guises of sin and especially the rebellion of pride is unmasked. The painful interior trials which arise from such a confrontation effect that radical de-centering of self. Today everything conspires to flee the void - curiosity, noise, distractions and busyness. Acedia, that quiet despair, has become a condition of the world. Pope Francis has asked us to move to the peripheries. We must see this call within the shape of our conversatio. Our very life constrained and shaped by solitude moves us swiftly to the peripheries where sub personal forces must be confronted with the armor of faith and hope. For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities, with the powers, with the world rulers of this present darkness, with the evil spirits in the heavens. This spiritual combat is not just for ourselves but for the life of the world. Moving to the peripheries also means moving, in so far as this is possible, toward the marginal in community, those who are difficult to love, those who try our patience, the sick brothers and sisters who are dependent and are not productive. Moving to the peripheries means

offering hospitality to those come to us seeking healing and hope. Living at the peripheries of the interior also means that we are sentinels who keep vigil for the in-breaking in of resurrection light into the darkness of our world and share this in a mysterious manner throughout the Body of Christ. In his letter to St Gregory Nazianzen, St Basil speaks of that purification that occurs in solitude, so that the heart may receive every impress of divine doctrine. Silence and solitude is where wisdom is born as our Constitution 3 puts it.

I want to draw attention to lectio divina, as that space of disclosure of God. As the First Letter of Peter points out, all of us enter the monastery in bondage to the futile ways of our ancestors – layers upon layers of prejudices, assumptions, memories, sensibilities – that are unconverted by the encounter with faith. Lectio is purification by the fire of doctrine. This also means a de-centering. To listen to the Word means that I must jettison my own mundane word and accept and acknowledge that God's word is the decisive factor in my life. The Word must shape and judge experience and it is not the other way around. This means living by faith and not sight. No wonder lectio is a discipline and a necessary one. The fascination with information, an ever present escape in our age, must be resisted firmly if the transformation by the Word is to catch fire in our lives. Through this immersion in the Word and the centrality of this desire for the Word, the mystery of Christ grows in us so that our eyes cannot but be on the Lord.

Manual and simple labor linked as it is to obedience and poverty hollows us out. In the world, work is identity. Work is about self-fulfillment. Workaholism is a virtue. In our life work which is shaped by obedience puts us at the service of others. We are expected to live by the work of our hands and this is our expression of poverty. This 'poverty' puts us in solidarity with those who cannot live off rents and accumulated capital. Monastic work immerses us in the limitations of the community and its work program and its burden of history, sometimes a very inefficient and dysfunctional history. Work and self-support are great graces of our vocation. They rescue us from the Neoplatonic disdain for labor and engage us in the Holy Spirit's transformation of the cosmos in Christ. Our industries give us the opportunity to witness to our employees this transformation so that in the sphere of the practical affairs we are not split personalities. Catholics at prayer and capitalists at work.

I know this is not an exhaustive listing nor is it an original, creative restatement of Cistercian life but it is meant to be a reminder of some important elements of our conversatio assembled under the rubric of making a habitation for God. As I said, this space can be oppressive but if we persevere, then this space becomes the hundred fold for it discloses to each of us, the mystery of Christ. This sustained encounter with the Lord is the heart of and the hidden secret of our joyful perseverance in a life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious.