

Short Presentation for the O Cist General Chapter – Bernardine Cistercians of Esquermes

Thank you very much for the invitation to meet you and talk to you today. It is always a pleasure to meet so many people committed to the same way of life and to share this moment of grace with you.

I would like to present very briefly our branch of the Cistercian family. As with so many Abbeys, our history and evolution was shaped and influenced by the historical and political context of the founding nuns. The foundresses of the Order of Cistercians known as the Bernardines of Esquermes came originally from three abbeys in French Flanders which were suppressed by the Revolution of 1789. These met at Esquermes, near Lille, to continue their monastic life. The new monastery was officially established in 1827.

From the beginning, to earn their living and in response to the needs of the time, the foundresses undertook the work of education, which had formed part of the life of two of the abbeys from which they came. This work developed greatly at Esquermes and leaves us today with an openness to educational activities, even if in recent years we have withdrawn from all but two of our schools.

Circumstances led us to found other monasteries in France, England and Belgium. Together these formed a Congregation grouped around a Generalate House, now situated in Lille in the North of France. In response to the call of the Church and in particular to that of Pope Pius XII, we made foundations in Japan and in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and later in this century in Burkina Faso and Viet Nam.

Having remained faithful to our Cistercian vocation in spite of the difficulties encountered in the course of their history, we obtained official recognition from the Church, in 1955, as nuns of the Order of Citeaux.

Today we are about 100 sisters in 7 communities – in 6 different countries. With the help of some photos, I will take you on a rapid tour of those seven monasteries

- Monastery of Notre Dame de la Plaine – the Generalate House in Lille – a community of about forty sisters, many of whom are fairly elderly ... We have a Primary School, an Icon studio and a guest house. The Government of the Order reside here, so I spend about half my time in residence. We are a few km away from Esquermes, the site of the first monastery.
- Monastery of Our Lady of Hynning, Carnforth, Lancashire, England – situated in beautiful countryside, the large guest and retreat house welcomes many who seek prayer and peace.

- Monastery of Our Lady and St Bernard, Brownhill, Stroud, UK. A more recent foundation after leaving a big property responsible for two large schools near London. Again, a guest house is the chief way of earning a living.

Both the English communities live an ecumenical dimension to the full, receiving many groups from other Christian traditions, and notably doing quite a lot of spiritual direction for members of the Anglican Clergy.

- Monastery of Our Lady of the Lake, Goma, Congo. Situated in the Great Lakes region of Eastern Africa, on the frontier with Rwanda, the community's principal work is a successful secondary school for girls. The area itself is very unstable politically, geographically, ethnically, and economically, and knows almost every form of precariousness except faith. The Church is very much alive and the people have great faith in God.
- Monastery of Our Lady of Bafor, Burkina Faso – also a recent foundation. Burkina is a very poor country with a minority of Christians and very little monastic life. Our foundation there is gradually taking root, and the last stage of buildings culminated in the Church two years ago. Making yoghurt is one of the principal activities. Local vocations are slow to come – two Burkinabé have been and gone, but we hope to welcome postulants later this year.
- Monastery of Our Lady Star of the Sea, Ito, Japan. Our community in Japan was founded in 1954 and at first received several vocations – alas not very much since ... so there are now only six sisters remaining, of whom only one is under 80. all over 70. They recently moved to a small house which is more manageable than their previous large monastery. They are, no doubt, living the paschal mystery. However, not before having the idea that we should go elsewhere in Asia, hence the foundation in Viet Nam.
- Monastery of Our Lady of the Hills, Damb'ri, Viet Nam. The sisters went to Viet Nam in 2010, and after two years living in Ho Chi Minh moved to the town of Bao Loc two hundred km north of the city. Land, mostly covered in coffee bushes, was bought and the construction of the monastery began in 2013 started on the monastery in 2013 and the first phase is completed. A second phase will begin shortly. We already have a group of four novices and five postulants with us. The young women seem very serious, but the discernment of vocations is not easy. The foundation in Viet Nam is an adventure into the unknown – it is difficult for foreigners to establish a religious community and we have to go very gradually so as not to attract the attention of the communist authorities. I would like to thank all the monastic communities in Viet Nam who have welcomed us so warmly, and helped us in practical ways – I know there are many monks and nuns from Viet Nam here today. Thank you.

Unusually, our vow of stability is to the Order so the sisters can move from community to community. In practice, the geographical dispersion of the communities means that there is not a great deal of movement, but this possibility enables us to live the Charter of Charity in

a very practical way, looking at the needs of each community and of each sister. It also enables the sisters of different communities to know each other. In 2017, we propose to bring together all the novices and juniors together for a formation session at the Generalate House for a formation session so as to create the links right from the beginning.

When I visit the communities, I am sometimes divided between two reactions – the first is admiration and gratitude for the fidelity and love with which my sisters continue to live their Cistercian vocation. I see each community take its place, in coherence with its vocation, in the mission of the local church. The other reaction I have is to feel challenged, faced with some situations which verge on the dysfunctional. Living the Cistercian life in evolving circumstances and different situations is a constant challenge. As some of our communities get smaller and the members older, living an authentically fraternal life seems more difficult. Overwork, the rise of individualism, and individual fragilities can have a negative effect. Community life has always been intergenerational, but when the pyramid of ages is distorted in the community, creative thinking is required to enable each sister to live at the rhythm suitable to her stage in the monastic life. Faced with the challenge of having a truly fraternal community, it is good to remember that this work is first and foremost God's work and not ours. Nevertheless, we are taking advantage of the Year of Mercy to have a communal reflection in the Order on our living of fraternal charity in the light of God's mercy. Each community has been asked to plan its own programme of reflection and action according to its needs; it is my fervent hope that all the sisters will enter into the process.

We remain very much in touch with, and grateful to the other members of the Cistercian family for their spiritual and practical help, whether it be at the level of formation, shared courses, pastoral meetings or practical help. With the passage of time, it seems that the sense of family and communion amongst the monastic communities becomes ever more stronger, which I surely the work of the Holy Spirit. A thank you in particular to Dom Mauro for his openness.

I wish that your Chapter may continue to go smoothly, and thank you again for your welcome.

Sr Mary-Helen Jackson
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