

General Chapter O Cist 2015 presentation

I would like to thank Dom Mauro-Giuseppe for his kind invitation to be with you at this time during your General Chapter. It is one way of keeping in touch and his visits to our General Chapter in 2011 and again last year were much appreciated.

First of all I offer some general facts about the Order which might give you some idea of our situation. We are 96 autonomous houses of monks and 73 of nuns in 44 countries in the Americas, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania. The total number of monks on paper is 1934 and of nuns 1657 giving a combined total of 3591. About half of the monks and nuns of the Order are in Europe but only a third of those in initial formation in the Order are in European monasteries. In terms of numerical growth the region of Africa-Madagascar, both monks and nuns, is one that continues growing; the nuns in Latin America and in Italy too. For the rest while some communities may be growing numerically and others remain stable the overall trend is one of numerical diminution, slow but steady and there is little to indicate that there will be any change in this for the immediate future. The two largest communities of the Order are in Europe: the monks of Sept-Fons in France and the nuns of Vitorchiano in Italy. Vitorchiano and its many foundations (7 since 1968 and 3 more have issued from 3 of their foundations) is an exceptional phenomenon in the Order.

While we don't as an Order have Congregations as you do, in the past 50 years or so the monasteries have grouped themselves into regions (or regional conferences as they are called) – there are twelve: three in the Americas, (Can, USA and L. America); one in Asia/Oceania; one for Africa Madagascar and 7 in Europe. Location, geographical proximity, language or other factors are what unite these groups. The Regions have no legal powers but are groups of monks and nuns whose object is to foster communion and fraternal cooperation in given areas as well as contributing to dialogue within the Order itself. A representative of each region forms part of a group that prepares each General Chapter. Over the years these regions have had an increasingly important place not only in making their concerns heard at the General Chapter but also as practical tools for support and cooperation in many aspects of the daily life of communities. For example in organizing formation not only in terms of initial formation but also in terms of sharing skills for different services within communities, cellarers, accounting, infirmary, guest house etc. They are also an important source of support, stimulation and encouragement for abbots and abbesses in their pastoral service of communities.

In recent years particular difficulties related to falling numbers and increasing age of the communities have led to other developments in some regions in the Western world. For example the Spanish region and the Cistercian Congregation of St. Bernard [ccsb-nuns] (which works closely with the oco in Spain) have developed a “Monasterio asistencial” which is a centre for the care of elderly and infirm members of communities. At present there are about a dozen sisters resident there availing of this facility. Another use has been made of part of these buildings recently namely that of a location for a common novitiate programme for the novices of the oco and ccsb communities who wish to avail of it. This novitiate programme is designed to take place for two periods of two months yearly for the two years of novitiate. Its purpose is to complement and cooperate with the normal novitiate formation that in many houses cannot provide adequately for the needs of those in formation.

The monasteries of monks and nuns of France (27 in all, which belong to four different French-speaking regions not confined to France) have been meeting for nearly three years in a collaborative effort to face the challenges of monastic life as it is experienced in France today. They avail of a professional facilitator to help them express their concerns, dialogue about them and work to try to find ways of resolving them or living with them. The five monasteries of monks in Ireland, given the critical nature of their situation, have been encouraged by the General Chapter to work together to form a “community of communities” with a view to the continued existence of the Cistercian charism in Ireland (as distinct from the survival of each of the present five monasteries). The houses have done a huge amount of work over the last few years in examining their situation. The difficulty is in making the hard decisions that the project may call for.

This sample of the kind of thing that is going on in parts of the Order today is to give you a flavour of how we are living and facing our lives today. The synthetic report of our last General Chapter in September 2014 in describing the dynamic of the Chapter reflects this thrust: “the dynamic of this Chapter can be summed up in the words: pastoral solicitude, collaboration and decision”. This meant a lot of listening and the study of situations by the Commissions of the Chapter as well as collaboration through more shared responsibility by giving more information in the general assembly which can make for more informed voting.

These experiences are leading to a greater honesty and openness about how communities are actually living and the difficulties they have. When we begin to recognize our own poverty there is a better chance that we can work together! This

poverty can bring us to face reality and meet God there. We can begin to see what we are actually living. And that can lead to ask what we want to live and what we have to share with others. It questions us about our own identity – are we what we say we are? It can lead us to authenticity, not just because it is a rare commodity in public life today, or because it is avidly sought and appreciated by young seekers of today, as we hear, but especially because it is the only basis for a true relationship with God and with one another.

I find it striking and important that the two words, among the many words Pope Francis has uttered and continues to utter, that mark his writings so far are joy and mercy (and more recently Praise in “Laudato si”). The Holy Father has the knack of going to the heart of the Gospel and getting his message over to ordinary people in words and images that strike home. In fact these two words, mercy and joy, relate to Pope Francis’ experience of how he sees himself as a person in the light of the Gospel: “I am a sinner on whom the Lord has looked”. The Gospel experience is for him one of mercy and joy, of being forgiven and loved and so joyful. I think that these realities might be a little more accessible to us today in our experience of our poverty and in our efforts at fraternity. What place has the mercy of the Gospel got in my life? What place joy? While the Gospels and the monastic tradition and practice have been my daily diet for many years these are questions I ask myself now as I note from time to time my concerned, serious and tight-lipped demeanour. The answers are not so obvious to me! Have I been too concerned with doing things well, being right, improving things, being a success? What about at the community and Order level? I can see now my “messianic” aspirations on being made novice director where I thought things would improve! I was a little more modest when elected abbot - luckily! This is not the climate in which experiences such as mercy, joy, and the human (and spiritual) qualities that St. Benedict would wish to see in responsible people in community, such as the infirmarian, the porter, the novice director not to mention the abbot, can flourish. These realities have to be at the heart of whatever we do and live today as monks and nuns, in community, in our Orders and as members of God’s holy people.

Thank you for your attention, your welcome and for this opportunity of koinonia.

f. Eamon Fitzgerald

Abbot General ocso