

9th Centenary of the CHARTER OF CHARITY
Solemnity of the Most Blessed Trinity
June 16, 2019

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Could there be a more beautiful feast than today's Solemnity of the Most Blessed Trinity to celebrate this ninth centenary of the Charter of Charity as a family? "The Father is love, the Son is grace, the Spirit is communion, O Blessed Trinity!" The Trinitarian *coenobium* is the very substance of charity, Charity that is expressed in love, grace, and communion. These words are full of resonance for every Christian, of course, but perhaps even more so for the monks, nuns and lay people who belong to the great Cistercian family.

Because of the simple fact of belonging to this family, who among us is not conscious of being a full member of a *schola caritatis* where the love of the Father, the grace of the Son, and the communion in the Spirit embrace us and form the foundation on which we would like to build everything in our lives? I mean, build everything in our monasteries, everything in our relationships within our communities, everything among our monasteries, among our Orders, our Congregations, and of course also build up everything in the relationships that today inspire, move, and bring to life what is more and more frequently called "the Cistercian Family".

In the genetic code of the Cistercian charism, the Charter of Charity can be considered the nucleus of identity that grounds everything we have lived for 921 years. It is true that its guiding principles began to take shape before Cîteaux was born. I am thinking here of the erection of the Abbey of Aulps, the foundation of Molesme, and the famous "Molesme Agreement" which sought to establish relations of peace and harmony between the Abbey of Aulps and its foundation, Balerne, both of them called a "church" according to the very early usage in the primitive documents relating to the foundation of Cîteaux. That said, there is no doubt that it was on Cistercian soil and under the inspiration of Stephen Harding that the *Carta Caritatis* really took shape and consistency. We might say that the Carta is our chief treasure.

As a gift of the Spirit to the Church and to the world, this treasure is, so to speak, the heart of the Cistercian tradition. It does not belong to us, but it is up to us to make it grow. Each monk and nun bears the responsibility for this. Each community, including a possible lay extension associated with it, can find in the Charter the grace to strengthen and renew its Cistercian

identity. Of that great document, each Congregation and Order manifests a particular hue, a special reflection, a new actualization for the good of the great Cistercian Family and its witness at the beginning of the third millennium. We see plainly that our treasure is multifaceted in nature, according to the image dear to Pope Francis. It reflects the confluence of many diversities which, in concert, preserve its overall originality. Here, nothing is dissolved, nothing is destroyed, nothing dominates anything else, but everything is integrated.¹

This treasure possesses an inner force which is precisely Charity, the impulse of Charity that has made the tree of Cîteaux flourish over the centuries, sometimes under difficult circumstances, as is often the case today. Unlike in the 12th century, our Orders, our Congregations, and many of our communities are no longer today in a context of growth but of diminishment, with all that this implies in the organization of our community life and the way we live in the spaces we occupy. As a result, we are perhaps better placed to welcome and understand what Saint Paul writes to his correspondents in Rome: “We rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us” (Rom 5:3-5). This declaration urges us to review our criteria for success: mere numbers are less important to us than the burning flame; the growth or withering of our branches is less important to us than our perseverance in conversion of heart. Through seasons of both toil and grace, whether whipped by the storm or revitalized by the sun, the tree holds its ground.

Let us, then, be so bold as to ask the following questions: When does the fruit of charity have the most delicious taste? When does it cause the most joy? When is it most imbued with the flavour and wisdom that delights the Lord and plays before him at all times? In prosperity or in scarcity? In growth or in diminishment? Only God knows! But it is no offense to God to wonder whether the fruit of the communion we have now rediscovered in the great Cistercian Family does not have for the Lord of the Paschal Mystery a more excellent flavour than that of the best years of the Golden Age, when Saint Bernard was writing his commentary on the Song of Songs and when Cîteaux and her daughter houses couldn’t make foundations fast enough...

¹ These lines are inspired by *Evangelii gaudium*, 236, the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis.

For “the ways of the Lord are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts”. The Spirit of truth again today reminds us of the many times we see Jesus in the gospel not only embarrassing his disciples but also confusing them, as when he says things like the following: “What were you talking about on the way?” “Give them something to eat yourselves!” “Whenever someone takes your coat from you, give him your tunic as well!” “Get behind me, Satan!” “Love your enemies, bless those who curse you!”... And such disorientation keeps up until their very last evening together, when Jesus asks his disciples: “Do you understand what I just did? I am in the midst of you as the one who serves! Love one another as I have loved you.” This is the sign, this is the sacrament of charity.

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