

Solemnity of the Founders of the Cistercian Order, January 26, 2025

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[readings appended]

It's always trouble when someone gets up to speak at their own party – it's never a short speech, but it's rude to stop them, even when they ramble, which they inevitably will – but today, January 26, is the Cistercian Order's party, and here I am.

For this feastday of the holy Founders of the Cistercian Order, Robert, Alberic, and Stephen Harding, we return to Christ's promise of a mysterious multiplication: What you give up for his sake and for the sake of the Gospel will be returned to you a hundred times over and, through all the troubles that come along with that, will lead you to eternal life. This principle runs throughout the readings: though the bodies of our noble ancestors have been laid away, their heritage and progeny remain alive and lasting; the one who leaves an old place to seek what is promised finds himself directed toward a “city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God,” finds from a “man as good as dead” and a sterile woman descendants beyond the count of the stars and the sands on the seashore; again, Isaac, offered up – to death –, becomes a symbol, of new life within loss accepted in faith; what you give up, you receive hundredfold – by a narrow path, one enters into the vastest of realms, the Kingdom of God.

The founders of our Order vividly experienced this mystery: a few years ago, back in 1098, they left the easy and accepted standards of monastic life and strove with zeal to establish it more truly, against many opponents, and when the work came to fruition at Cîteaux they were desperate that they would not find a way, as they put it paradoxically, for “Christ's poor to leave after them heirs to their poverty.” But the Spirit heard their prayers: some thirty men came to join Cîteaux at once – and one of them was St. Bernard, so we're not talking about just a bunch of idiots here –, by the year 1200 there were over 500 Cistercian monasteries spanning the whole of the continent, from Ireland to Norway to Syria to Spain; and by the eve of the Reformation there were some 740 houses of monks and an almost equal number of houses of nuns. I think right now we are at about three hundred monasteries in the world, depending whom and how you count – and I counted very generously. In Texas we are up to a total of one so far, a big step up from zero, and that's the most difficult step, like it was back at Cîteaux nine hundred and twenty-seven years ago.

Of course, the Order is not a number; religious orders are usually described by reference to traditions, or charisms, or forms of life. Such an approach might work better for an order named better, named after a person or an operation or activity, but we Cistercians are named after a place: Cîteaux in French,

Cistercium in Latin – a name that maybe means something like, “That swampy area on the near side of mile-marker number three.” Not very romantic. The first monks there called it simply, “The New Monastery,” and the charism they received there is not a particular activity or style, but the grace and labor of monastic life itself: the charism to be monks truly, fully, consistently, and expansively. They discerned carefully that what the times needed was true and restored monastic life, and all that monastic life can be and do – for time’s sake I’ve left out the detailed account of all the possibilities –; they strove for the fullness of monastic life, so they arranged to ensure its being well founded on the most important principle of all, the principle of charity, of relating monks to each other and monasteries to each other in mutual love, because they saw from experience that only in that way could monastic life retain its authentic integrity even as it spread (as it needed to). They did not run from the troubles of the world in monastic retreat, but teamed up in love to work at its conversion in the conversion of self and loving support of others. Their wisdom was given the official stamp at the Fourth Lateran Council a hundred years later, in 1215, when all the many proliferating and chaotic religious movements of that time were told to model themselves on the Cistercians’ structures, to become real *orders*; they were even told to bring two neighboring Cistercian abbots in as “consultants” to get things set up correctly. Really, the early abbots of Cîteaux crafted what is considered the first “religious order” – and we’re still not sure why other religious orders exist – a uniting body that becomes itself a school for monasteries, just as each monastery is a school for its people.

For every monastery is a school – not a place of withdrawal, or isolation, or penance, or hiding, but as St. Benedict calls it, a “school for the Lord’s service.” Monasteries are always places of formation: stable living under the rational, reasoned authority of a Rule and the wisdom and spiritual adaptability of an abbot elected democratically by the most informed and invested voters you can imagine, his own monks – there is simply no better way to craft a workspace with the right challenges and encouragements for all to grow in peace, to seek God, study, pray, work, and learn to experience God’s love in themselves so as to develop what one historian describes as the Cistercian “compulsion to enact charity in the world.” Our forefathers spoke of themselves as “lovers of the place,” not because the areas had some idyllic beauty – (just as well we’re here in Irving) – but because they demanded labor, because a true location is the proper workshop for laboring at restoring Christian life:

formation through quiet study and obedient work in a settled place, not by the wide-ranging imposition of clever systems or implementation of settled notions, not by wandering about vaguely in the presumption of knowing what to say just anybody anywhere at any time, not by disputation and faction, but by working to form a community that supports itself and thus shares itself with others, on a path toward what is found in experience – they insisted on stability and localization as necessary for bringing about formation as consistent, certain, steady, and gradual transformation from within, through seeking God in stable and shared conversion, like the conversion of that swamp valley to the shining star of Cîteaux. Stable, obedient conversion: this is the monastic framework for forming individuals and communities into the guiding lights of wisdom and love needed in this world.

This founding intuition about spiritual practice gave rise to a beautiful and heroic way of understanding our quest for God. In the Cistercian tradition, let's call it, the way to truth is the way of humility, of facing the truth of self and, through perseverance, peacefully acquiescing to God's love as it reveals itself in life. In the first step of such conversion, we experience the truth as harsh and severe, for we must accuse ourselves and turn away from evil, led by the force, thank God, of cold reason. After that ice bath, we need to warm up, and in the next step we encounter the truth as sweet and gentle, and here we follow the lead of compassion, of loving others in sympathy and community, led to the truth through the experience of mercy and love in the warm ways that cold reason cannot easily analyze. That is the stage in which, God willing, we spend most of our lives, for the final phase is that of contemplation, of mystical contemplation, when truth is pure and ravishing, when we are not led to it by clear reason or compassionate love but are simply seized by it, embraced by the truth in its fullness to the depth of our being.

Or, to look at the path of formation in another way, we can study it in light of the degrees of love: in the first degree, we all begin, sad to say, with love of ourselves for our own sake, – a bad and unhappy life, but it least it does have love and desire active within it – but then, struck by fear of punishment and the rational recognition and admission that we are not necessary, self-subsistent beings, we then love God, but still for our own sake, out of fear and reasonably wagering it's the best choice; then, in the third degree, through the steady labor of reading, and prayer, and obedience to the needs of the place and its people, by practices that engage us with the love of God in himself, we begin

by the path of experience to love God for God's own sake. There is however still one more step in the sequence – and St. Bernard says it happens rarely and briefly if at all in this life – and that is the fourth degree of love, not the love of self for your own sake, or of God for your sake, or of God for his sake, but of yourself for God's sake, a complete transformation of the experience of one's own existence, like the drop of water in the wine, or iron heated to glow like the fire in which it was heated, or air flooded with light that becomes like light – the self as we usually experience it is lost, not in annihilation, but only because the whole inner realm of identity reveals itself as a gift from God and a gift to God, in the discovery that, by God's grace, at the heart of all one's being in the world and in God is the simple exclamation we are taught to pray, "Thy will be done!" When our Creator's own delight arises in our created hearts, and all says "and it was good," "and it is good," not simply in gratitude but in participation.

And so the path of monastic formation, what our Order tries to bear witness to in the world, means experiencing that one's own soul is the bride of Christ. Our freedom and all our powers are not in contrast with God, but are his gifts, so the interplay of grace and freedom should be like the interplay of young lovers walking hand-in-hand, the soul leaning over onto her beloved's shoulder as they go, speaking to him like lovers speak, in silence and with almost a secret language, a hidden glance – something we cannot share with others and yet which mysteriously suffuses all that we are and thus shines through to others nonetheless. Moreover, like all brides-to-be as they get ready for the wedding, the soul is not alone – I can't imagine the bride getting dressed up by herself, though I haven't tried dressing like that, I admit – no, the soul is not alone; she is adorned and made beautiful in the helpful company of her friends, the maid of honor and the bridal party, chosen to help her out of love and honor toward them. Our souls, so often ugly little things, are transformed not by their own labors, but by the love of the Bridegroom and the joyous accompaniment of friends and beloved companions along the way.

This is a beautiful vision of what the quest for God means and how one lives it out – and I hope your experience of being connected to this monastery is helping you on this quest. We are, however, in an unusual situation. The truth is, to really see what the Cistercian Order is and aims to be, you would need to see not one but many monasteries, a whole congregation of monasteries linked to each other in the charitable mutual correction and encouragement that is the

real hallmark of the Order. Imagine if instead of this one place – as beautiful as it is –, there were five, ten, fifty, seven hundred such communities, of monks and nuns, vowed to the life of stable, obedient conversion and dedicating their lives to sharing that formation with the young and all who come to them. The only reason this isn't the case already is simply that it hasn't happened yet, and it takes time; there is no inherent obstacle and it remains the Order's ideal. What reduced the Order's numbers was not some slacking away from its purpose or descent into irrelevancy, but rather the bubonic plague, the Hundred Years' War, excessive taxation to fund other wars and Crusades, the radical fracturing of European political and ecclesiastical systems and dividing of the continent into warring parties that prevented the monasteries from staying connected and disrupted their internal organization, the Reformation and Revolutions that more or less obliterated the Order's governing structures and many of its houses, in some places destroying every one of them and leaving behind only idyllic ruination and "bare ruin'd choirs." It was only in the late nineteenth century, so pretty recently, that the Order started getting back onto its feet, and the unimaginable violence of the twentieth century and the confused swirling of culture in its aftermath of globalization and technological advance has made slow progress of the growth. But in monastic history class the other day, the novices and I were wondering: it's not that the world is less insane now than before, but here we are in a huge land full of people in need of formation, divided by a lot of little things but united mostly by language and culture and interstate highways and so on – it's a somewhat insane country, but maybe America today is not so far from the feudal Europe of the twelfth century in which the Cistercian way of life spread so powerfully; our culture has maximized the avenues for and openness to formation, but has not found what to be formed toward.

There are many good things moving in the Church today, and many less good; we are here because we have discerned, in youthful consideration both careful and intense, that what is most needed is the monastic life, cultivating the quest for God in the work and life of a place, raising from the ground of souls we find and the actual ground of earth we are on places that serve not as idyllic retreats but as workshops of spiritual labor. Something like the Cistercian path is the best path forward for steady growth, proposing stability, obedience, and life-long conversion as cures for our culture's tendencies toward dispersion and selfishness, uprootedness and superficiality. I encourage you to model your life upon it as closely as you can! Even noble young people, and I know many of

them, seeking to lay aside what St. Paul calls “the old self which deteriorates through illusion and desire,” seeking to be “renewed in the spirit of their minds,” need their aspirations to find realization in concrete, lived experience, in lasting commitment – a place where their quest can descend from YouTube, substacks, and whatever apps and channels may be helpful into a life and a communion with others. You do not need just to be told what to do and how to think, but given room to do it, welcomed into a reliable, well founded, tested, challenging and encouraging space in which you are invited to grow in your quest for Christ’s love.

I don’t need to tell you how much I have come to see it as one of the great marvels of God’s strange and inventive providence that my odd little life came under the influence of a Cistercian monastery – it’s certainly already been more than a hundred times what I gave up to be here; there’s more than a hundred of you right here in front of me now! – I don’t need to tell you all about this, because I certainly don’t have more time to speak, and you all have your own experiences too of the same sort; you could teach me.

The English historian William of Malmesbury, writing around the year 1140, described the Cistercian Order as the “surest road to heaven” – and he was a Benedictine! On this feastday it is good to meditate on how beautiful it would be for this life to spread again as it so often has. Of course, if it will, the men who will make it so will not come from afar like our Hungarian forefathers, but will come mostly from among you and people you know. So if you know 20–30 young people ready to seek God in this way, or if you have maybe 20–30 million dollars... or even, and really first of all, 20–30 minutes of time (in addition to what I’ve just taken up!) to spend in prayer alongside us as you are today... please keep it up. Let us thank God for the more than hundredfold blessings he has poured out in his providence by establishing Cistercian life here among us.



[Creed]

Guided by Christ's invitation, let us direct our prayers and hearts to our Heavenly Father.

That in their mission the Church's leaders may find reliable guidance and assistance from among her monks and nuns, let us pray to the Lord.

That the early Cistercians' heroic and poetic spirit of devotion to Mary, the Mother of God, may flourish anew among Christians, let us pray to the Lord.

That the warring spirits and long-standing hatreds in the world be brought to peace and reconciliation, let us pray to the Lord.

For the well-being and growth of the Cistercian Order throughout the world, especially in Austria, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Czechia, Eritrea, Ethiopia, France, Germany, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Viet Nam, Hungary, and the United States, let us pray to the Lord.

For all the deceased monks and nuns of our Order and for all their many friends and helpers, on whose lives and works we rely, especially for the twenty-four monks of Dallas buried here: Victor, Leonard, Odo, Thomas, Lambert, Louis, Rudolph, Damian, George, Christopher, Placid, Balthasar, Henry, Aloysius, Matthew, Pascal, David, Benedict, Ralph, Melchior, Bede, Roch, Anselm, and Denis, that they may all rest in peace, let us pray to the Lord.

For vocations to the monastic life and perseverance, let us pray to the Lord.

Almighty Father, hear our prayers and our hearts' truest desires, and by the intercession of the Founders of Cîteaux and our Order, grant us your grace in abundance, through Christ our Lord.

FIRST READING

Sir 44: 1, 10-15

Now will I praise those godly men, / our ancestors, each in his own time: / These were godly men / whose virtues have not been forgotten; / Their wealth remains in their families, / their heritage with their descendants; / Through God's covenant with them their family endures, / their posterity for their sake.

And for all time their progeny will endure, / their glory will never be blotted out; / Their bodies are peacefully laid away, / but their name lives on and on. / At gatherings their wisdom is retold, / and the assembly proclaims their praise.

SECOND READING

Heb 11: 1-2, 8-19

Brothers and sisters: Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and evidence of things not seen. Because of it the ancients were well attested.

By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs of the same promise; for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and maker is God. By faith he received power to generate, even though he was past the normal age—and Sarah herself was sterile—for he thought that the one who had made the promise was trustworthy. So it was that there came forth from one man, himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sands on the seashore.

All these died in faith. They did not receive what had been promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land from which they had come, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one. Therefore, God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.

By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name." He reasoned that God was able to raise even from the dead, and he received Isaac back as a symbol.

GOSPEL

Mk 10: 24b-30

Jesus said to his disciples: “Children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for one who is rich to enter the Kingdom of God.” They were exceedingly astonished and said among themselves, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For men it is impossible, but not for God. All things are possible for God.” Peter began to say to him, “We have given up everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Amen, I say to you, there is no one who has given up house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands for my sake and for the sake of the Gospel who will not receive a hundred times more now in this present age: houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and eternal life in the age to come.”