

“BOUND BY A CORD OF MARVELOUS CHARITY”

Circular letter Abbot General

Tilburg, 20 august 2023

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

*“In fact, before the Cistercian abbeys began to flourish, the most reverend father Stephen, inspired by the Holy spirit and in council with his brothers, set out to write down a decree which was called the Charter of Charity, In it we are taught how the communities of our Order, dispersed throughout various parts of the world and divided by various languages, have been bound by the cord of marvelous charity and the manifestation of mutual respect and have become one church, one way of life, even one body in Christ (Eph. 4:4). He decided to call this decree the Charter of Charity because by its statutes all monetary exactions were rejected and only what belongs to charity and the salvation of souls was maintained in all things human and divine.”
(Exordium Magnum XIX)*

The feast of St. Bernard is the occasion for this brief circular letter. When I visit the communities, I like to take the time to speak separately with those in formation and their formators. I try to listen to their dreams, their enthusiasm, and the fire of beginning, as well as their difficulties and questions. Recently a postulant asked me, "What is the benefit to me and the community of belonging to an Order?" I was somewhat surprised by this question that I would never have asked myself as a postulant. Perhaps I never asked it in my monastic life. The Order and belonging to the Order has always been something natural to me. In any case, it has never been a problem or a question.

Yet I am increasingly aware that this is not true for everyone. Some may become disappointed in the Order during their lives. Perhaps structures in the Order have not listened well to people or communities, or one does not feel heard and, as a result, there has been pain on both sides. For them, the sense of belonging to an Order is indeed a problem. Sometimes I encounter communities or individual monks and nuns for whom the Order seems to be far away. They do not feel that they are part of a greater whole. The General Chapter and Regional Meeting are experienced as meetings for superiors. The Regular Visitation is not so much a link with the Order as to the mother house or founding house. Sometimes there are even sisters and brothers who try to keep the Order and its structures as far away from their own community as possible. So "Why do we belong to an Order? Is not such a strange question.

The question became a challenge for me. For it also touches on my own functioning as Abbot General. If there is no reason for the existence of the Order, then there is also no need for a figure like an Abbot General. After all, he is "the bond of unity" (Cst. 82.1). I have since my election experienced how important it is to tell about the life of the communities of the Order when visiting them. It causes brothers and sisters to see their own community in relation to other communities with a similar way of life and yet respecting each one's individuality (Cst. 71). It opens not only the window to the other communities but also the window to one's own life in the community. Because even at the local level, it remains a challenge for everyone to live in love and respect with everyone's diversity.

The text from the Great Exordium I quoted at the beginning of this letter may help us find an answer to the question. It describes the Order as "a church, a way of life and even a body in Christ." We want to come together as Cistercians, scattered throughout the world, in a

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ABBAS GENERALIS

community of communities to shape an evangelical life according to the Rule of St. Benedict and based on the customs of the Cistercians. A church **distributed** into several smaller churches but forming one church because the way of life is the same. One body in Christ. The 1969 Declaration of Cistercian Life says, "we all discovered a profound sense of communion in the lived experience of our common spiritual values." Legitimate diversity is held together by "a cord of marvelous charity."

How firm this cord is we as an Order have been able to experience explicitly on several occasions recently: the collection for our sisters of Panama, the visit of the Father Immediate to the community of Mokoto and during the sad death of Dom Godefroy, abbot of Acey. These incidents show, perhaps better than any theoretical answer, how good and beneficial it is to live together as brothers and sisters and to belong to an Order. Three occasions that show that not only human beings but also a community is not made to live alone but always to live in connection with others.

On Good Friday 2023, I appealed to the generosity of the communities of the Order to help the sisters of the community of La Paz who, due to political circumstances, were forced to leave Nicaragua. They were destitute of almost all their possessions and had to rebuild their existence elsewhere. You responded to this cry for help with great love. Already within four hours, on that Good Friday, the needed amount of 800,000 euros had arrived in the account of the Generalate. As indicated in the letter, this was the minimum amount, but the sisters could certainly use more. You gave generously because in the end a sum of 2.4 million euros was received. For this, many thanks, not only from me and the council but also from M. Fabiana and the sisters of La Paz. They have written down some words of thanks to you all, which I enclose with this letter.

See here a concrete reason why we belong to an Order. It is a body in which we are called to support one another not only through prayer and good example but also by actually sharing of our abundance with other communities in need. How impressive it was to see how poor communities in the Order gave small amounts of their abundance.

The second example in which we were able to experience "the cord of marvelous charity" was the visit that Dom Damien, Abbot of Scourmont, recently made to the brothers of Mokoto (Democratic Republic of the Congo) under very difficult circumstances. Since the beginning of this year, the region where our brothers live has been ravaged by a long-armed conflict. Our brothers have assumed their responsibilities and provided hospitality to thousands of people who had fled.

The General Chapter of September 2022 had elevated Mokoto to the rank of abbey but because of the war situation, this elevation had not yet been able to officially take place. At last the Father Immediate was able to visit the brothers and the elevation took place while the fighting continued. A sign of hope! For Dom Vedaste and the brothers, this was an important event which showed that in the midst of the difficulties they were allowed to experience the bond with the Order, through their Father Immediate. An experience that they were not left alone.

The third concrete example I would like to cite in response to the question of why we belong to an Order is the tragic death of Dom Godefroy, Abbot of Acey. This unexpected death deeply affected us all. On the day he went missing, messages of support were already pouring in from all sides not only to the brothers of Acey but also at the Generalate. Sisters and brothers who promised their prayers. What prayers and hopes were offered that day!

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ABBAS GENERALIS

Once the sad news of his passing came in, a flood of sympathy came again. I think, first of all, that it was a great comfort to the brothers of Acey to experience that one is not alone in grief. On the morning of the funeral, together with the superiors already present, we had a meeting with the brothers at the chapter. I tried to give the brothers a word of comfort and encouragement but more impressive was that we were there as communities of the Order, represented by their superiors, simply gathered to share grief, and support each other. What a powerful moment that showed that as communities we have pastoral care for one another. (Cst. 71.2)

See here, three concrete examples showing why we belong to an Order. Brothers and sisters, a person, an organization and therefore the Order in crisis has the challenge that there can be a tendency to want to go one's own way. One closes oneself off from others because one sees the other as a threat, one considers oneself too good or too bad, or one quietly waits in a corner for different and better times. It is precisely then that we desperately need each other as communities. Precisely then it will become apparent whether the cord of love is firm or a thin rope. What a blessing it is to experience that the cord of charity in the Order is firm and still marvelous! Let we pull ourselves up by that!

The only answer to the question: Why do we belong to an Order? Because of love! During Vigils this week, we read a beautiful text by Blessed Madeleine Delbr el (1904-1964): "If this small piece of humanity (the unmarried for the sake of the Kingdom) takes the step to the Lord, it is to live only the Love by which He loves humanity." To belong to an Order is to live the Love with which God loves humanity. It is the love lived in the church of our communities; it is the love lived in a similar way of life; it is the love lived in the body of Christ. May this letter invite you all to reflect with gratitude why we belong to an Order and join me in thanking the Lord and Our Lady of Silence for this cord of marvelous charity.

In prayerful communion,

Br. Bernardus Peeters ocso
Abbot General

Appendix: letter of the community of La Paz, Panama.