

## CHAPTER NINE

# *The Regions and the Regional Conferences*

### 9.1. THE BACKGROUND HISTORY OF THE REGIONS

*(by Dom Armand Veilleux)<sup>1</sup>*

When Dom Sortais was Abbot General, several abbots from various places were in the habit of meeting, as a way of helping each other. These meetings were in no way official, but the Abbot General, a great promoter of Cistercian centralization, was afraid of anything that would lead to subdividing the Order into Regions. He dreaded it even more because he had had to deal with an attempt of some Spanish abbots to reconstitute the Congregation of Castille, which would have entailed their passing over to the Common Observance. In 1960 we were questioning the possibility of only convoking the General Chapter every two years and certain abbots were wishing they could meet by nation or by language those years when there was no Chapter. Dom Sortais alluded to this idea in his opening conference for the General Chapter of that year, and invited us to prudence, for such meetings could be “a ferment of separatism harmful to the unity that constitutes the strength and beauty of our Order in the eyes of the Holy See and, let us not doubt it, in the eyes of the Lord.” He had the Chapter vote on the following declaration:

It would be unfortunate if the time between our General Chapters caused meetings that could take the form of Regional Chapters. Nothing prevents the abbots from meeting to discuss their problems together, but these meetings should remain on the level of friendship. The General Chapter declares that it will not recognize these meetings as official in any way and that they should not make decisions or even formulate common desires. (GC 1960, p. 11)

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However, hardly had Dom Ignace Gillet been elected Abbot General in January 1964, than he was confronted with a request from some monks of Achel, who wanted to make a particular type of foundation that was unusual in the Order. At the request of the abbot of Achel, Dom Ignace called together several abbots among those who were most involved in this question, to get their advice. But these abbots took advantage of the situation to discuss the problem of renewal in the Order, and discussed points that could be put on the program of the next General Chapter. They drew up a report that, as they saw it, was worth communicating to the other abbots. The reactions of the abbots would make it possible to prepare the agenda for the Chapter at another meeting of the commission.

But instead, Dom Ignace consulted the abbots on the necessity of setting up this preparatory commission for the Chapter. He did not want to form such a commission without the endorsement of the Capitulants. In a November 25, 1964, circular letter, he synthesized the answers to his questionnaire. The majority really did want this commission, which would be formed according to the number of monks and nuns in each country or group of countries. Thus the abbots of a given Region had to reach an agreement to designate their representatives to this commission.

At this first meeting of what later became the Central Commission, in Rome, in December 1964, the "Region factor" was discussed at length, especially since the agenda of the General Chapter of 1965 included the question of the "Constitutional recognition of these Regional Meetings." Dom Jean-de-la-Croix of Aiguebelle gave a first report on the matter, and he tended to transfer a part of the authority of the Father Immediate to these meetings. Dom Gueric of Scourmont proposed a different orientation, which the assembly approved: there was no need to consider an immediate recognition of these Regional Meetings, which were "all the more appreciated, the more they were spontaneous." "Their principle role," said Dom Gueric, "is not to establish a new institution, but rather to respond to a spiritual need: to establish dialogue and promote contacts. The great interest of these meetings is to know one another better in order to love one another more." Dom Gueric saw in them a second goal that "consists in the preparation of questions to present at the General Chapter." Thus studies could be given to qualified and available religious "since, too often, the abbots are neither qualified nor available to study these questions in depth" (pp. 58-59). He also proposed another interesting idea: since it is a question of allowing the superiors to meet, one "could hope for connections between monasteries more distant from each other, even between monasteries belonging to different continents. Such Regional Meetings should then be supra-national and supra-linguistic, overcoming natural limits as much as possible, so as to become more spiritual. One could invite members who

belonged to other Regions to such meetings” (pp.59–60). In the end, the Central Commission of 1964—paying no attention to the warning at the 1960 General Chapter—asked that Regional reports be sent to all the monasteries.

The 1965 General Chapter spoke explicitly about these Regional Meetings, but did not go as far as the Central Commission would have wanted. The Chapter seemed to want to avoid the danger of “regionalism.” Contrary to the decision of 1960, these meetings were now authorized to formulate common votes, and it was accepted that their minutes be sent to all the abbots. The question of giving them a juridical status was put off until later. However, the Regional Meetings were already given the task of clarifying usages, and they were useful for designating members for the Central Commission.

When the 1966 Central Commission met, the question about the juridical status of these meetings was explicitly brought up, but everyone agreed that the situation was still evolving, and that it was too soon to legislate about it. Besides, an interesting debate was under way on whether or not to have non-superior delegates at these meetings. Finally someone proposed that the Regional Presidents form a Synod-Council of the Abbot General; but others did not see the advisability of such a body. Dom Guerric of Scourmont said: “The essential thing is that each Region be represented at the Central Commission and that each Region be consulted in important matters.”

The following year, at the 1967 Central Commission, the abbot of Aiguebelle presented the desires of the French South and West Region for a new distribution of houses, because the abbesses would be participating in the meetings, and the Region was becoming too large (pp. 13–14). The question of non-superior delegates participating at these meetings was also brought up, but the situation was allowed to evolve freely (p. 14).

The General Chapter of 1967 recognized that the Regions had “an important role in identifying problems and studying them.” Without anyone realizing it, this role would be the source of a problem that would accompany the reform of our institutions. Several Regions could meet more easily because of the smaller distances, and were comprised of more outstanding personalities, who would have a great deal of influence on the movement of the Order. This left the “peripheral” Regions with little possibility of expressing themselves on the way questions were handled and on the formulation of various solutions that would be studied at the time of the General Chapters. In addition, there was the fact that certain influential persons participated in more than one Regional Conference. The same 1967 Chapter decided that, thereafter, its authorization was necessary to form a new Region, and it approved the formation of the African Region.

At the 1969 Chapter new responsibilities were given to the Regions. They had

the care of organizing a court of appeal for a religious sent to another monastery as a disciplinary measure. They established Regional Secretaries of formation, and each Region was authorized to send a non-superior representative to the General Chapter. Concretely, from 1969 up to the definitive edition of the Constitutions, and even since then, the General Chapter has always given tasks to the Regions and involved them in the life of the Order in various ways.

The General Chapter of 1971 was the first to pay fairly close attention to the Regions. It considered them as a “permanent structure,” and required the approbation of the Chapter for the creation of new Regions. At the following Chapter the participants wanted to return to this notion of “permanent structure,” and the 1977 Chapter wrote a “Document on the Regional Conferences,” to avoid having to speak of them in the future Constitutions (Appendix X). This document assigned two functions to the Regions: a) the preparation of the General Chapter and b) the care of extending and developing the pastoral action of the General Chapter in the communities.”

This 1977 Chapter (votes 100 and 102) and the Chapter of Abbesses in 1978 (vote 59) suppressed the requirement for the approval of new Regions by the General Chapter, judging that a simple recognition of their existence was sufficient. These decisions created a lot of confusion in the years that followed (see the description of this process in the minutes of the 1981 *Consilium Generale*, p. 10). In fact, since each Region had a representative on the *Consilium Generale*, the number of members of this group could grow uncontrollably.

Number 81 of our present Constitutions marks an evolution on several points. It no longer speaks simply of free meetings of *superiors*, but of “communities of the Order grouped into “Regions” and these Regions—which can be composed of both monks and nuns—are linked to *geographical areas*. It was no longer possible not belong to a Region, even though no one is actually obliged to belong to one Region rather than another (the definitive text in 1987 suppressed the expression “free associations” that the texts voted at Holyoke and El Escorial included in 1984 and 1985). Also, every new Region has to be approved by the General Chapter. Finally, this c. 81, contrary to the “document” of 1977, stated again that its end is to foster “communion and fraternal cooperation in each geographical area and in the Order as a whole.” This is the only goal mentioned in this Constitution. It is only in a Statute that the “usefulness” of the Regional Meetings is mentioned: for the preparation of the Central Commission and the General Chapter. In another Statute their role of “establishing a dialogue among the various nations and peoples by which the common patrimony of the Order can be more deeply appreciated” is mentioned.

The creation of Regions in the feminine branch closely followed that of Re-

gions for the monks. In practice, almost all the meetings were in common from the beginning. Gradually “Mixed Regions” came into play, even if no one ever succeeded in defining what this “mixedness” consisted of. Concretely, at the end of the Twentieth Century, all the Regions were considered mixed, except the Dutch Region which was officially composed of only men’s monasteries, even though the Dutch-speaking abbesses attended all its meetings (while at the same time belonging to the Central-North-Europe Region).

The nuns of the Region of the Isles, of the United States and of Canada had formed for quite some time a Region called the NAI (North America and the Isles). When the nuns of the United States decided to form a mixed Region with the monks of their country, they were numerous enough (five) to have a delegate at the Central Commission (or Preparation Commission) of the nuns. But this was not the case for the Canadian abbesses or for those of the United Kingdom and Ireland, who numbered only two each on either side of the Atlantic. After many negotiations, it was decided that the mixed Region of the Isles as well as the Canadian Region would each have one representative at the two Central Commissions. As for the Italian Region, formed when the Italian monasteries separated from the Spanish monasteries, the Italian superiors of themselves gave up the right to have a delegate on the Central Commissions, but were content to be represented by someone who would already be attending in another capacity.

As has been seen, each time that the question arose as to whether the Regions could be established freely or whether they needed to be approved by the General Chapter, it was always connected with the question of the composition of the Central Commissions. No one wanted to multiply the number of members on these Commissions endlessly, because they were already numerous, and also because there was always an uncomfortable feeling in these Commissions when giving the same voting rights to a Region with three or four monasteries as to one with twenty-five or thirty monasteries. To allow the Regions to develop along the lines of their original intent (i.e., the free meeting of superiors and communities for pastoral reasons), it would be good to create a composition of Central Commissions that would not be linked to the Regions but would respect a just representation of cultures. (This question has been treated above, § 8.2.3.)

It would then be easier to reconsider how the Regions are constituted, a desire that has been expressed several times. The 2005 Chapter ratified (on an experimental basis) a new division of the houses of four European Regions, forming five more balanced Regions, as will be shown at the end of this Chapter. In what follows, we present the **eleven Regions as they were defined at the end of the Twentieth Century.**