

## **“THE LOVE OF SHARING AND THE SHARING OF LOVE”<sup>1</sup>.**

**Working together as the Cistercian sign of Hope in the Church and the world today.**

*“None of us lives for oneself,  
and no one dies for oneself.  
For if we live, we live for the Lord,  
and if we die, we die for the Lord,  
so then, whether we live or die,  
we are the Lord’s.”  
(Rom 14; 7-8)*

Brothers and sisters,

I recently read Emilia Jamroziak’s overview of the history of the Order. What struck me most was her conclusion: *“The ability to adapt and respond to these very different social and economic conditions is what made the Cistercians so successful.”*<sup>2</sup> I see and experience this myself time and again during my visits to our communities around the world; in many monasteries, the capacity for adaptation is truly remarkable.

Some may frown at the word “adaptation” or even hold their breath. Nevertheless, I would like to recall the words of the recently deceased Prof. David N. Bell (1943-2025): *“Adaptation is not necessarily decadence, though if the prurient wish to hunt for examples of decadence, they will undoubtedly find them.”*<sup>3</sup>

Today, however, I would like to focus not on adaptability, but on another sign of Hope which, particularly in our current era, poses a distinct challenge to how we live out our Cistercian charism within both the Church and the wider world. This sign of Hope often demands a spirit of flexibility – not only from individual monks and nuns, but also from superiors, communities, Regional Meetings, the Abbot General, and even the General Chapter.

I am referring to collaboration as a sign of Hope. When I speak of this as a sign of Hope in our profoundly polarised Church and world, I do so because the tendency for individuals and communities to turn inwards and close themselves off is so prevalent.<sup>4</sup> I am deeply convinced that it is only through authentic collaboration that our entire Order can respond meaningfully to the realities we face today. In doing so, we are not merely able to deepen our living

---

<sup>1</sup> Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates*, volume two, Cistercian Fathers Series, 41, Kalamazoo, 1986, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> E. Jamroziak, *The Cistercian Order in Medieval Europe. 1090-1500*. Routledge, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> David Bell, *Printed books in English Cistercian Monasteries*, Cîteaux: *Commentarii Cistercienses* 53 (2002) p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed description of this reality, see Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 9-55.

out of our vocation, but also to become a visible sign of Hope – both within the Church, in our own Order, and in society at large. As Pope Francis wrote in *Fratelli tutti*: “Let us dream, then, as a single human family, as fellow travellers of the same journey, children of the same earth which is our common home, each with the richness of his or her own faith and convictions, each with his or her own voice, all brothers and sisters!”.<sup>5</sup>

In this opening conference, I would like to show that collaboration is the Cistercian sign of Hope for our times and that the celebration of the General Chapter is an excellent opportunity to make this Hope visible.

### **Is the Order sick or in crisis?**

During my travels and visits to various communities, I regularly meet brothers and sisters who ask me questions about the state of the Order. Questions such as: Is the Order disappearing? Is the Order in crisis? Is the Order sick? Where is the Order heading? When I ask them why they think so, I often hear answers such as there are hardly any vocations left in many places, more monasteries are closing, many brothers and sisters are leaving the Order, and there are numerous scandals. Although these questions and concerns may be justified, I nevertheless have difficulty with this attitude. Not because I want to deny reality, but precisely because this way of thinking makes it clear why the Order is in crisis and why it is sick.

The brothers and sisters who think this way, and yes, there are some of us here in this room, approach the Order as if they themselves are not part of it. They place themselves at a comfortable distance, from which they critically judge the Order, other communities, each other or individual monks/nuns without involving themselves. It becomes even more distressing when people start pointing fingers. It seems as if all difficulties are exclusively outside one’s own community or one’s own monastic and personal life.

What particularly bothers me about this way of thinking is that people always blame others and forget to look critically at themselves. In doing so, they place themselves above others. Such an attitude has no place in a Christian community. Pope Francis reminded it to us of many times: when you point a finger at someone else, three fingers point back at you. The Holy Scriptures urge us to “*consider others better than yourselves*”<sup>6</sup>. In Chapter 72 of the Rule, St. Benedict emphasises the good zeal that should characterise us: “*They should anticipate one another in honour (Rom. 12:10); most patiently endure one another’s infirmities, whether of body or of character; vie in paying obedience one to another – no one following what he considers useful for*

---

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli tutti*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Phil. 2:3.

*himself, but rather what benefits another – ; tender the charity of brotherhood chastely.”<sup>7</sup>*

In this light, the words of St. Paul are all the more striking: *“When one part suffers, all parts suffer with it”*.<sup>8</sup> Brothers and sisters who reason in this way do not realise that they are part of that one body of the Church, to which the Order also belongs, to which every community, every individual monk or nun belongs. It is therefore valuable to quote St. Paul’s words here in full: *‘As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many. If a foot should say, “Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. Or if an ear should say, “Because I am not an eye I do not belong to the body,” it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, “I do not need you,” nor again the head to the feet, “I do not need you.” Indeed, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are all the more necessary.’*<sup>9</sup>

We are all part of the same body, whether that is the Order as a whole, our own community, or each of us individually. How can I place myself outside of that and think that I am more than someone else? How can I claim that I don’t need others, or say that I want nothing to do with them? Isn’t that precisely the attitude of the Pharisee in the temple, while Jesus and St. Benedict call us to follow the humility of the tax collector?

Yes, I truly believe that the Order is sick and that all communities are suffering from this disease. Yes, I am convinced that all of us, not least myself, are affected by this disease. Fortunately! For Jesus did not come for the healthy or the righteous, but for the sick and sinners who need a physician.<sup>10</sup> The problem we suffer from revolves around constantly judging and condemning ourselves and each other, thereby placing ourselves outside, above or separate from others, the community or even the Order. Polarisation is constantly lurking when we remain stuck in our self-imposed closed worldview.

What we see everywhere today, both in society and in the Church, is that it has become quite normal to blame others. Right-wing politicians point to the left as the cause of problems, while left-wing politicians do the same towards the

---

<sup>7</sup> RB 72,4-8.

<sup>8</sup> 1 Cor. 12:26.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 12:12-22.

<sup>10</sup> “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2:17.

right. Politicians in the middle blame both the left and the right. In the South, people point to the North, and in the North, people think that the South is incapable of anything. We always keep ourselves outside the situation or the issue so that we do not have to take responsibility. It is always the other who is the problem. This worldly mentality has also crept into the Church, the Order and our communities and has unfortunately become very common.

The real problem is not that there are too few vocations in some parts of the world, or that brothers and sisters in certain communities do not keep their vows. The problem is that all of us, without exception, have been affected by a worldly mentality in which things like self-fulfilment, individual freedom and the assertion of rights have been elevated to the status of idols. You can only come to this conclusion if you dare to look honestly at your own heart, at your community and at the Order, and place yourself back at the centre of the Church. Love can only flourish there – not on the sidelines, not outside, and not above. As Thomas Merton aptly wrote: “*Love begins by allowing those we love to be themselves; not trying to make them into versions that fit our own image.*”<sup>11</sup>

All over the world, I see how individual brothers and sisters, but also communities and Regions, are increasingly inclined to focus on themselves, their own group or their own Region, closing themselves off from others and retreating into themselves. This creates the risk that others are no longer considered important, are portrayed as inferior, or even as “not right in their doctrine”. I notice that personal freedom has sometimes become so important that an essential monastic value such as obedience is mainly experienced as a limitation, not only for the individual, but also for the autonomy of a community or even a Region. Increasingly often, I see brothers and sisters, communities and Regions claiming their rights, often at the expense of others, and as if there were only rights and no duties.

Perhaps the greatest threat is that we are becoming indifferent to one another and to the heart of the Gospel: giving one’s life out of love. It is a worldly mentality that has slowly taken root in our hearts, our communities, our Regions and our Order. Of course, individual freedom, self-development and having rights are good things in themselves, but if we make them absolute values and idolise them, we are doing exactly what the world does and we no longer distinguish ourselves as Christians, as monks and nuns. The same applies to things like power, money and sexuality. It is precisely by taking our vows that we want to make a different voice heard, to make a difference based on the Gospel and the example of Jesus. But if we turn these good things into idols, the “salt” loses its power<sup>12</sup> and as a community we are worthless.

Pope Leo XIV recently addressed a million young people gathered in Rome: “*We too, dear friends, are made this way, we are made for this. We are*

---

<sup>11</sup> Thomas Merton, *No man is an island*, Harcourt Brace, New York, 1955. p. 149.

<sup>12</sup> Matt 5:13.

*not made for a life where everything is taken for granted and static, but for an existence that is constantly renewed through gift of self in love.” He added: “This is why we continually aspire to something “more” that no created reality can give us; we feel a deep and burning thirst that no drink in this world can satisfy.”<sup>13</sup>*

Do we really experience this desire for “more”? Do young people today who hunger and thirst for this “more” find a place in our communities? Yes, the Order is indeed sick! And yes, the Order is truly in crisis, because you and I are sick, because you and I, ourselves are in crisis, because we are all influenced by the worldly spirit.

And even if, God forbid, I thought that I was not affected by this worldly mentality, I would still be sick or in crisis, because I am part of the whole – I am sick together with the Church, in crisis together with the Order.

### **The medicine**

During my visits to various communities, I am struck time and time again that, despite illness and crisis, there is much that is good and that there are brothers, sisters and communities throughout our Order who are true sources of Hope. They prove that there really is a remedy for the worldly spirit of closing oneself off in one’s own world and polarisation: working together. But what does “working together” mean?

Working together is intrinsically linked to the Cistercian charism. The *Carta Caritatis* laid the foundations for cooperation between the different communities, because our predecessors knew from their own experience that the tendency to dominate and the power relations between master and subject take root more quickly than the evangelical call to loving service to one another. Instead of a hierarchical or monarchical model, the Cistercians consciously chose cooperation, in which love is the starting point for change and renewal.<sup>14</sup> Only through love, made visible in concrete cooperation, could the monk/nun, the community and the Order continually reform and renew themselves.

The General Chapter repeatedly resorted to cooperation as a means of promoting renewal and change within the Order. Think of structures such as filiation/paternity, Father Immediate and regular visitations. Later, cooperation was also encouraged by recognising congregations in cooperation with the General Chapter, especially in times of crisis, so that there was room for renewal in specific situations. The General Chapter proved particularly wise in

---

<sup>13</sup> Pope Leo XIV, Homily 3 August 2025.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Monika Dihsmäier, Entscheidungsfindung und die versionen der Carta Caritatis, in: E. Delaissé, La Charte de charité 1119-2019. Un document pour préserver l’unité entre les communautés. Paris, 2020, pp. 69-109.

always applying the medicine of cooperation in a tailored manner so that no closed groups formed, creating a “we” in opposition to the others.

Time and time again, the General Chapter managed to respond to local needs by constantly adapting its approach to cooperation. During the nineteenth century, this open attitude gradually disappeared because of a desire for uniformity. In many cases, this uniformity had a stifling effect. Fortunately, a healthy unity in diversity was restored in 1969 with the Statute for Unity and Pluralism. Nevertheless, it remains a task for all of us to internalise the spirit of that Statute more deeply. This is precisely where Pope Francis’ encyclical *Fratelli tutti* can help us. “*How much our human family still has to learn about living together in harmony and peace, without everyone having to be the same!*”<sup>15</sup>

### **Working together within the body of Christ**

Working together is not just an activity, but is, above all, taking your place as a baptised member of the body of Christ, to which you yourself, your community, your Region and the Order belong, in a spirit of responsibility and freedom.

As the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: ‘*Baptism makes us members of the Body of Christ: “Therefore . . . we are members one of another.” (Eph. 4:25) Baptism incorporates us into the Church. From the baptismal fonts is born the one People of God of the New Covenant, which transcends all the natural or human limits of nations, cultures, races, and sexes: “For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body”.’ (1 Cor 12:13)*<sup>16</sup>

Through baptism, we become participants in the loving cooperation of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus says in John 14:10: “*It is the Father who, remaining in me, does his work.*” And further: “*Believe me: I am in the Father and the Father is in me. Or believe it because of the works themselves. Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever believes in me will also do the works that I do. Yes, he will do even greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.*” (John 14:11-12)

Cooperation brings us to the heart of the Triune God and his “*incomprehensible charity*”, a generosity that wants to love and be loved infinitely, to share everything and to receive everything.<sup>17</sup> As a Cistercian, one inevitably comes to Treatise XV by Baldwin of Ford (1125-1190) on the cenobitic life. For him, “*sharing is the basis of the common life*”, both by nature, in sin and grace, and in glory.<sup>18</sup> This Cistercian text provides us with a remedy for the worldly spirit of

---

<sup>15</sup> Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti*, 100.

<sup>16</sup> CCC 1267.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. [https://cistercian-mentors.webnode.es/materials/baldwin/?utm\\_source](https://cistercian-mentors.webnode.es/materials/baldwin/?utm_source).

<sup>18</sup> Baldwin of Ford, *Spiritual Tractates*, volume two, Cistercian Fathers Series, 41, Kalamazoo, 1986, p. 165.

polarisation caused by the idolisation of self-development, individual freedom and the sole pursuit of rights.

Baldwin speaks of “*the love of sharing and the sharing of love.*”<sup>19</sup> Although this sounds poetic and his reference to the Trinity, angelic choirs, apostles and the first Christian community may be idealistic, in a cenobitic community it is all about sharing love and the sharing of love – precisely in everyday life, in the little things.

What strikes me particularly in Baldwin’s text is his theological explanation of the sharing of grace. Every baptised person, therefore, every monk or nun, every community and the entire Order, has received grace not to keep for themselves, but to share. Instead of wanting to keep everything for oneself, dominate or criticise, this vision invites us to see the good in others and discover what their contribution to my life can be, and vice versa. That contribution is not our merit, but pure grace. It is an exchange in the service of the body – the community, the Church.

Baldwin writes: “*If you pay attention, you will see how the qualities that belong to each member individually serve the common good. The eye does not look only for itself but guides our feet in their steps and our hands in their work. The mouth does not eat only for itself, nor does the stomach digest only for itself, but they perform a joint work; and what the whole body needs to feed itself, to satisfy its needs and help it grow, that is what is taken in by the mouth and digested by the stomach. If any part of the body is hurt, does not the tongue suffer with it? As if it were itself hurt, it takes on the voice of the one who suffers and cries out to the one who inflicted the wound: ‘Why do you hurt me?’.*”<sup>20</sup>

He concludes: “*Beloved brothers in Christ, where do these examples lead us? Is it not to mutual patience, mutual humility, mutual love? Has God not written a law of love in us that can teach us about ourselves? If He who gave us the law would also give us His blessing, and feed us in the innocence of our hearts, and guide us with a skilful hand on the path of peace (Ps 78:72), then we would preserve unity of spirit in the bond of peace, and love for God in love for our neighbour. When we love God with one mind and one heart in accordance with the purity of our profession, the love of God is undoubtedly poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit of God brings us all to life as if we were one body, so that none of us lives for ourselves, but for God; and so that we may all live together in unity of spirit through the one spirit who dwells in us.*”<sup>21</sup>

This theological principle, which is at the heart of the belief in the *communio sanctorum*, can also be found in recent Church documents on synodality. The instrumentum laboris of the second session of the Synod on Synodality refers to the principle of “*the exchange of gifts*”. The Synod places this exchange of

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>20</sup> Idem.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 179.

grace at the heart of the synodal Church: *“Walking together as baptised persons in the diversity of charisms, vocations and ministries, as well as in the exchange of gifts between Churches, is an important sacramental sign for today’s world, which, on the one hand, experiences increasingly intense forms of interconnectedness, and on the other is immersed in a mercantile culture that marginalises gratuitousness.”*<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, the authors of the document Hope that gifts will be shared concretely in solidarity between the different churches, without any desire for domination: *“The Episcopal Conferences Hope that goods will be shared in a spirit of solidarity between the Churches that make up the one and unique Catholic Church, without any desire for domination or claim to superiority. The existence of rich Churches and Churches that live in great hardship is a scandal. It is therefore suggested that arrangements be made to promote mutual ties and form support networks, including in the context of groupings of Churches. All the local Churches receive and give in the communion of the one Church. There are Churches that need the support of financial and material resources; others that are enriched by the witness of living faith and loving service to the poorest; still others need, above all, the help of evangelisers who devote their lives to communicating the Gospel to other peoples. In particular, the generosity of priests, deacons, consecrated men and women, lay men and women engaged in the mission ad gentes is recognised and solicited.”*<sup>23</sup>

This underlines that the exchange of gifts is not an abstract ideal but very concrete, as Saint John Paul II emphasised in *Ut unum sint*: *“Dialogue is not only an exchange of ideas. In some way it is always an ‘exchange of gifts’.”*<sup>24</sup>

Synodality is therefore more than making the Church or the Order more democratic. Synodality means that as Christians, as a community, as an Order, we take our baptism seriously and, despite our vulnerability (sins), see the grace and gifts that God has given us and which we, in turn, give to one another across the boundaries of race, gender, culture, etc. Only from this can synodality arise, and not from (Church) political agendas or populism. This is precisely where the challenge of synodality lies for our Order, and not so much in changing structures, although that will also be necessary!

## **Conclusion**

Brothers and sisters, as I said earlier, the Order is sick, but in that vulnerability, I see many forms of collaboration within and between communities. A collaboration that is an exchange of grace and gifts, amid a vulnerable reality, and therefore a sign of Hope. It is precisely this cooperation, rooted in our

---

<sup>22</sup> “Instrumentum laboris” for the Second Session of the 16th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (October 2024), no. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., nos. 44-45.

<sup>24</sup> St. John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 28.



baptism, that is the Hopeful sign that we as Cistercians can give in a closed worldview and a polarised Church and world.

Like Baldwin's treatise, this seems lofty and poetic. However, it is very concrete. I understand very well the reaction of Sister Maria Gonzales of Crozet, who wrote after a first reading of Baldwinus's text: "*The text is like trying to fix a faucet with a wrench in one hand and a book of poetry in the other.*"<sup>25</sup> But with her, I increasingly see the value and usefulness of this concept of sharing grace and the grace of sharing as the basis of our common life, also at the level of the Order.

It requires a conversion on our part. A conversion from "I" to "we," or as Father Chukwuka John Ife, a monk of Awhum, writes in his book *Authentic Conversion*: "*Conversion is a radical alteration of a person's life as it changes from self, ego-centric to God, and going out from self to the service of others.*"<sup>26</sup> Without this conversion, we cannot see these signs of Hope.

I see that sign of Hope where communities work together in formation, where sisters help brothers in formation. I see it, for example, in Tre Fontane and Aque Salvie, where brothers and sisters together bear witness to Cistercian life in the heart of the eternal city. I see Hope in Ireland where three communities came together in one single community. I see Hope in western France, where communities are trying to shape their economies together. I see Hope in Mokoto, where despite the violence, doors are opening to thousands of refugees and cooperation makes monastic hospitality a sign of Hope. I see that sign of Hope in our monasteries in Syria, Israel or anywhere else amid violence. I see signs of Hope where superiors from different cultures help communities in difficulty. I see Hope because more communities are open to a multicultural composition. In the United States, Japan and Spain, too, I see cautious attempts at cooperation between communities. If you look closely and, above all, dare to look, you will see signs of Hope everywhere.

We can make this even more concrete by paying attention to this exchange of gifts during the General Chapter when studying the House Reports. By looking beyond our own interests in appointments, elections, etc. By looking first at ourselves and then at others in difficult situations and helping each other instead of condemning or avoiding each other. By being mindful of healthy differences. By being truly open and committed to the exchange of gifts between the different worlds and cultures that make up the Order and this General Chapter. Let this General Chapter help us to share through love and to love sharing, so that it becomes an exercise in Charity and a growth in our ongoing conversion to see the signs of Hope that God gives us today in the midst of our vulnerability.

---

<sup>25</sup> <https://cistercian-mentors.webnode.es/materials/baldwin/>

<sup>26</sup> Ife, Chukwuka John oco, *Authentic conversion*, p. 55-56.

Is the Order sick? Yes, and it must remain so, because only in this way do we realise that we need each other, that we need the gifts and graces of others to live. St. Bernard calls us to remain pilgrims of Hope under the shadow of the Most High.<sup>27</sup> That pilgrimage is sometimes difficult, but every pilgrim knows that you need your fellow pilgrims to keep the flame of Hope burning. Therefore, let us work together, very concretely in our communities, between our communities and especially here in the General Chapter. Let no one say, “I don’t matter” or “you don’t matter.” Everyone has a gift, a grace, for the building up of the whole. Discover that gift! Discover that grace!

Assisi, Memoria of Pope Gregory the Great, 3 September 2025.

Br. Bernardus Peeters ocso  
Abbot General

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Bernard of Clairvaux, Sermons on Psalm 90(91).