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Prodesse cupientes

**The theological and ecclesiological contribution of the *Carta Caritatis*
for the present of our Orders and for the whole Church**

That all may be one

The topic given me for this talk is as interesting as it is difficult. I do not have the theological and ecclesiological qualifications to handle it at an academic level, but perhaps this is also a chance to read the *Carta Caritatis* (henceforth *CC*) as one of its direct recipients and not as someone who analyzes it as a scholar or someone curious about ancient texts. In the *Carta*, Saint Stephen Harding and his collaborators write to the monks and monasteries of their time, but with a concern that reaches all monasteries, monks, and nuns as descendants of a family who have been born from this root or spring of Cîteaux.

At the end of his earthly life Jesus also was concerned that the gift of his presence, of his communion, of his Gospel, reach everyone and create unity: “I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:20–21).

So perhaps we should really read the *CC* in the spirit of this prayer of Jesus to the Father, because here Jesus expresses a concern about the transmission of the gift of his Person to the world, a gift bestowed upon and entrusted to the Church, to the community of disciples, and which the Church transmits to the world to the degree that she remains united by an absolutely original and unique bond: that which links the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit: the charity of God, the Charity that is God, the Trinity’s Communion of love.

Basically it would be enough to have this theological and ecclesiological awareness, but which is also Christological, Trinitarian, and mystical, in order to help us know the profound and always current intention our Fathers had when they compiled the *CC* and had it approved by the Church. They had been moved first of all by a charismatic experience in living out this fruitful unity of transmitting Christ, and then by the concern, or rather by the solicitude that this gift not be lost, because that would mean losing the gift of Christ, the event of Christ who has been sent into the world through the Church so that humanity can experience divinization in communion, in the Trinitarian Unity lived out among sinful human beings, thanks to the mercy of the Father who hears the prayer of the Son in the Spirit.

More up-to-date than we are

I think that the first elementary condition for correctly interpreting the texts of the tradition, and especially the texts of a particular tradition that have reached us in a specific way, is the awareness that these texts are addressed to us personally, that they reach us because, from the beginning, they (so to say) wrote our name, last name, and address on the envelope, and that thus they bring us a message, a word that concerns us, that knows us and knows what we need in order to live out our vocation and mission.

Perceiving this correspondence between the word transmitted to us by the ancient Fathers and our life does not depend on the particularly elevated quality of the text. There are certainly similar texts of a higher theological, literary, and even mystical quality, which we can certainly value and keep as a treasure. But these texts do not have that unique quality that those pertaining to our charism have, which is the quality of being directly addressed to our person, to our community, to our Order, out of love for the fullness of our life and vocation. They are like wills left by our ancestors for their direct heirs, and for this reason they not only bring us something but also ask something of us, demand a response, a responsibility.

What always strikes me in texts like the *CC*, or like the Rule of St. Benedict, but also in the texts of the Church Fathers, and certainly in Sacred Scripture, is that these ancient texts are more up-to-date than we are, they surprise us because they make us realize that we are less up-to-date than they are in living our life today, our faith, our vocation. We need to pick them back up, meditate on them again, to modernize, to update, our vocation and mission in the Church.

When we get back to these texts, we sense that they express a love for the fullness of our life, a paternal and maternal solicitude regarding us, they want us to grow, to be fruitful in our vocation, in the charism we have received. The *CC* is not concerned just to keep us from making errors or to correct us if we make them. It is concerned with our living, with our being alive and fruitful, with our being happy in living out our mission. As we read it we are surprised, then, to need it today, today more than ever to need its help, its advice, its monastic, theological, and ecclesiological wisdom.

An eternal gift always present

I say this also with a certain sense of compunction, since I realize that, in the thirty-five years of my life in the monastery I think I have not passed a single day without meditating on the Rule of St. Benedict, but it has been almost thirty years since I considered the *CC*, after having studied it during the program of initial formation. I feel a little bit like the Israelites who, when they rediscover the book of the Law and hear Ezra read it, cry warm tears for having neglected and forgotten this gift for so many years. But the comfort the prophet gives the people is true for me too, for us: "Do not be grieved, for the joy of the Lord is your strength" (Neh 8:10).

The charism of the Law of God, of the texts inspired by God, is not lost, but lives, we can live it again as if it had come into being today. Because it does not come from the past, but always comes as if from the eternal, that is, from the gift of the Holy Spirit who is always a breaking-in of the eternal into the present. At times, it is a strong and bold incursion, like the strong wind of Pentecost that everyone feels (cf. Acts 2:2-4); at times, it is a “whisper of a light breeze” perceived only by Elijah in the solitude of the mountain cavern (cf. 1 Kings 19:12). The important thing is for the gift of God to be received by someone, to become in at least one heart a meditation aimed at letting the Spirit act in one’s self and in the world, like the Virgin Mary does (cf. Lk 2:19, 51).

In periods of general crisis, and in particular in the monastic life, of crisis, that is, in conceiving of and living out a charism as a vocation and mission, how important it is to open ourselves back up to the gift that the charism is by its nature! In periods of crisis, however, the danger is to desire for the charism to be affirmed in a disruptive way, with thunder, lightning, and mighty wind. But this is not a fruitful attitude, because in reality this expectation of “special effects” that would impress everybody, and that would make us impressive to everybody, inhibits a real opening to the breath of the Spirit. We wait for God to do everything, for God to rebuild everything, for God to renew everything, and on its own that is right, but we do not offer God the only thing that he asks of us in order to be able to do, reconstruct, and renew everything: our listening, that is, our silence before Him, our *yes*, our humbly waiting, in a word: our faith. To receive the breath of a light breeze is more demanding work on ourselves than noticing thunder and lightning that make the earth shake and smash rocks. You notice a thunderclap; a breeze you have to listen for. If we do not keep silent to hear it, we do not sense it. But when we hear it, we realize that a miracle happens immediately, that the simple fact of sensing the breath of a light breeze puts us in the presence of God, and that the renewal of everything, the reconstruction of everything starts with our heart.

Jesus who sleeps in the storm

Two weeks ago I was in Bolivia and was working with our few nuns on enormous problems concerning their school, problems directly connected to the whole economic, social, and political situation of the country. And in those same days there was the Gospel which tells that, while Jesus and the disciples were crossing the sea, “a windstorm arose on the sea, so great that the boat was being swamped by the waves” (Mt 8:24). In the midst of this storm, Jesus was sleeping.

Jesus, who sleeps when everything seems to be going to the bottom and into total loss, is an incomprehensible phenomenon. One can interpret it in different ways. In the best case the disciples think that he is so worn out that not even a storm manages to wake him up. In the worst case, they think that it does not matter to Jesus if they die, as the Gospel of Mark explicitly expresses (cf. Mk 4:38).

But both hypotheses look at the phenomenon only from our side, on this side of what is apparent, on the side of our “evidence.” If, however, we were to look at this phenomenon from God’s side, from the side of the eternal, we would discover that on the other side of this man who sleeps in the midst of the tempest there opens an infinite space, an infinite and eternal reality: Jesus’ total trust in the Father, their relationship of infinite love that nothing can disturb, that nothing puts at risk, that nothing can ruin. Then we would understand that Jesus who sleeps in the ship being swept away by the waves is, in reality, a revelation in our today of the eternal peace of God. Not just a revelation, but also a sharing of God’s infinite tranquility with our troubled present. In fact, when he wakes up, Jesus will not excuse himself for having slept, but will reprove the disciples for not having faith and will calm the winds and sea (Mt 8:26).

So, I think today we must read the *CC* with this spirit, exposing ourselves to the breath of a light breeze that we are called to receive with faith in this day of ours that is disoriented and troubled because everything seems to be going downhill, to be able to continue to cross the sea of history on the ship of the Church, of our Orders, of our communities, keeping Christ with us to bring him where He wants to go to give himself to the world.

The *CC*, like on the other hand the Rule of St. Benedict, has indeed the value of speaking to us of the daily, historic situation of our Order in the light of the infinite reality that stands behind what appears to our eyes. This theological awareness in living out a vocation does not eliminate the poverty and frailty of that which appears, of the reality in which we find ourselves, but it makes us see it under a different light, positive and proactive, that is, always reaching toward a truer and more profound fidelity to our charism.

It strikes me how aware the first Cistercians were, from the beginning, of their frailty in living out their charism, of the always possible capacity for betrayal and infidelity. Even regarding the abbot of Cîteaux the *CC* foresees straightforwardly that he can be unfaithful, that he must be corrected, punished, and even deposed. But all the possible negatives are always considered within the horizon of a possible good, of a possible conversion, and as an opportunity to recover and live out the charism with greater humility, and thus with greater fruitfulness.

In a few words, it is as if the whole *CC* were marked by faith’s view of the reality of communities and individuals. One does not ever stop at the phenomenon of Jesus who sleeps while everything goes badly, but one looks beyond the visible phenomenon to discover and rediscover ever anew the merciful and omnipotent work of the Father who always hides behind the real, at times petty phenomenon that we see in the life of individuals and communities.

The great positivity that the faith makes us see behind every appearance of loss is the Salvation that Christ can and will always work, because for this was he sent from the Father.

The Christological foundation

In the brief Preface of the *CC* we read that the reason for its title, “Charter of Charity,” is that what this document pursues is “charity alone and the good of souls in things divine and human” (Pref. 4). Here there is already an allusion to a Christological foundation, because the unity of the divine and human has become possible through the charity of God who became man in Christ for the salvation of souls, that is, of the whole human being. The unity of the divinity and humanity in the incarnate Word is transmitted to man by the charity of God who saves him.

Right after this Christological allusion, the *CC* opens with a passage that confesses faith in Christ as “the one true King and Lord and Master” (*CC* 1.2). Three titles that embrace the mystery of Christ in his divine totality of omnipotence, divinity, and truth. Three titles that confess a glorious Christ before whom man rediscovers the truth of himself in obeying, adoring, listening.

In fact, the *CC* immediately links this confession of Christ with the humble recognition of what man is before Him: “We know full well that all of us are servants, albeit useless servants, of the one true King and Lord and Master.” Putting himself before Christ in his glory, man knows himself, recognizes what he is. The relationship with Christ makes man aware of his identity. It is a Christological anthropology inspired by the Rule of St. Benedict, which insists on these three titles of Christ precisely to define the path of the man who is faced with the Christian event.

The value of this setup, which is biblical and patristic, is that it favors unity. Above all the unity of the person who serves and follows Christ. But also the unity of communities within themselves and among themselves, which is the theme of the *CC*. The strength of the proposal of communion to which the *CC* exhorts us comes from its being essentially founded on Christ the King, Lord, and Master, and in a correct arrangement of the relationship with Him, a relationship that begins with the clear awareness of what we are and become before Him, with Him, in Him.

The *CC* starts with the awareness that the true unity of man and of men among each other must be a unity “*in divinis et humanis*,” as we read in the Preface of the *CC*. The unity of man and of men is Christological, Christ makes it real by assimilating us to Himself. In man what needs to be united is not only the human, but also the divine, the image of God that not even sin manages to erase.

The way of unity in charity for man redeemed by Christ is indeed the sacramental and ascetic reflection of the identity of Christ the King, Lord, and Master, that is, as I was saying, a way of obedience to the King, of adoration of the Lord, and of listening to the Master. The titles of Savior, Redeemer, and Son of God are missing. But one could say that the *CC*, like the Rule, privileges the titles that involve us in a path, which ask for our free consent, and which thus permit Christ to be our Savior and Redeemer, to assimilate us to his being the Son of God.

The pro-existence of authority

The awareness of being “useless servants” of the true King, Lord, and Master; of being, as the *CC* goes on to add, “the most wretched of men – *miserrimos hominum*” (and here it speaks in the name of those with most authority in the Order), in the end determines the whole style and the arrangements of the *CC*.

This is another Christological aspect dominating the *CC*: authority that puts itself, like Christ, in the last place, in the place of the one who serves: “But I am among you as one who serves” (Lk 22:27). In this the *CC* echoes the Rule of St. Benedict, the famous advice for the abbot: “*prodesse magis quam praeesse*” – to be of service rather than to dominate; ‘to be for’ rather than ‘be above’ or ‘be first’ (RB 64:8). “*Prodesse enim illis omnibusque sanctae ecclesiae filiis cupientes...* – desiring to profit them and all the children of holy Church...” (*CC* 1.3). Authority in the Order appropriates the pro-existence of Christ the good Shepherd. Its opposite is described right away, to underline the positive value of this life given for all: “We purpose to enact in their regard naught which will burden them, naught which will diminish their substance; lest, while wishing to gain abundance from their poverty, we be unable to avoid the evil of avarice which is, as the Apostle attests, a ‘serving of idols’” (*ibid.*).

The *CC* wants especially those in charge in the Order and in communities to found their fidelity to the charism on a clear and conscious choice between Christ and idols, between the service of Christ – which is serving as Christ served – and the service of idols, a service to idols that makes us slaves, that humiliates authority in wicked slavery. Serving Christ as true King, Lord, and Master is a service that serves all like Him, and thus it is a service that frees, that exalts freedom, the freedom of the free gift of life, of love, of charity.

What freedom in this expression of the *CC* that we could summarize as “*prodesse omnibus cupientes* – longing to help everyone, to be of service to everyone”! It means that the pastoral ministry, at every level of the hierarchy of an Order or of the whole Church is not lived as a burden, an unbearable load, but with desire, a desire as of those who are in love, in love with Christ who makes us fall in love with the souls He has redeemed.

This perception of the service of authority, and of authority as service, is made explicit immediately in the *CC*, in a paragraph that positively expresses the pro-existence of the superiors: “We do wish, however, for the sake of charity [*gratia caritatis*], to retain the care of souls, so that should they ever attempt to turn aside ever so little — which God forbid! — from their holy resolve and the observance of the Holy Rule, they may be able to return, through our solicitude, to the straight path of life” (*CC* 1.5)

Here there is a clear reference to the good Shepherd of the Gospel, who searches for the lost sheep (cf. Lk 15:4–6). But there is also a clear allusion to the return of the lost son to the house of the merciful father (cf. Lk 15:11–32).

In any case, the first chapter of the *CC* seems to me to establish the Christological foundation of all that will follow. It affirms right away that fidelity to a charism is only possible as fidelity to Christ, to Christ sent from the Father as King, Lord, and Master, granted to human beings to save them as a good Shepherd of souls, and not as a mercenary who “does not care for the sheep” (Jn 10:13). The expression “*prodesse cupientes*” is the exact opposite of the self-interested and egoistic indifference of the mercenary. Instead it expresses the heart of the good Shepherd, the heart of Christ, his charity.

The charism endures by caring for the superiors’ fidelity

I insist on this Christological and soteriological foundation of the *CC* because the more I read it the clearer it is to me that the preoccupation of those who redacted it, that is of the first Cistercian abbots, was indeed to remain faithful to a charism, but they understood that a charism is not maintained and transmitted in the abstract, but rather through them who are called to take on the service of authority, of pastoral guidance of individuals and communities whom the charism gathers. Today, too, there is great concern over the transmission of our charism, of our way of life and vocation. We seek solutions, seek to run to shelter, but I often get the impression that we forget the factor that is fundamental for guaranteeing a fruitful fidelity to the charism, to the vocation and mission which is entrusted to us: the superiors, guides, fathers and mothers, shepherds. One often forgets that it is not so much or first of all vocations in and of themselves, or the preservation of certain forms or observances, that ensure the transmission of the charism, but rather the fact that there should always be guides, shepherds who know how to care for souls by leading them together on a road of following Christ, of holiness. The preoccupation that shows up all through the *CC* is that the Cistercian charismatic family always be able to form men and women who are capable of and wanting to *prodesse*, to benefit their brothers and sisters, to take care of them “*gratia caritatis*”: in the grace of charity.

But an objection often arises when one says or ascertain this. Where do we find capable superiors? If there are not any, if they are so rare, how do we go about producing them?

It is here that the *CC* gives a very important and basically original response: that it is precisely for this and on this that the community of communities that is the Order must work together, must help each other. If we read the Rule of St. Benedict, it stands out clearly that his main preoccupation is with forming especially the abbot, helping him, encouraging him, correcting him, so that he be a shepherd who guides the community, keeps it united, and makes it grow and advance. Well, it is like the *CC* makes this preoccupation of St. Benedict the common concern of all the superiors of the nascent Order, and provides tools so that the superiors of the Cistercian Family continue working together on this fundamental task, without which a charism cannot bear fruit.

Thus, after the first chapter in which the image of the good shepherd is described in the light of Christ the King, Lord, and Master, in contrast with the dark image of the mercenary, the *CC* continues practically as a manual of formation and correction of superiors, so that the Order can always have “shepherds with a blameless heart,” as Psalm 78 says of King David (cf. Ps 78:72), united fraternally among them and capable of guiding their communities in the name of Christ who wants to lead us “together to eternal life” (RB 72:12).

No one is the owner of a charism

Before at least briefly examining the fundamental aspects of this care for superiors that the *CC* expresses, it seems important to me to emphasize an aspect that is ecclesiological very important, especially in the Church today. A lot is said about charisms, but there is often a certain confusion in understanding where the charism is found, or rather: in whom it is found, who guarantees it, who transmits it. In the Church today a deep wound has been opened by the discovery that many founders have abused the consciences, souls, and bodies of their disciples in shameful and sometimes criminal ways.

The position of our first fathers, of those whom we call Founders, in particular of St. Stephen Harding, can be today like an ointment on these wounds, and a light that can give serenity and peace back to the many who have followed a charism in good faith, and with fruitfulness for the Kingdom too.

What is striking in the *CC* is that our founders did indeed have a strong sense of their responsibility for the charism, and thus of their authority, but they lived it out in an objective, not personalistic way. Perhaps St. Bernard had this tendency a little, but not the true and proper Founders of the Cistercian Order. In the *CC* you can clearly see that St. Stephen considered himself a servant of the charism, not its proprietor. And in all the first abbots this favored the awareness that the charism was a grace for them to serve together, without needing to be the center of attention. Religious Orders and movements often enter into crisis after the death of the founder or foundress because there is a conception of the charism as if it were a spring that arises from them rather than from the Holy Spirit.

Thus, when they die, one starts to perform ...charismatic archeology, instead of continuing to receive the gift of the Spirit as they themselves did. Because it is the Holy Spirit who works to transmit the particular charisms from generation to generation, and he does so by seeking individuals who receive him. We should not learn from the founders to create the charism, nor to resuscitate it, but to receive it today. No true founder considers himself the creator of what the Spirit makes him stir up. His merit is to receive a gift with humility and put himself at its service. And this is essentially what his successors should learn, and all those who follow an ecclesial charism, always keeping clear the awareness that the charism, of an ancient Order too, is a gift that the Spirit makes today, now, and which thus asks to be received today.

The hierarchy of the Church is also called to put itself humbly at the service of the Holy Spirit, recognizing the charismatic gifts, encouraging them, verifying the humility and truth with which they are received and made fruitful by individuals and communities who receive them.

The *CC* is a good example of this. With the Privilege of December 23, 1119 Pope Callixtus II approves, confirms, and puts under his solemn protection all that the *CC* presents. The Church recognizes that there is a particular charism and that it is well received by those who have presented the *CC* to her authoritative discernment. It does not seem that he corrects or adds anything essential to what the Cistercians already submitted to him.

In his document, the Pope expresses a sympathy for, a benevolence toward this new experience of monastic communion. Sometimes today one gets the impression that there must be some kind of duel between the Holy See and charismatic Families, or at least that what is presented or received be the object of a legal procedure, as if the Holy See and Orders and Movements were opposed entities, and not members and ministers of the one Church, of the one Body of Christ. It is as if one had hostile camps, and that what one wins the other loses. I am not saying that this is a defect in the functioning of the Holy See, or only of it, because often the problem is on the part of the charismatic Families that insufficiently cultivate the ecclesial sense of their mission.

What I like in the *CC* and in the approbation of Callixtus II is the awareness of all working in one vineyard, of all serving the one Bride of Christ, so that she be beautiful and fruitful in her mission in the world. The pope receives the *CC* like a gift for the Church, and for this reason approves and protects it for the good of the whole People of God.

Forming servants of a charism of communion

In the light of this excursus, I would like to turn to reading the *CC* as a manual for formation of superiors capable of receiving the Cistercian charism and making it fruitful. After what I have just said, it is understood that a good Cistercian superior is above all a person who lives out his or her responsibility as a servant of a charism of communion.

Transmission of an experience

This is why the *CC* asks that all be formed in the school of the Rule of St. Benedict as it is observed in the mother monastery (*CC* 2). There is no formation, no education, without reference to a tradition, and the true tradition in the Church is the transmission of an experience of life. Not just the transmission of rules, usages, doctrines, but an experience of life in action that makes persons grow.

Concord in prayer

In chapter 3, the *CC* explores this vision more deeply in the context of common prayer. It asks “that they have the usages and chant and all the books necessary for the day and night Hours and for Mass according to the form of the usages and books of the New Monastery.” If one takes note only of this central part of the chapter, one can think that what our fathers were asking for was only a formal uniformity. Yet this phrase is framed by two affirmations that give its profound meaning. The first is that liturgical uniformity is requested because the monks are received from one monastery to another. Reciprocal welcome in liturgical prayer is an eminent sign of unity in the Order. One cannot welcome another more profoundly than in prayer.

This must make us reflect, because if this has to happen today, it is clear that we cannot say that we welcome each other if we have a liturgical form in which only a man of the twelfth century would feel at ease. Today a common liturgical language is unthinkable, but today it is also much easier than nine hundred years ago to make the necessary translations available, or find ways of silently participating that are as welcoming as understanding everything. Above all the liturgy is prayer, a relationship with God, and fraternal communion, dimensions that can be shared even without intellectually being understood.

In this sense one can perhaps also understand the sense of uniformity that this chapter adds at the end: “so that there may be no discord in our conduct, but that we may live by one charity, one Rule, and like usages.”

It is one of the famous phrases of the *CC*. In the background of these words we see the image of the first Christian community of Jerusalem, or rather of the very first group of Christians gathered in the Upper Room for Pentecost. The term “discord” is the opposite of “concord,” of being one heart and one mind like the first Christians, their being of one mind in prayer (cf. Acts 1:14, 4:32).

One often enters into discord about the liturgy because one reduces it to a question of liturgical forms. The liturgy, however, is the soul of the Christian community, and the true question is not that of saving the liturgy, but of saving the soul of communities and of the whole Church, which is reciprocal charity, concord in love, communion.

Anyway, what the *CC* says about prayer also aims to offer within the Order a school of prayer, a constant possibility of liturgical formation, also with the choice and attentive development of liturgical texts of the best tradition and quality.

The hierarchy of a living body

Next the *CC* precisely describes the hierarchical order that must be respected among the abbots when they visit each other or meet in some monastery (cf. *CC* 4). The issue is not respecting protocol as in meetings of diplomats. It is actually an order not just of places to occupy but as it were within a living body.

The hierarchy adapts and changes according to the situation, and the proper prerogatives of the local abbot must be respected, but must also take the care to charitably correct what is not going well in a community. It is an order that educates toward remembering the life of the body that the Order constitutes, and to respect it so that it can grow.

The visitation

Next the *CC* describes one of the fundamental instruments for the on-going formation of the superiors and their communities: the visitation. This must be frequent, paternal, made by the abbot of the abbey that founded the monastery visited, and is an occasion of joy for those who are visited (cf. *CC* 5). For those who want to grow, being the object of paternal or maternal attention, even when it must correct, is always a positive opportunity. The visitation is not an inspection, but an increase in a generative relationship. It is an act of accompaniment with the purpose of advancing along the path, with fidelity and hope.

The heart of communion: the General Chapter

The culminating point of fidelity to the charism that the first fathers highlighted is certainly the General Chapter of all the abbots.

In light of what I was emphasizing above, I would like to concentrate on the formative aspect that this annual meeting represented and should still represent for superiors. One was not mainly dealing with a parliament for treating and resolving problems. It was a synodal moment in which the superiors took care of themselves by taking care of each other.

The list of topics to treat in the General Chapter was essential, but included everything: “Let them treat of the salvation of their own souls; if something is to be emended or added to in the observance of the Holy Rule or of the Order, let them so ordain it, and let them reestablish among themselves the good of peace and charity” (*CC* 7.2).

These arrangements reveal one of our founders’ important convictions: that what happens among superiors happens in the whole Order, radiates into the whole Order. What the *CC* wants to happen at the General Chapter is that the assembled abbots have an integral experience of communion in Christ. It wants the abbots to be concerned above all with having this experience of the charism themselves, of the ecclesiality of their being together. If this happens, every superior will radiate this experience in his or her community, and will help it have the experience too.

But what experience are we talking about?

It is an experience of the Salvation of their entire person: “Let them treat of the salvation of their own souls.” For our fathers the soul meant, deep down, the person in his or her entirety. Salvation, then, refers necessarily to Christ the Savior and Redeemer of man and of the world.

The abbots gathered first of all to put themselves in Christ's presence together and, from that experience, to examine the state of their communities and of the Order. Essentially, finding themselves together in the General Chapter meant sharing the experience of Christ who died and rose for us, and thus it was like a renewal of the meeting of the Apostles with the risen Jesus in the Upper Room. Without this, every ecclesial gathering becomes mundane, becomes political, administrative, is no longer truly ecclesial.

From this point, the abbots could run back through their communities' path in the light of the charism defined by the Rule of St. Benedict and the customs proper to the Cistercian Order. The issue then was recovering and encouraging obedience to the charism in the *conversatio morum*, in the conversion within a specific sphere, of monastic and communal life. It was mutual assistance to be lived out with a humility that was disposed toward correction and with hope for new and better life: "if something is to be emended or added – *quid emendandum est vel augendum*." The abbots are invited to return to an awareness of their pastoral authority, because "authority" etymologically means "making something grow," precisely the verb "*augere*" used by the *CC*.

Finally the abbots are invited to "reform" (*reformat*) among themselves the good of peace and charity. The text insists that this happen "*inter se* – among them," always with the awareness that what happens in the superiors and among the superiors is reflected in the whole Order. Always renewing communion, the bond of peace and charity that unites us in Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit, is the great reform that every community and the whole Church must always pursue, always keep active. And it is a primary responsibility of the shepherds who appropriate the great and solemn priestly prayer of Christ before his entry into the Passion, the prayer "*ut unum sint*" of chapter seventeen of the Gospel of John.

If the General Chapter is lived in this way, it becomes a hearth of life and renewal for the Order and the whole Church, because it becomes a humble and effective way of putting oneself at the disposition of the Spirit who always animates and reanimates the Church through every charism that He himself stirs up and nourishes.

Correction and conversion

All that follows in the *CC* basically does nothing but develop and explain in detail this essential labor expressed in the first paragraph of chapter seven, dedicated to the General Chapter.

In chapter nine it develops at length the theme of the correction and conversion of abbots who have turned out to be lacking in their ministry, even if it is the abbot of Cîteaux, whom today we would call the abbot general.

The seriousness of absenteeism from the General Chapter is underlined, and if we think about what we have just seen, we understand why disregarding this meeting is a serious lack of responsibility and charity.

As in the Rule of St. Benedict, however, the correction, often exercised collegially by several abbots, and the eventual punishment as well, always aim at the conversion of the culpable. Repentance always grants him the right to return home, the right to fraternal welcome in his community or in other monasteries of the Order, as in the parable of the prodigal son.

In any case, and also and especially in this case, the intention of the *CC* is to form the superiors toward fidelity to the charism and to communion with the other abbots of the Order.

The most intense fire

I conclude by underlining a summary expression, where, on the topic of the General Chapter, the *CC* speaks of mutual aid, including economic aid, in favor of the needier abbeys, precisely to live out concretely the "*bonum caritatis*" among the abbeys.

The expression used to describe that which should move the abbots to help the needier brothers and communities is a very brief and marvelous hymn to charity: "*maximo caritatis igne succensi* – enkindled by the most intense fire of charity" (*CC* 7.4).

The whole *CC*, in the end, wants to kindle and feed this fire, which is the full realization of every charism, because, as St. Paul says, charity is the greatest charism (cf. 1 Cor 12:31), and every charism is fulfilled only with the full ardor of this divine love.