

ABBOT GENERAL CONFERENCE AT THE CONCLUSION OF GENERAL CHAPTER 2022, PART 1

Brothers and Sisters,

An experience of synodality, as we may call the first part of this General Chapter 2022. Since Dom Eamon's request, during the Central Commission of 2021, that he be relieved of his task as Abbot General as soon as possible, due to health reasons, we as an Order have been journeying together. It was an exciting road given the pandemic and the short time to organise everything. We may thank God that so many have been able, despite everything, to be here. Thank you for your efforts to be here and we feel connected to all the communities that could not be there. Many thanks to the brothers and sisters of the Generalate, especially Dom Anastasius, who organised everything so well. It made it possible for us to do our work as a General Chapter in a safe, calm and organised way, whereby great strides were made with regard to technology (the cloud) and ecological concerns.

According to church parlance, a Religious Institute celebrates a General Chapter. During this first part we have experienced this intensely. The days that helped prepare for the election of a new Abbot General passed in an atmosphere of peace and unity. During those days we suddenly became aware that synodality is not just a buzzword or a process that takes place outside of us in the universal church, but that we are that synod, that we are together on the way towards God's future. The regions, the commissions, but also each of us personally knew how to really listen to what the Spirit had to say to us. In this way we lived out the words of Dom Mauro-Giuseppe about the synodality of communion. The word synodality continued to resonate, even after the election that certainly ended in a celebration of communion.

A celebration should be accompanied by a feeling of gratitude, for the past, present and future. As I close this part of the General Chapter, I would like to take the opportunity to thank Dom Eamon once again for the past 14 years in which he has given himself with heart and soul to walk with us as our Abbot General. He has done so with an admirable simplicity and closeness rooted in his deep faith in the Living Word of the Gospel. The logo of Synod 2023 shows a bishop who does not walk above, below, in front of or behind the people of God, but in the midst of them, on the road with the people of God. That is exactly the memory we will all have of Dom Eamon: a Abbot General who walked the road together, in the midst of us. This also allows him, after so many years of service, to return to that people of God to continue with us. Thank you, Dom Eamon, and with St Patrick of Ireland we pray:

The Lord be with you to show you the right way. The Lord be with you to embrace and protect you from dangers of right and left. The Lord be behind you to save you from the vicious attacks of others. The Lord be among you to catch you when you are in danger of falling. The Lord be within you to comfort you when you are sad. The Lord be around you to defend you when people fall over you. The Lord be above you to bless you. May God have mercy on you, now and always.

The General Chapter elected not only a new Abbot General but also a number of new councillors to the Abbot General. This also means that we say goodbye to two councillors, Dom Timothy and M. Daniele, who, each in their own way, have left a great mark on our journey together over the past few years. As close collaborators of the Abbot General, they have carried and made possible, often in the background, a great deal. A long applause from all of us was a token of our great

appreciation, in the realisation that any form of expression of our gratitude actually falls short. We wish them both all the best, our prayers are with them and we hope that they may now rest from all their labours!

With this General Chapter, part 1, a page is turned and together, with God's help, we may begin a new chapter. As your new General Abbot, I feel it is important to reflect on the experience of synodality and the desire to initiate this synodal process for the whole Order in this closing conference. This Chapter has taught us that a synod, synodality, has nothing to do with a church meeting where delegates work through a set agenda. Pope Francis calls on us to return to the original meaning of the term 'synod': a way that you go together, being on the road together. The three focal points are *communio*, *participatio* (participation) and *missio* (the mission and vocation of the church). It is true: our monastic life is synodal by nature, but sometimes it is good to become aware again of the treasure you have.



The new chapter that we, as an Order, are beginning with this chapter is entitled Synodality, but the first few pages should actually remain empty. Everything begins with listening: creation, redemption and completion. Everything starts with listening! Our Rule also begins with the word: listen. When I introduced the synodal process in my own community, I presented the brothers with the following icon of Maria del Silenzio, Mary, the Silent. I would like to give you this icon today as well, so that hopefully for you and the communities it may be the beginning of a new listening in order to journey together, with your brothers and sisters, the church and the world.

The icon of Mary, the silent is a new icon written by an Italian Benedictine nun and distributed by a Capuchin, with a special apostolate approved by Pope Francis. The icon has its origins in Coptic depictions of Mary with her fingers on her lips from the 6th century and the icons of John, the evangelist who silently opens himself to the influsions of the Spirit. Another origin is found in the icons of the Ascension of the Lord, on which Mary looks straight at the viewer and holds out her hand in blessing. The icon shows us that silence is the way to enter into the mystery of the encounter between God and man.

As an Order, we are really on the way together! For me, that is the great fruit of this part of the General Chapter. The theme of the common road is hidden in the golden line of Mary's cloak on the icon. This symbolism of the way can be seen in the golden ribbon that surrounds the entire mantle of the Mother of God in the icon. Human life is often compared in the Bible to a road, a path which opens up for us step by step. The path has already been mapped out for us by the Lord, as has the goal of our journey, but only by following it does it become a reality for us, who remain free to leave the path of truth to follow mirages. Along the way, the Mother of God becomes a companion on the journey and a guide.

She invites us to stop, to consider everything carefully: the gesture of the left hand, both authoritative and sweet, evokes a word the Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah: "This says Yahweh: Stand at the crossroads and look out. (Jer 6:16) The gesture of the Mother of God expresses at the same time a blessing which pushes us on: the ribbon, starting at the bottom of the image, goes up, down, continues invisible, reappears ... The right path is not entirely linear, easy, or clear: it will be necessary to trust, to follow, to let oneself be led. It will be necessary to climb and this will involve fatigue and perseverance. Save your breath...

Silence, necessary for any authentic journey of oneness with the Lord, is much more than an ascetic tool. At the level of the Blessed Virgin's right arm the ribbon stops, the path requires a jump in levels indicated by the gesture of Mary: "Put a seal on your lips, keep the Word in the depths of your heart, let yourself be surprised by the Spirit", the Mother of God seems to be saying to us lovingly. "When you no longer see how to continue on your life's path, when every chance seems lost, when your efforts seem to be in vain, then be silent. Let yourself be carried on by silence, let yourself be lifted up by love, without resistance, without interference of the tumult of your thoughts. Then you will find the way to follow and in it you will catch a glimpse of my face, and by following it you will radiate my peace". Like Abraham, like Mary, like the saints who preceded us on the journey of life, we go forward in faith."

I want to encourage all of you, but especially those communities who are going through a difficult time. I don't want to mention names because there are many, and all of them are close to the General Chapter, but let me only recall here the both communities of Cameroon: Koutaba and Bamenda. Dear brothers, let this General Chapter be an encouragement for you. As your brothers and sisters we know that you feel yourself alone, isolated and even abandoned by the Order but you are not alone and we will not let you alone. Let yourself be lifted up by love, without interference of the tumult of your thoughts, feelings and political situation. At the moment we can only offer you the silence of our prayers but out of this silence there will be a word of life for you!

When this part of the Chapter asks for a synodal process to be initiated, I would like to invite all of you to take the listening attitude that has made this Chapter a celebration to your communities. It is true that sometimes the nightmare of not knowing and of running needlessly in circles has also marked this Chapter, but three words can help us: Stop, calm down and wait! They are also words that have helped me personally as I have taken on my new service.

The Chapter has given us the opportunity to stop, to pause. As brothers and sisters, we took time to listen to each other, to share our joys and sorrows about the state of the Order, our vulnerabilities and our new lives. This listening to each other took place in peace and tranquillity. Efficiency and activism were not our response during these days of the Chapter. This time has taught us to wait because it is only through waiting in the Spirit that the truth emerges. It is precisely because we have had the courage to stop, stay calm and wait that this General Chapter, Part 1, has become a sign of hope for us all.

This synodal process will ask from us the capacity to listen. It is true, listening is all over the Rule but do we really listen to God in our prayer, lectio and work? Are we, as superiors, good listeners to everybody in the community or do we only listen to a privileged group of brothers or sisters? It is easy to say that we listen to the youngest one but is that a reality? How do we listen to our local church to whom we belong? What about our listening to those who knock on our doors? Are they really Christ or do they disturb us? Brothers and sisters, this General Chapter has convinced me that we have the capacity to listen. It is there because we received by our baptism, without exception this gift of the Holy Spirit. It was confirmed by our confirmation and it is daily nourished by the Eucharist. My dream, for all of us, will be (this is not a nightmare) that we become true listeners! But be aware, this requires from all of us: conversion!

This attitude alone can help us to overcome our problems. Yes, there are many problems in the Order, in the communities, among the brothers and sisters and even among ourselves. The power of listening is that it opens up the truth and therefore God Himself! He will always speak out of silence!

Brothers and sisters, we will continue our journey together and meet again in September for the second part. In the meantime, not only will I try to begin the work with the new council, but I will

also attend, as much as possible, the regional meetings in order to get to know you better as superiors. Please pass on the dates of your regional meetings as soon as possible so that we can see how all this can be arranged. I hope to be in Rome in the week of March 7th. The most new councilors will be in Rome around Easter. I am grateful for the willingness of the councillors to work with me and I look forward to do it together. I think it is a good group, with competent people, younger and vital but above all a good representation of the Order.

Mary, the silent, may support you all in the meantime. Our thanks has been given already by all the commissions to everybody. I do not want to repeat it. With gratitude I close this first part of the General Chapter 2022 and wish you all a good and safe journey back home. Greetings to all brothers and sisters! See you back in September!

Dom Bernardus, conclusion of the RGM 2022 Part 1, 17 février 2022