

7.2. THREE EYE-WITNESS ACCOUNTS OF THE 1969 GENERAL CHAPTER

7.2.1. Dom Armand Veilleux | A Turning Point in the Order's History¹²

The 1969 General Chapter was certainly the most important Chapter for the history of our Order since the 1892 Chapter of Union. It created within our Order a unity that has continued to hold firm, and it produced a few important texts that continue to influence the life of the Order and in which the Order set out in earnest on the path of post-conciliar reform. To call it a “charismatic” Chapter is not to use a trite label. The Holy Spirit's action was in fact clearly felt.

It is clearly still too soon to write the history of that period. Nonetheless, I would like to give my impressions of that Chapter, which I experienced with great intensity. I took part, not as an abbot (I was elected abbot a few months after the Chapter), but as an expert from the Canadian Region.

The General Chapter opened in a climate of unease and tension. The official minutes briefly allude to this climate with a great deal of tact and discretion: “During several sessions of the first days of the Chapter, the discussions had to do with relations between the Order and the Holy See, and with the role in these relations of the Very Rev. Fr. Abbot General, supreme moderator” (Minutes, p. 5).

In reality, what stood out in the first days of the Chapter were discussions about the possible resignation of the Abbot General, Dom Ignace Gillet. This latter, unable to accept in good conscience some of the orientations and decisions taken by the 1967 Chapter, which had authorized experiments, had taken measures through the Holy See to prevent certain initiatives from being put into practice, for example, the *loi-cadre* for the Divine Office obtained by the *Concilium* for the application of conciliar liturgical reform in the US and Canadian Regions. Some capitulants, while respecting Dom Ignace's personal convictions, thought that, if his conscience did not allow him to show solidarity with decisions legitimately taken by the General Chapter, he ought to resign. Following a few days of public discussion, a compromise solution was negotiated outside of the sessions by the Vicar and Moderator of the Chapter, Dom Ambrose, who acted with great tact and charity. Dom Ignace was to present his resignation at the following Chapter. In fact, however, he presented it at the 1974 Chapter. I am convinced that the great

¹² Dom Armand Veilleux has been the abbot of Scourmont since 1999, after having been abbot of Mistassini (Canada) from 1969 to 1976, of Conyers (USA) from 1984 to 1990, Procurator of the Order from 1990 to 1998.

charity and honesty with which these discussions were carried out and the great humility with which Dom Ignace gave his consent were major factors in creating the climate of trust and mutual respect that characterized the rest of the Chapter.

Since it was difficult to see how Dom Ignace, in spite of his great qualities, could guide the Order in searching for new paths and renewal, the Chapter devised the creation of a new function, namely, a “Secretary General” of the Order, somewhat along the lines of the Secretary General of the United Nations, to carry out this role alongside the Abbot General. In fact, however, he was given the more modest title of “Secretary of the *Consilium Generale*.” Of itself, it was a shaky solution or even a recipe for disaster. But in fact it worked rather well, no doubt, thanks to both the great tact of the person elected to this post, Dom John Eudes Bamberger, and the great humility of Dom Ignace. When Dom John Eudes became abbot of Genesee a few years later, he was not replaced, and the post ceased to exist.

Another potential source of great tensions at the opening of the Chapter was the desire of the North American regions to obtain greater autonomy for their houses and greater pluralism in the application of monastic values. This desire for pluralism seemed dangerous to other regions that tended to see uniformity of observance as a guarantee of unity in the Order. This point was obviously linked to the burning question of the revision of the Constitutions, especially since the draft of a “New Charter of Charity,” drawn up by a Commission established in 1967, had not been well received. A new ordering of topics proposed by Dom Augustine Roberts and accepted by the Chapter, with a few modifications, made it possible to work around this difficulty. According to the new order of topics, there would first be a discussion on the definition of Cistercian life. This was a providential initiative.

We first spoke about drawing up a “Descriptive Definition of the Order.” But we quickly realized that Cistercian life cannot be “defined” as if it were an abstract reality. Nor could it be “described.” Cistercian life is an empirical reality that has taken on many aspects and forms in the course of history, so it cannot be “described” without choosing arbitrarily and *a priori* the elements to be brought into the “description.” We therefore decided to draw up instead a “Declaration” that would be both an act of faith in the vocation we perceive to be ours at this precise moment of the Order’s history and with the necessarily limited lights we possess at present, and a commitment to live in accordance with this vocation. Three different commissions of different languages drew up three rather like-minded drafts, which were then revised in each of these commissions to make them more concordant. Finally, the text was finalized by a small commission of five persons and approved by a nearly unanimous vote (68 to 8). The unity built around the drawing up of this beautiful little text affected all the work of the following weeks.

The Statute on Unity and Pluralism that caused so much fear at the beginning of the Chapter was voted on a little later, again, almost unanimously (70 to 4). Also, the General Chapter decided to ask the Holy See for a *loi-cadre* for the Divine Office that would apply to the whole Order (69 to 7).

One of the important questions on the General Chapter's agenda was the length of the abbatial term. This was a difficult question, and the capitulants did not feel ready to make a decision on the matter. On the one hand, it was felt that the *ad vitam* abbatial term could not be maintained, but, on the other hand, there was not a readiness to institute an abbacy for a fixed term. In some monasteries of the Order, feelings were so strong that several abbots thought the Order could not simply put the question off until later without causing a great deal of unease. It was the intervention of an outside "expert," Dom Brasó, that made it possible to unfreeze the question. Dom Brasó, former abbot of Montserrat and president of the Subiaco Benedictine Congregation, explained the solution that his congregation had adopted shortly before, namely, the *ad tempus non definitum* abbatial term. According to this solution, the abbot is not elected for life, nor is he elected for a fixed period of six or eight years. He must simply offer his resignation as soon as he realizes or is helped to see that resigning would be preferable for the good of his community. What matters most, then, is not a "right" to stay in office, but the good of the community the abbot is meant to serve.

A first vote of 58 to 17 decided that abbots would no longer be elected *ad vitam*. Since then, all abbots have been elected *ad tempus*. It remained to decide if the duration of this term was to be determined beforehand by an election for a fixed period, or if it was to be left "indefinite." Without precluding future evolution, the Chapter decided that the mechanisms in place, especially the Regular Visitation, were sufficient. So the choice was for an abbacy *ad tempus non definitum*, adopting the model of the Subiaco Congregation. It was five years later, in 1974, that communities were given the possibility of choosing between this solution and an abbatial election *ad tempus definitum*.

The other major point on the General Chapter's agenda was the revision of the Constitutions. A commission created by the 1967 Chapter had been given the mandate of drafting an introduction to the Constitutions, showing the scriptural and spiritual foundations. This commission drafted a "New Charter of Charity," which had a fairly cool reception in the Order. The commission therefore set to work again a few months before the 1969 Chapter and sent all the superiors of the Order a series of seven documents. Meanwhile, Dom Vincent, Procurator General, offered a new suggestion: Our basic law is the Rule of Saint Benedict, complemented by the Charter of Charity. We therefore do not need Constitutions; it would be enough to draw up "declarations" on the Rule and on the Charter of Charity.

In this matter also, the intervention of an expert from outside the Order was of major importance. It came from Fr. Beyer, SJ, a well-known canonist, professor of law at the Gregorian University, and consultant to the Roman Commission for the revision of canon law. His approach was along the same lines as Dom Vincent's. He explained that the directives for revising constitutions foresaw a distinction between the "fundamental law" that expressed the spirituality and overall structure of an Order or Institute, and "secondary law," made up of statutes. Only the fundamental law needed the approval of the Holy See. We could consider the Rule of Saint Benedict as our fundamental law, and, obviously, there is no need for a new approval of the Holy for that! He advised us slowly to review, Chapter after Chapter, the various aspects of our life, drawing up appropriate statutes. If someday the Holy See demanded a text for its approval, a compilation of these decisions could be made. He also advised us not to hurry and to take at least ten or fifteen years for this work. The General Chapter opted for this orientation, and, of all the decisions of the 1969 General Chapter, this was the most important one and the one that entailed the most consequences for the Order's evolution over the following 25 years.

Instead of having a small commission make a quick revision of the text of the Constitutions, the Order undertook a gigantic task that, from 1969 to 1987, involved all the communities and all the Regions in a vast effort to reflect on the fundamental values of the Cistercian life and to revise the Order's structures. After three successive drafts studied by the whole Order, an initial version of the Constitutions was voted on at Holyoke in 1984 for the monks, and the following year at El Escorial for the nuns. These texts were reviewed by the Mixed General Meeting at Rome in 1987 before being presented to the Holy See and approved on Pentecost of 1990.

One of good initiatives of the 1969 General Chapter was to appoint at the beginning of the Chapter a small team to write up a synthesis of the Chapter's work, in order to give readers a good grasp of the main points that stood out. Not only was this summary report approved by the Chapter, but the Abbot General agreed to provide a short preface for it and encourage people to read it. No doubt, this text contributed to the General Chapter's work being well received in the Order. Attempts to do something similar at subsequent Chapters did not turn out as well.

It was not until the General Chapter at Holyoke, when the text of the new Constitutions took its final form, that we again experienced a truly charismatic meeting in which the action of the Spirit was palpable. Nonetheless, the experience of the 1969 General Chapter remains unmatched.