

**Thoughts for the General Chapter of the Trappists**  
**14 September 2022 in Assisi**

Thank you for this invitation to once again come to your General Chapter. These words of appreciation are genuine, and not just a proper or polite way to begin speaking to you. I think of the Trappists as true brother and sisters, as we all live under the guidance and inspiration of the *Rule of Saint Benedict*. We form the three Monastic Orders of the Church. We share so much in common, especially with the passage of time, the movements in our society, the renewal of monastic life following the guidance of the Second Vatican Council, and finding ourselves both working and learning together in these times of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Allow me to outline some of these things in which we are already taking part, and seeing some results. It is already twelve years since the inauguration of the Monastic Formators Program, which presently is held both at Sant'Anselmo and at the *Oasi Sacro Cuore* in Assisi. This program has had instructors who are Trappists, Cistercians and Benedictines. Add to this that the students in this program come from all three monastic Orders. While in the past, we may have had three such programs for the monastic Orders, now we have one. While it is in English, that sets certain limits for those who can participate; and now the Cistercians have established their program which comes at a different time of the year, has strong formational elements, and brings together all three monastic orders. With their set-up at the Cistercian Generalate is very well done with the ability to have simultaneous translations.

What is the point that stands above the fact that these courses are offered now in several places and different languages? Our younger generations of monks and nuns are coming to know one another better and over a period of time where this was not true before. Establishing the rapport between the members of our Orders shows there is a unifying element of which we should be aware. What this suggests for the future is that, while we may wish to have meetings of Formators and Econs of the distinct orders, should we begin to think that it is worthwhile and even healthy to think of having groups meet to share ideas, experiences, resources, and maybe even personnel to make our programs stronger— each having their own character, and also a shared and experienced character. Thinking positively, we ask, “Are there ways in which we can continue to learn from each other?”

During this past academic year, Sant'Anselmo offered an honorary doctorate to Trappist Father Michael Casey. Speaking as a Benedictine, I know that the extent to which his writings and retreats have touched the lives of all of our monastic communities. How many times have we heard the thoughts of Father Michael Casey read in our refectory, appreciating over a period of several weeks that he has developed from within our monastic tradition. He has taken his knowledge and wisdom, and made them accessible to our community members— whether they are for novices or the middle-aged or the elderly. That is a wonderful gift that the Trappist Order has made available to all the monastic communities. When this honorary doctorate was presented to Father Michael, the leaders of all three monastic Orders were present for the event. And in the laudatory responses, there were two women, the Abbess of Vitorchiano and Dr. Donna Orsuto from the department of Christian Spirituality of the Gregorian University. It was an attempt to have present the three monastic orders, and also a representation of a woman Trappist and also a member of the laity. The discourse of Father Michael has been published both in a book designed by Sant'Anselmo, and also published in *American Benedictine Review*.

When I was elected Abbot Primate, it was close to that time that my mother passed to eternity. Her small patrimony was divided between my two brothers and me. It is not a great sum of money, only about 25,000 euros. But moving into my new position, I thought, “How might this money be used in a way that expresses one of my hopes?” I gave that money to our bursar and asked him to set up an account for the Trappist and Cistercians who come to Sant'Anselmo. I had written to the Father Generals at the time, and that money still sits there... unused. But this might be a good moment to throw out a challenge to establish at Sant'Anselmo a “scholarship for members of the three monastic orders.” What this would mean is that we would need to contribute money until it would reach about 500.000 euros so that it could support a full scholarship for a monk or nun at Sant'Anselmo, whether that would be in Monastic Studies, Liturgy, Sacramentality, Theology, or Philosophy. It could take us 5 years or more to complete what we think would be a healthy scholarship for someone in the monastic orders ... but you asked me to think of something new and challenging. Might we be willing to consider Sant'Anselmo as a school where the three monastic orders do their graduate studies to enrich the lives of our communities.

One of the ways in which we can enrich one another is the possibility of finding in our communities those men or women who would serve as spiritual guides between our community. I can readily say that my spiritual life was enriched by having a Trappist serve as my spiritual director while I was at Abbot. Yes, it meant boarding a plane and flying to Dubuque, but it was always well worth the trip, the conversation, the change of monastic scenery, and to see how the community was living out its mission within the life of the Church.

Speaking of mission, what is the mission of the monastic orders to the Church of today? I believe that if I had to choose one mission among several, for me the one that would stand out the most would be our keeping alive the Scriptures as the source of daily living in the life of the Church. Yes, many people among the laity are learning more about the Scriptures, but what is the level at which this is taking place? My own community at Conception Abbey has a web page which gives a reflection on the daily readings of the celebration of the Eucharist. I will readily say, I am opposed to this. Why? It is because we are not encouraging the faithful to read the Scriptures in a more profound way; rather what we are doing for our readers is digesting a message and passing it on to them. If we want the Word of God to find a place in the heart of our friends, oblates, and people who turn to our web page, we have to help them in that difficult task of opening the Word of God so that they can make it their own, and be enriched by what God has to say. What God has to say is far more important, more nuanced, and more profound than what I can say. Here I am talking about the experience of the Scriptures in the quiet of a person's life. When we have people coming among us to take time to retreat, are we directing them to the Scriptures in such a way that they leave our monasteries with a way into the Word of God, a way of believing in the power of that Word, and of desiring to go back to the Word as a source of life for them.

Our daily practice of *lectio divina* touches not only the thoughts that come from that period of time spent allowing the Scriptures to speak to our hearts. The effects of *lectio divina* touch our lives in the ways in which we interact with one another. One morning we may have had a time of deep reflection and rich insights, thoughts that are very person to each of us. And yet, it is that daily contact with the Word that touches our lives and opens our hearts to charity, to hope when things seem bleak, to sacrifice

for the sake of others, with no one knowing what has happened.

I would like to leave you with a final thought about the Psalms. The more I read the Psalms and pray for them, the more that I believe they speak to our lives in a very personal and real way. Even those difficult lines that sound so violent and hateful, they speak to us about both ourselves and the world that surrounds us. If we read carefully the “General Instruction on the Liturgy of the Hours,” we see how they distinguish between “the recitation of the Psalms,” and the “Praying from the Psalms.” In what the General Instruction calls the sacred silence, those are the moment when the Holy Spirit open us to the words of Scripture. We recite the Psalms, and then in the moments of sacred silence, we pray, we open our hearts to what God has said to us. It is a dialogue between God and us. Also, we should allow the images of the Scriptures to point our way to prayer – for example, Jerusalem is always a place of divine dwelling– and it is also a place of war, tension and violence. What are the ways in which this directs our prayer? It need not be a profound or deep moment, but rather a moment of communion. We are, as monastic men and women, people of communion, and the Psalms unite us with our brothers and sisters, and our world. That is our mission – to be the people of the Scriptures allowing the Word of God to penetrate our being, and to invite others to do the same.