

## *Guiding Principles of Development Throughout the Twentieth Century*

### 10.1. CISTERCIAN IDENTITY: TWO POINTS OF VIEW

#### 10.1.1. The Viewpoint of Dom Armand Veilleux<sup>2</sup>

This volume describes the Order's development over a period of a little more than a century. What has emerged from this evolution is a strong sense of identity. It is the history of a group of women and men who knew how to traverse many trials and more than one crisis without losing their Cistercian identity, for it had been well forged in the preceding centuries by uprooting and odyssey.

A person can enter into a true relationship with another only in the measure that he or she has a strong identity. A Catholic can enter a fruitful ecumenical dialogue if he is well anchored in his Catholic tradition, much like only a Christian who is solid in his faith can truly dialogue with a representative of another religious tradition. Finally, only someone who is well rooted in his or her own culture is capable of entering deeply into another culture so that a creative newness can result from a true inculturation. It is the same for institutions and communities.

During this period of a little over a century that interests us, and that can easily be divided into two sections—before Vatican II and after Vatican II—our Order manifested a very clear identity. During the first part of these historical sections, it was a question of fidelity to the fundamental monastic values well established in the uniform observances in all the monasteries, as well as in the juridical tradition clearly established in 1893 and lived faithfully.

In the years preceding Vatican II, the Order, strong in its traditions and at the same time having a spirit of adventure inherited from the decades of odyssey from the time of Dom Augustin de Lestrange, did not hesitate to initiate a surge

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of new foundations in the four corners of the world. It quickly became evident that the unity of the Order as well as fidelity to its monastic vocation could not be guaranteed simply by fidelity to uniform observances. The shocks created by the irruption of the Spirit of Vatican II, and the presence, at the time, of students at Monte Cistello coming from most of the monasteries of men in the Order, as well as several crises happening in local Churches, could have smashed everything to bits within the Order. But this did not happen. Much to the contrary.

One of the reasons that our Order remained spiritually and monastically healthy throughout this entire period, in spite of decreasing numbers (accompanied by the large increase of foundations) was that from the beginning of the Council it made a collective and collegial effort to express its identity in the writing of important texts that were never the result of a few isolated scribes but always from dialogue at the level of the entire Order. These texts are the objective expression of a clearly perceived vocation.

The writing of a "Declaration on the Cistercian Life," finalized during the 1969 Chapter, after a process of maturation in the communities and Regional Meetings, was a key charismatic moment. All the great intuitions of this brief text form the basic outline for the Constitutions and all the important Statutes written later: on Formation, the Regular Visitation and Temporal Administration, not forgetting the one on Foundations, continually reworked to respond to constantly changing situations.

The fundamental intuition of this Declaration is that the Cistercian life is a life "totally oriented toward the experience of the living God," which is a very beautiful way to describe what is called today the "contemplative life," an expression that is now too common unfortunately. This is reaffirmed from the beginning of our Constitutions (c. 2), where our Order is defined as "wholly ordered to contemplation" consecrating its members to "the worship of God" following the Rule of Saint Benedict. Also, our Document on Formation, in its prologue, which is a resumé of all the spirituality of our Constitutions, describes formation as a long process leading us, from our entrance to the monastery until our death, to be gradually transformed to the image of Christ, and thus a contemplative union with God. According to the conclusion (n. 31) of the Statute on the Regular Visitation, it is conceived as a spiritual event offered to each community to guarantee its growth in fidelity to the Cistercian grace. The Statute on Temporal Administration opens with the affirmation that "the entire organization of the monastery is directed to bringing the monks into close union with Christ." And finally, the goal of a foundation is to foster this Cistercian *life*.

The second important intuition, united with the fundamental intuition of our Founders of the Twelfth Century, is that our life is clearly and profoundly *ceno-*

*bitic*. We are true cenobites living together in solitude and not hermits living in community. “We carry out this search for God under a Rule and an Abbot, in a community of love where all are responsible. It is through stability that we commit ourselves to this community,” says the Declaration of 1969. We could enumerate endless texts from our Constitutions and each of the Statutes mentioned in which the important orientations of the life and important decisions rest with the community as such. Evidently this means, in each case, community understood as properly Cistercian, that is, the brothers together “with their abbot” (to use this fine expression of the Little Exordium describing the monks of Molesmes leaving for Cîteaux “with their abbot”).

A third aspect of our Cistercian identity is poverty, incarnated in simplicity of life. According to the Declaration, “Our Cistercian life is basically simple and austere. It is truly poor and penitential ‘in the joy of the Holy Spirit.’” And according to our Constitutions (c. 3.3) the monks “seek the blessedness promised to the poor” “in simplicity and labor.” As for the Document on Formation, in its Prologue (n. 4) it speaks of the poverty of heart which allows it to “run with an open heart on the paths of God’s service,” after gradually becoming detached from false sources of security. The Statute on Temporal Administration also recalls from the beginning (n. 7) the importance of evangelical simplicity in the use of goods that we have at our disposal but which are all “ecclesiastical goods,” that is, goods belonging to the People of God. This practice of evangelical poverty and simplicity will evidently be an important point to look out for during the Regular Visitation, and every foundation should be ready to live a serious poverty for quite some time.

Our Order was conceived by our Founders of the Twelfth Century as a community of communities. In modern terms, the collegial dimension of pastoral solicitude is an essential aspect of our Cistercian identity. Our Constitutions say it clearly in its beautiful c. 71 which opens the third section. This collegial dimension affects the life not only of superiors but of all the members of the Order. Also, when monks or nuns elect an abbot or abbess, they ought to be conscious that they are electing someone who should exercise this collegial responsibility. The Regular Visitation is one of the first exercises of this collegiality, which is expressed also in the approval of foundations by the General Chapter, an approval which includes the acceptance of a collective responsibility for a new foundation. Finally the same co-responsibility is exercised in the material help that communities are called to offer one another.

Another aspect of the Cistercian identity that people will want to emphasize—among many others that could be mentioned—is its cultural incarnation. The Declaration of 1969 happened because of the necessity of reaffirming the ba-

sic identity of the Order and at the same time of recognizing the necessity of a diversity because of the implantation of the Order in numerous cultures, all in a situation of rapid evolution. In the same spirit, the Document on Formation was limited to affirming the important fundamental principles of all formation in the Cistercian spirit, leaving ample room for adaptation to all cultures and even calling each Region (n. 69) to make this adaptation carefully. It is the same for the Statute on Temporal Administration. The Statute on Foundations has never ceased being revised, Chapter after Chapter, precisely in order to respect this need of incarnation in the evolution of cultural situations.

Thus, one sees that the Order has maintained, in the course of the last half century, during a profound and rapid evolution, a very clear and solid identity, that has known how to constantly repeat and reaffirm itself in its legislative and spiritual texts. We can be confident that this clearly Cistercian identity, with the principle characteristics that we have just described, will allow it to face serenely all the challenges that it will not fail to meet in the years ahead, not only in the countries of ancient Christianity but also in the young Churches.