



# A LETTER FROM THE ABBEY

Christmas, 2000

## LIGHT SHINING IN DARKNESS

*The Perspective of Hope*

This year's calendar produces the shortest possible Advent beginning on December 3 and ending on December 24: only three weeks. Perhaps, this is the best way for us to be reminded that our Advent is not supposed to end.

Advent as an ongoing program is not a new idea. Christianity understood its focus in "the One who is to come." This is was the term John the Baptist used to make his inquiries about Jesus. In his reply Jesus saw that his coming took place in the transformation of the human beings around him: the blind see, the lame walk, leper are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and to the poor the gospel is announced. (Mt 11:4). But at the end of his ministry he spoke of his second coming that defined a program for his followers: you must be like servants waiting for their master to return. When condemned to death he made the statement: "From now on you will see the Son of Man on the Power's right side and coming upon the clouds of heaven" (Mt 26:64).

The Holy Year we are closing with its focus on the third millennium had a powerful impact on so many Catholics around the globe exactly because it drew our attention to Jesus' on-going coming. The sterility of Christian theology in our age might be caused by some forgetfulness of Jesus' true nature in which present and future are always linked. His presence is a continuously unfolding reality. His "having arrived" promises new and new arrivals, his future coming is not so much "a return" but the completion of a single journey in which all men of good will become his companions.

A theology of hope comes about when we assess the condition of human beings living in grace. God is both with us and on his way. There is no "either/or" about his present presence and future arrival. The fullness that comes unfold from the reality we already have. But this existence extended over the cross of time needs to come to a closure of its agony and thus bring the fruit to full ripeness.

The human heart is not easily trained to wait. In all needs and efforts we want quick results, instant success and immediate response. But love, faithfulness, loyalty and dedication cannot be made manifest unless proven by endurance. Time is essential for the way we define ourselves.



So even the shepherds of Bethlehem must begin a journey: "Let us go to Bethlehem..." They have to "find" the child that was announced to them (Lk 2:15-16). The Magi must go on a journey, follow a sign, ask questions, travel and inquire and only then can they "find the child and his mother" and experience a "very great joy" (Mt 2:10-11). Only those who seek will find, and only to those who knock will the door be opened. The human being is a creature of many desires. Unless we sort them out before they tear us asunder, we fall victim to our desires. During the journey, anxiety is transformed into hope, suffering into patience and the heart becomes detoxified from all traces of bitterness.

There is no greater Christmas gift than the discovery that what we want is the giver. Actually over all gifts and givers, we should boldly reach out for the one source of all giving. Seeing how he towers over all expectations and yet descends to come to us as the Child of Christmas is the gift that turns us into blind who see, deaf who hear, lame who walk, and poor men infinitely enriched by the an ongoing coming of PEACE.

**MERRY CHRISTMAS AND A HAPPY NEW YEARS**

## VOCATIONS IDENTIFIED

A year ago the Newsletter included an essay on "Vocations Anonymous" which elicited a great deal of response. It is tempting to go back to the topic and add a few words.

### 1) *Vocations Discussed at the General Chapter.*

Although this topic was not the focus of any session, it surfaced a few times with vigor and attracted interest. Many communities suffer from a shortage of vocation. The only country with a large increase of membership is Vietnam. Yet, because of communism and also because of cultural peculiarities and numerous make-shift arrangements resulting from the country's political condition, no valid generalizations could be made as to the reasons for this increase in vocation. Another interesting intervention was made by a monk of Ethiopia, where there had been no vocation shortage in the last thirty years. He reported how the civil war and the waves of famine destroyed the social base of the vocations and that now they face a sudden shortage they have not experienced before. More optimistic were some isolated interventions (a monk from Brazil, an abbot of Denmark, monks of Italy) stating that in today's world there are many more vocations than we usually give credit for, but "we" - meaning probably the religious institutions, the bishops and the priests - have a hard time helping them to come to fruition. A peculiar contribution came from the staff hired for the simultaneous translation of the proceedings, seminarians of an international seminary in Berlin, run by the movement called "Neo-Catechumenate," seven young men from four countries, who spoke about their own discovery of a vocation. Their outlook was that of a new spring of the church on the path defined by Pope John-Paul II, a man whom they admire for his ideas, courage and integrity.

### 2) *What Can Be Done About It?*

In the past two years many people have become tired of analyzing the causes of the vocation shortage and asking repeatedly the one same question: what are you doing about

it? One answer is prayer focusing on the need and the desire for more and better priests. Another is a sense of duty and urgency to improve on both personal and common lives of priests and religious so that people would see them as indispensable for the future of the church.

### 3) *What Have We Done?*

A year ago the Abbey also began a chain of activities which have recently picked up in intensity and produced some fruits. Retreats, talks and study groups were organized with students both of the University of Dallas and Cistercian Prep School, discussing the prospect of a Cistercian vocation. A Vocation Committee was formed of the Abbot, the Prior (Fr. Peter), the Subprior (Fr. Bernard), the novice master (Fr. Roch) and the vocation director (Fr. Paul) with monthly meetings at which each member reports on some area of formation, recruitment or dissemination of information. Due to this approach, not only did we receive the gift of two novices, but experienced their presence in our lives as both a blessing and a task. In the process we have become more realistic and more pragmatic about what it takes for the community to receive and form new members.

### 4) *What To Hope For?*

Institutions come and go. The Church keeps on living on account of the Risen Christ. And the priesthood also survives. But the magnitude of the crises lying ahead remain unknown. Religious orders and monasteries come and go, some go extinct and new ones come about. But survival is also a fact of life. It does not happen unless one fights for it. Yet, the success of a religious community is not a mere result of efforts put forth by individuals, but the sum total of people who form community around common goals, shared journeys of mind, heart and character, common work and joint sacrifices. Today the task of witnessing to Christ includes first of all a re-learning of the meaning of the Cross: sacrifice, expiation, endurance, turning the realities of human suffering into means of redemption for a fuller life.

## GENERAL CHAPTER IN ROME

*From a report given by the Abbot in the Abbey about the Chapter at which he and Fr. Roch participated.*

### **Members**

The Chapter began on August 31 at the "Salesianum," a large facility close to Rome's Leonardo da Vinci Airport in Fiumicino. There were 122 participant, a few more men than women

### **Organization**

The Chapter began by clarifying procedures and electing three moderators who were supposed to run the meetings. These with the help of a small but efficient secretariate of three people (one Italian, one Austrian and one from Germany) had the task of communicating in the three major languages of the Chapter (German, Italian and French). At the same time there was also simultaneous translation. Consequently the moderators were allowed to speak any of these languages. As moderator I had to speak either German or Italian, because English was not officially translated. The other two moderators spoke in their native German. Most important was the translation into Spanish because of the large number of Spanish-speaking abbesses of whom very few spoke another language.

### **State of the Order**

The first large presentation by the Abbot General was some sort of a "state of the Order" address, a report about each congregation of monasteries. The picture he drew was completed by the reports of the abbot presidents of the congregations. Two of the congregations, the one of Belgium/Holland and the one of East Germany/Czech Republic were reported to be struggling with major problems. In Belgium and Holland monastic life fell apart after the seventies; in the Czech monasteries the attempts of restoring Cistercian life in the formerly suppressed monasteries have so far almost completely failed. The Congregation of Vietnam reported an abundance of

vocations of both monks and nuns. The total of the members is 547 with more than 100 novices at the present time. This growth has never been well explained. The monasteries are seemingly able to offer an authentic form of religious life with a high degree of "inculturation" under exclusively Vietnamese leadership. The Abbot General has visited them only once in the last five years and, honestly stated that their work and way of life is quite impenetrable, due to the make-shift character of the way they deal with their situation. The Ethiopian Cistercians are presently facing major difficulties because of the independence of Eritrea obtained at the price of a bloody war. Many of the Cistercians in Africa are of Eritrean, among them Fr. Siyum who studied in Dallas in 1989-91. Modestly optimistic was the report given by the other congregations, although there was a general complaint about the low number of vocations especially in the abbeys of Austria, the houses of Casamari and the majority of the monasteries in Spain. Some recent foundations are quite flourishing, like the German foundation of Heiligenkreuz in Stiepel, or the monastery of Rieunette, founded by Boulaur in Southern France. The famous monastery of Helfta in East Germany where St. Gertrud lived has re-opened 400 years after its suppression.

### **Interlude**

On Sunday, September 3, the Chapter went to the beatification of Popes Pius IX and John XXIII and Dom Columba Marmion OSB. The ceremony was quite beautiful, with a huge and very prayerful international crowd. The Pope spoke clearly and distinctly but he certainly looked like a dying man on the last leg of his journey, yet filled with courage and projecting the charisma of leadership.

### **The First Three Days: Experiment in Cistercian Ecumenism**

On Monday, September 4, the Abbot General of the Trappists, Dom Bernardo Olivera, an Argentinian, visited the chapter and stayed for the whole day. He surprised the chapter by presenting a solemn apology for all the wrongs that Trappists have committed against the unity of the order. Abbot General Maurus was visibly unprepared for this kind of solemn act. The result was true confusion. So Abbot Maurus spoke of the need to learn more about our common history. French and Italian abbots, disappointed by Abbot Maurus' response, began to demand that we start with an open-ended discussion about the relationship of the two Orders, while the program of the day was about the role of the Eucharist in monastic life for which we had two invited speakers from outside the Chapter. So we had a most unusual day. The two speakers, Bruno Forte from Naples and Basilius Studer from Switzerland, delivered their papers on the Eucharist, while people kept on demanding that we change the agenda to treat "relationships in the Cistercian Family." As moderator in the afternoon, I had the thankless task of enforcing the previously established "ordo of topics." There was, in fact, a document prepared in committee about "The Cistercian Family" which needed to be presented and discussed in an orderly fashion on the next day. Meanwhile, the Abbot General of the Trappists, either because of misunderstanding or taking advantage of the situation, declared himself willing to come back the next day to participate in the discussion of our document about the Cistercian Family. Finally, he understood that he was overextending his invitation. However, before leaving he made a statement about his personal desire to see soon the "unity of spirit in the Cistercian Family expressed in the unity of one body." Some took this statement as a proof of the suspicion that this idea of the "Cistercian Family" was nothing short of a re-united Order under his leadership. While the French/Italian declarations of sympathy for the Trappists began to increase, from the German/Austrian side (almost 50 % of the participants) there came declarations that their communities know and care little about the Strict Observance. I began to say that I was feeling as if World War I had broken out again. Unfortunately nobody thought that my joke was funny. The chaotic events of the day were cleared up on the next two days. A brilliant presentation of a document prepared by a committee in the summer, "About Communion in the Cistercian Family" was made by an Austrian monk and found a very positive response. The document was discussed in four "language groups" (German, Italian, French, Spanish). Each group said that they were very happy with the text and only minor changes were suggested. In order to repair the embarrassments of the previous day, a short letter was composed for the Abbot General of the Trappists responding to all his concerns. This letter was later presented to the Trappists on September 8 at a luncheon in honor of the Trappist Abbot General. The German Cistercians gave the Trappists a full series of eight volumes of the new Latin/German edition of the works of St Bernard. It was, indeed, a good hint that it would be up to the Trappists to sponsor (finance and organize) the bilingual English/Latin edition of the works of St. Bernard. Thus the whole affair of "the dialogue" in the Cistercian Family came to a satisfactory resolution. The General Chapter unanimously adopted a document defining the Order's identity and, at the same time, inviting all other communities with the Cistercian "charisma" to work together on our common patrimony. It was an invitation to build closer relationships but insisting on "both truth and charity" in all matters including the historical dimension.

### **The Rest of the Sessions**

The Chapter's other acts are of mostly juridical importance. The Constitutions of the Order and the basic legislative text, the so-called "Declaratio," were updated and finalized. New officials were elected for the Order's Synod and the Abbot General's Council. For the first time in history, both organs received female members.

**Last impressions.** The number of official members was 122. With other helpers this meant an assembly of about 150 Cistercians in one place. I cannot remember having seen so many Cistercians assembled in one place ever since I participated at Abbot Wendelin's jubilee of his 10th year as abbot of Zirc in 1949. The liturgical celebrations were beautiful and uplifting. I found myself in the midst of brothers and sisters whose basic posture in life is prayer. I invited the abbot General to visit us in Dallas. Maybe during the Spring semester he will be able to come to our monastery.

#### MONASTERY NEWS

On September 24, **Br. Gabriel** went to Rome to begin graduate studies in theology at the University of St. Thomas. He lives at the Cistercian Generalate, the Residence of the Abbot General of the Cistercian Order, with some thirty-five other seminarians, including Cistercians, from a dozen different nations studying at various pontifical institutions of higher learning in Rome. Brother Gabriel will be back for both Christmas and Easter. His studies began with intensive Italian, but for the first semester all of the courses he takes are taught in English.

**Br. Patrick** is teaching one class at CPS in addition to his studies in theology at the University of Dallas.

**Fr. Paul** extended his work as Vocation Director by making trips to Texas A&M and Baylor Universities. At both places he was hosted by the Catholic Student Center.

**Fr. Roch** was one of the organizers of an ecumenical theological conference on the Eucharist held Nov 7-9, 2000 at the University of Dallas. Professors of theology from Stanford, Yale, Notre Dame, Baylor, SMU, TCU, University of Texas and other places participated with pastors and graduate students of various confessional backgrounds. One of the major papers discussed was by **Abbot Denis** "On the Eucharistic Provenance of the New Testament Scripture." **Fr. David** was respondent to a presentation on the Eucharistic theology of the Greek Church Fathers. The participants paid an official visit to the Cistercian Abbey Church and listened to performances by the Collegium Cantorum of the University of Dallas.

Our novices are participating in school activities at CPS. **Br. Lucas** organized a "schola" of singers for liturgical events. **Br. Francis** helped with the 3rd Form's Retreat He is planning to coach baseball in the second semester.

#### PLANNED FOR THE ABBEY CHURCH

Every First Friday of the school year the Community's Mass at the Abbey will be at 7:30 PM. Except for January the Collegium Cantorum of the University of Dallas plans to participate.

On Holy Thursday and Good Friday the Collegium Cantorum from UD will again provide music for our church services. On both Holy Thursday (April 12) and Good Friday (April 13) the services will begin at 5:30 PM. The Easter Vigil begins at 11 PM.

Christmas Midnight Service on December 24: Office of Readings at 11:30 PM to be followed immediately by the Midnight mass.

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