

General Chapter of the Cistercian Order

Ariccia, 9 October 2022

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Opening Greeting and Introduction

Dear Mother Abbess and Fathers Abbot Presidents,
Dear Father Procurator General,
Dear Mother Abbesses, Father Abbots, Mother Prioresses, Father Priors,
and all members of the General Chapter,

We find ourselves here again after 7 years since the last General Chapter. They have not been easy years to pass through, marked as they were by the Covid-19 pandemic, by the increasing fragility of our communities, by some dismissals of superiors after grave irregularities and abuses of power.

In the formation of our General Chapter, many faces have changed: 7 Abbot Presidents have changed, and we have one more Congregation, that of Saint Gertrude the Great. Abbot President Eugenio Romagnuolo, of Casamari, unfortunately departed from us, as a victim of Covid, as early as April 2020. There are about 43 new superiors (a good half of the members of the General Chapter), among whom are 7 administrators. 13 communities have lost the status of being *sui iuris* for various reasons. There is for now only one superior of a new *sui iuris* monastery, that of Phuoc Hiep in Vietnam. Great figures as Superiors of the Order have concluded their faithful service. Mother Gemma Punk of Regina Mundi tendered her resignation after 75 years as superior. Now we know that she “reigned” longer than Queen Elisabeth! Mother Rosaria Saccol, of San Giacomo di Veglia, left the abbatial post after 51 years and returned in holiness to the Father on 23 November 2021. Mother Irmengard Senoner of Mariengarten has just recently finished her 39 years of abbatial service.

Beyond those I have mentioned, I would also like to mention the superiors who have returned to the Father’s House in these years: Abbot President emeritus of the suppressed Congregation of Mary Mediatrix of All Graces, Dom Gerardus Hopstaken; Abbot President emeritus of the Congregation of the Holy Family, Dom Jean Lam; the Abbot President emeritus of the Congregation of St. Bernard in Italy, Dom Ambrogio Luigi Rottini; Mother Consolata of Frauenthal, Mother Assunta of Santa Susanna, Dom Bao of My Ca, Abbot Christian of Rein, Abbot Denis of Dallas, Mother Presentación Muro of Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Mother Agnes of Kismaros. Another sorrowful loss for the Order was the untimely death of Fr. Sebastian Paciolla, on 22 June 2021.

In these seven years, the members of the General Chapter with the right to vote have dropped from 100 to 87. The members of the Order, notwithstanding the countries and certain communities in Europe and the United States that have enough vocations, have dropped from about 2500 to 2217.

As I said to the Holy Father when I met with him last 13 June: “We are having a harder time walking, but we are walking more closely together.” Francis responded to me by citing an African proverb: “If you want to walk fast, walk alone, but if you want to walk safely, walk along with others.”

Yes, I think we are walking more closely together, but not always and not with everyone. In the end, with this General Chapter we will see whether I told the Pope the truth or a lie. I hope you will not make me have to go to confession!

What should the purpose of the General Chapter be?

The *Carta Caritatis* repeats it to us from 903 years ago: “Let them treat of the salvation of their own souls; if something is to be emended or added to in the observance of the Holy Rule or of the Order, let them so ordain it, and let them reestablish among themselves the good of peace and charity” (CC 7.2).

In this, it takes back up many apostolic exhortations, like that which St. Paul addresses to the Ephesians:

“I therefore urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit – just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call – one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. [...] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” (Eph 4:1–6,15–16)

Pope Francis, with all his exhortations to revive the synodal nature of the Church, helps us rediscover our Cistercian charism, precisely as a “journey together” of communities that are joined by one and the same vocation, by one hope, one faith, one charity. In my letters and in some conferences in these last four years, I have sought to stimulate among us this *synodal awareness of our vocation and mission*, independent of the differences of observance and style of life that we live out in our individual communities and Congregations. What has helped me a great deal in this has been finding myself participating in various Church meetings: the 2018 Synod of Bishops dedicated to the youth, the February 2019 meeting in the Vatican on the topic of abuses in the Church, then the beginning of the synodal path for the whole Church on 9 and 10 October 2021, a path that will culminate in next year’s Synod of Bishops. I was also encouraged in this by the surprise of being elected to the Executive Council of the Union of Superiors General and by the even greater surprise of being elected vice-president of this Union. It is not a task that requires much work of me, fortunately, but it helps me be more attentive to the heartbeat of the universal Church and of the world. I tried to make the Order share in this awareness. I realized how much the other religious Orders are attentive to our monastic experience and sensibilities when they confront problems and especially in living out the Church’s mission. It is important for us to be aware of this, since it

is not so much the role of abbot general that makes me capable of this work, as it is the vocation that I share with each of you.

In his discourse on the occasion of the beginning of the synodal path, exactly a year ago, 9 October 2021, the Pope said:

“The words ‘communion’ and ‘mission’ can risk remaining somewhat abstract, unless we cultivate an ecclesial praxis that expresses *the concreteness of synodality* at every step of our journey and activity, encouraging real involvement on the part of each and all. I would say that celebrating a Synod is always a good and important thing, but it proves truly beneficial if it becomes a living expression of “being Church”, of a way of acting marked by true participation. This is not a matter of form, but of faith. Participation is a requirement of the faith received in baptism. As the Apostle Paul says, “in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). In the Church, everything starts with baptism. Baptism, the source of our life, gives rise to the equal dignity of the children of God, albeit in the diversity of ministries and charisms. Consequently, all the baptized are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission. Without real participation by the People of God, talk about communion risks remaining a devout wish.” (Address of His Holiness Pope Francis, 9 Oct 2021)

Participating in the Church’s mission

“All the baptized are called to take part in the Church’s life and mission,” Pope Francis says. I would like to underline this phrase, because it makes us realize that meeting each other and working together is not a task only for us, but must be inspired by a universal purpose. Of course we must, as the *Carta Caritatis* asks us to, treat of the salvation of our souls, ordain what is needed for the observance of the Holy Rule or of the Order, correct and increasing the life of our communities and reestablish among ourselves the good of peace and charity (cf. CC 7.2). But if in all this we do not think of the mission of the whole Church, that is, if we do not think of the salvation of the whole world, all our work on ourselves will be narcissistic, sterile, will not bear fruit, not even for ourselves. Because from the very beginning our Order kept itself united and worked on its own conversion “out of a desire to help all the members of the Order and all the children of holy Church – *prodesse illis omnibusque sanctae Ecclesiae filiis cupientes*” (CC 1.3). The sons of the Church means the whole of humanity. We are called to be fathers and mothers, brothers and sisters of the all humanity. Not humanity in the abstract, but the humanity that, in the world today, is born, lives, works, suffers, dies. We must not feel like we are sterile and useless if we do not have vocations or if we have to close some monastery. We should feel like we are sterile and useless if we live out our vocation without this passion for the whole human race.

The Pope always speaks of a “Church going forth,” that is, of the missionary passion that makes the whole Church strive to reach every sheep that is disoriented and far from the flock of Christ. We too, respecting the more contemplative or more apostolic characteristics of each of our Congregations and communities, must find and revive this missionary irradiation, to stay alive and above all happy with the joy

of the Gospel. As the Pope again writes in *Evangelii Gaudium*: “Each Christian and every community must discern the path that the Lord points out, but all of us are asked to obey his call to go forth from our own comfort zone in order to reach all the ‘peripheries’ in need of the light of the Gospel” (EG 20).

At times we become gloomy and discontent, irritable and capricious, simply because we forget about the world’s suffering, we forget the pandemic, poverty, war, hunger, the meaningless life of so many men and women, and of so many young people. We forget the innocent pain of so many children, the insecurity in which so many families live, the economic and social difficulties that confront lay people. We forget the persecuted Christians, we forget the martyrs. We forget the migrants. We forget the sadness of sinners who do not encounter the Redeemer. In the end we forget all the sheep lost without a shepherd, that is, we forget Christ’s compassion for humanity (cf. Mk 6:34).

How often, when I have found myself along with some of you confronting the problems that are never resolved, in which the conflicts, the claims, the disobediences, the infidelities grow ever sharper, have we said to each other: but what does this have to do with the salvation of the world and hence with Christ who came to live, suffer, die, and rise to save us?

But it is comforting to see that the majority of communities and persons live with this missionary awareness, and this makes their life great and radiant, even and especially when the circumstances, conditions, or health, constrain us to reduce our action. Who loves much, even if he can do nothing, acts as God!

Many brothers and sisters have, so to say, a “heart that goes forth,” that is an ecclesial, missionary heart, even and especially when they can only pray, and especially offer everything for the salvation of the world. I rejoice to see a little bit everywhere in the world how so many young people in our communities have this universal sense of our vocation, and this fills me with hope.

It is with this hope that I begin our General Chapter, on which we have already invoked the Holy Spirit, and we shall continue to invoke him, making an epiclesis over all that we will live out, say, think or try in these days, so that all may be offered to the Spirit, so that Christ the Redeemer, the Mercy of the Father, become incarnate there, as he did in the womb of Mary, Mother of the Church, Mother of Cîteaux.