

Exordium

A Program of Reflection and Study on the Values of the Cistercian Reform

Letter to Superiors

Dear Reverend Mother:

Dear Reverend Father:

As you may recall, among the proposals accepted by the OCSO General Chapter in 1996 was that of commemorating the ninth Centenary of the foundation of Cîteaux by a program of reflection and study to be done in all the communities. This was entrusted to a specially-elected commission who in turn passed the task to a sub-commission.

The members of this sub-commission were: Dom Franziskus de Place, S. Cecilia Aoki, Sr Marie-Pascale Dran, Fr Mariano Ballano and Fr Michael Casey. A reference bibliography was compiled by Dom Franziskus and the writing of the course was entrusted to Fr Michael.

The program that we are offering is named *Exordium*; it is both a commemoration of the beginnings of our Order and , it is to be hoped, a source of ongoing renewal on the threshold of a new millennium.

Exordium is designed to be done in ten monthly units, according to the possibilities of each community. This means setting some time apart for the work in our busy schedules. Maybe the program could be timed to coincide with the monthly Retreat Day.

It is the opinion of the sub-commission that each monk and nun should receive a personal copy of the basic texts, together with the material for the program. In this way everyone will have the opportunity to try to read and to reflect on the values pursued by our Founders.

In addition to private work, it seems desirable that the community approach this task of reflection corporately. This could be done by the public reading of some of the material, by conferences given by yourself to situate the themes in the context of your community's concrete experience, and perhaps by presentations made by other members of your community to provide the monks and nuns with more information and greater stimulus. In many communities it may be found profitable to come together to share thoughts and experiences and to try to apply what has been studied to the real situation of the community. On a separate page some suggestions are given about how this program may be implemented in your own community. You will be the best judge of what will work most effectively.

It is suggested that you appoint someone to administer the program. Perhaps one of the formators/teachers who has attended one of Fr Chrysogonus' seminars or the Institute of Cistercian Patrimony, would be suitable for this task. The program administrator would be responsible for contact with the sources of distribution, for receiving, reproducing and distributing

the notes, month by month, and for collaborating with you in devising practical means to achieve what the General Chapter desired according to your particular circumstances.

Exordium represents the first time that a program of ongoing formation for the whole Order has been attempted. A certain tentativeness is normal, and perhaps mistakes and delays will occur. I ask your indulgence in this case.

At this time the preliminary unit has been prepared and the remainder will appear with a certain regularity. Distribution will be done according to language and via the Regional Secretaries of Formation. Each house will receive one master copy from which other copies can be made locally for the community. In case of difficulties or if there is anything that I or any of the members of the sub-commission can do to help please do not hesitate to inform us.

I thank you for your cooperation.

Fr Michael Casey

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Letter to Program Administrators in Each Community:

Dear Sister:/Dear Brother:

Thank you for consenting to be the local contact-person for *Exordium*. The tasks that belong to this position are the following:

- a) To take responsibility (with the superior) for the adaptation of the program to local possibilities. This will involve compiling a calendar and scheduling different elements of the program according to the situation in your community.
- b) To coordinate local participation so that as many as are competent are involved in contributing to the program.
- c) To investigate with neighbouring monasteries the possibilities of sharing resources and avoiding duplicate effort.
- d) To receive the course materials for *Exordium*, to make copies of them for each member of the community, and to distribute them.
- e) To familiarise yourself with the content of the program so that you are able to help any who may have difficulties.
- f) To keep and make available some reference material that will be sent round to each community, but not for general distribution. The same applies with the “Additional Reference Material” that is obtainable from the Regional Secretary of Formation.

You will receive batches of material from your Regional Secretary of Formation or someone else. These will be printed on single-sided white paper to facilitate reproduction. You may wish to print on both sides of the paper and to use different paper colours for easy identification of the type of material. For example:

!	White	Introduction
!	Yellow	Reflection Sheets
!	Green	Further Reading, Bibliography, Primary Sources
!	Pink	Visual aids, maps, chronologies, schemas.

The material should be distributed at regular intervals so that members of the community are not overwhelmed by the number of pages. It may be useful to provide each with a binder in which to keep the pages, and to punch holes in the pages before distribution.

There are other things that a program administrator may choose to do to facilitate the program: adapting reading lists to what is available in your community library, making available copies of articles that are useful for each unit and, in general, keeping the program in the community consciousness. Such possibilities are left to your own imagination and spirit of enterprise.

Thank you for what you do to make this program a success. If you need help please contact your Regional Secretary of Formation, or myself or one of the Sub-commission, charged with this course.

Fraternally

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Letter to Regional Formation Secretaries

Dear Brother:

Dear Sister:

As you know, the General Chapter of 1996 made provision for a community program of study and reflection to mark the ninth centenary of the founding of Cîteaux. The Commission for the Centenary has entrusted me with the preparation of this program, assisted by a sub-commission.

The name adopted is “*Exordium: A Program of Reflection and Study on the Values of the Cistercian Reform*”. The material will be covered in ten monthly units, beginning on the 26 January 1998.

At first it was decided that I would prepare the material and it would be sent to the Generalate for translation, reproduction and circulation to the communities, who would be responsible for its further reproduction and distribution to the monks and nuns. At the meeting of the Commission in September, this decision was reversed. It was judged that such a task was beyond the capabilities of the secretariate and, as a result the task of translating (where necessary) and distributing the material to the communities would fall upon the regions. It was presumed that it would be the Regional Formation Secretary who would oversee this work, with whatever necessary help being provided by the Regional President[s]. Of course in many cases, Regions would be able to combine resources and work out their own channels of distribution. Such an exercise of subsidiarity is not without its complications, and I ask your patience in this.

This is what is involved.

1. To facilitate the distribution to every monk and nun of the Region of a personal copy of the three early documents that will form the basis of the program:
 - g) The *Exordium Parvum*,
 - h) The Charter of Charity,
 - i) The *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Summa Carta Caritatis*.
2. To receive whatever is sent as “Additional Resource Material” and to send copies of it to any communities that request. The exhaustive bibliography prepared by Dom Franziskus de Place, *Les premiers documents de l’histoire cistercienne (1098-1200)* is an example of “Additional Resource Material”. You may have already received a copy of this.
3. To be the regional reception point for the study material:
 - a) to have it translated it into your own language,

- b) to modify the references to reading matter to material available in your own language,
- c) to take responsibility for the quality of the presentation of the material,
- d) to make any suggestions that you consider to be helpful for the monks and nuns of your region[s],
- e) to send one master copy to the “program administrator” in each of the monasteries so that it can be used it to produce copies for the community. This should be printed on one side only, using white paper

Three things I regret very much, but which I do not have much hope of changing:

- a) the extra burden that this work places on you,
- b) the fact that the work has to be done under severe time constraints,
- c) my inability to write to you in your own language.

In these also I ask your patience. I shall do my best to speed material to you in as complete a form as possible and I shall be happy to answer your questions and to receive your suggestions (Please feel free to write in your own language — I can probably read it.)

I value your cooperation in this work, which I hope will benefit all the monks and nuns of the Order, and I thank you for whatever you can do to make it a reality.

Fraternally,

Fr Michael Casey

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Letter to Participants in *Exordium*:

Dear Sister:

Dear Brother:

Welcome to our program of reflection on the values of our Cistercian charism.

This program has been commissioned by the OCSO General Chapter to help us to use the occasion of the ninth centenary of the foundation of Cîteaux as an invitation to reflect more deeply on our Cistercian identity.

The program is divided into ten units with a preliminary unit that explains the approach and the method to be followed. You will receive a batch of ten pages or so each month. Some of this may be read to the community, but it is important that you make time to read this material for yourself. Allow one or two hours, read quietly and reflectively. We begin with background and the lives and personalities of the Founders. In Units 3-5 you will be asked to read closely the fundamental texts of our order, the *Exordium Parvum*, the Charter of Charity and the *Exordium Cistercii*. After that we will reflect together on a number of themes important to our Founders. For each unit there will be a reflection sheet to help stimulate your thoughts. If you have the time and inclination, extra reading will be available. Finally it is hoped that each community will create opportunities for all to share their impressions and experiences.

The skill that will be most important — if this project is to produce fruit — is the art of reading texts attentively and reflectively, trying to expand our mental and affective horizons, and opening our hearts to inspiration. This is not a history course. It is a program designed to help us to hear what the Spirit is saying today to our communities and to the Order.

I wish you well with your work during this centennial year.

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Three Possible Formats

MAXIMUM	MEDIAN	MINIMUM
Study material reproduced and distributed to all.	Study material reproduced and distributed to all	Study material reproduced and distributed to all
Introduction read to Community	Introduction read to community	Introduction read to community
Conference on the theme of month by Abbot/Abess	Conference or presentation on theme of month	Session by the formator for those in formation on theme of month
Presentation on theme of month by one of community		
Private Study Reflection Pages Extra Reading	Private Study Reflection Pages Extra Reading	Private Study Reflection Pages Extra Reading
Community sharing	Community or optional group sharing	Group sharing for those in formation

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A Program of Reflection and Study
on the Values of the Cistercian Reform

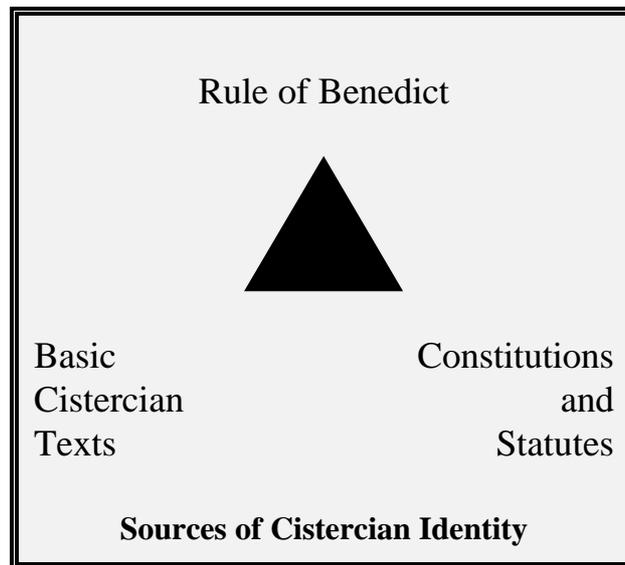
Ninth Centenary of the Foundation of Cîteaux
1998

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Preliminary Unit: Orientation

Exordium is a program designed to help communities to reflect on the values that inspired our Founders 900 years ago and to apply these values to Cistercian life today. At the heart of the program is the desire to come to a better understanding of the early Cistercian texts which best describe the purposes of the undertaking: the *Exordium Parvum*, the Charter of Charity, and the parallel versions of these which go by the name of the *Exordium Cistercii* and the *Summa Carta Caritatis*. It is presumed that each monk and nun will have a personal copy of these texts.

These texts are important because they express the nature of the Cistercian charism. Together with the Rule of Saint Benedict and our modern Constitutions, they constitute the essential portrait of our way of life, its spirit, its values and its most important observances.



There is a sense in which the primitive Cistercian texts seem very familiar to us. We have all known from novitiate days, the story of how Robert, Alberic and Stephen left Molesme to found the New Monastery. Consequently we do not pay much attention to the documents themselves and, probably, do not read them with the same attention that we give to the Rule of Saint Benedict. This omission means that we are missing on an important bridge between the sixth-century Rule and our twentieth-century Constitutions. It is, perhaps, unrealistic to expect that we will read the Rule with the same heart as our founders if we do not take care to discover for ourselves the truths that they cherished most. This involves spending time with the ancient texts, reading them carefully, reflecting on them in the light of our own

experience and trying to hear what they have to say to us today.

1. Why do we Need to Study the Texts?

This task requires of us a certain amount of work. The early Cistercian documents are not the straightforward texts that we once imagined them to be. In the last fifty years manuscript discoveries have raised new questions and much scholarly work has been invested trying to formulate answers. It is no longer possible to read these texts as we may have read them when we were novices. We need to work as hard at making sense of the primitive documents as we do in understanding the Scriptures or the Rule of St Benedict.

The 1993 Vatican document *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* is a good reminder of the need for serious study of the Bible and the necessity of making use of modern methods of interpretation in order to lay the foundation for a lively interaction between Scripture and life, such as in *lectio divina*. “Actualisation [applying the text to present-day situations] presupposes a correct exegesis of the text, part of which is the determining of its literal sense.” We, whose lives are permeated by God’s word, cannot excuse ourselves from this necessary labour, according to the level of our possibilities — this is why all monasteries offer courses in Sacred Scripture to provide this foundation. The only alternative is a pious fundamentalism, that owes nothing to traditional monastic zeal for the Word of God, but much to lack of interest and laziness.

The same principles apply to the interpretation of the Rule of Benedict. Today, when monks and nuns read the Rule devotionally, most of us recognise the need to read the footnotes to understand the Rule better; we are aware of Benedict’s sources and we appreciate the difference between Benedict’s Rule and the Rule of the Master. The spiritual profit we gain from such an active reading is not less but more than what follows the merely passive perusal of the text.

When we read the documents describing the foundation of the New Monastery in 1098, we need also to learn the art of paying careful attention to what the texts really mean. For us this will involve reflecting on the historical background, understanding better the meaning of particular words and phrases and reading the texts in the light of contemporary references. Those of us who have been fortunate enough to attend the sessions of Fr Chrysogonus Waddell on the primitive documents have learned to appreciate how much serious study can add to our enthusiasm for these important texts.

The ongoing task of renewing monastic life according to the charism of the Founders demands that we first try to listen to what the Founders have to say to us *today* — not to presume that what we heard yesterday is enough. The only way that we are going to open this life-giving channel of communication is for us to read the texts that express their aspirations and to listen with the ears of the heart.

Study

“Each member should study diligently the spirit, history and mission of the Institute to which he or she belongs, in order to advance the personal and communal assimilation of its charism.”

John Paul II,
Vita Consecrata, #71

2. Beyond Merely Intellectual Work

A correct understanding of the primitive texts is necessary if we are to avoid reading our own thoughts into the documents. We have to use available means to ensure that the interpretation we draw from them is objective. Nevertheless, this is only the first task. We are called to read these texts in the light of our monastic experience in such a way that they become a source of guidance and encouragement in the living of Cistercian life today — in so many different continents and cultures and faced with so many different challenges.

The Biblical Commission describes three steps to be taken in reading the Bible: the text must be heard within the context of our own situation, we must allow the text to act upon that situation and we must draw from the text elements that can improve our lives. The same steps will serve us well in our reading of the ancient Cistercian texts. We cannot allow these texts to be studied in academic isolation: they need to be read in the context of a life that strives to be authentically Cistercian. They are texts that yield their fullest meaning only to those who seek God, living in community and loving the Cistercian *conversatio* in its integrity. “Give me a lover; such a one will understand.”

Exordium is a program that is more concerned with the future than with the past. We are less concerned with solving historical problems than with bringing to the forefront of our awareness the values that our Founders sought and the priorities they established in living monastic life. We seek a fusion of horizons, so that we may include in our approach to live the priorities our Founders cherished. *Exordium* is

a program about values. In reflecting upon these primordial texts we hope to see more clearly the values inherent in our Cistercian vocation and from our contact with the Founders to draw the enthusiasm to implement these values more fully both in our personal lives and in our communities. It is not a matter of attempting to reproduce the twelfth century, but of re-expressing what our Founders sought in terms of present-day realities — actualising the charism.

Actualisation

“Based upon various forms of the philosophy of hermeneutics, the task of interpretation involves, accordingly, three steps:

4. to hear the Word from within one’s own concrete situation;
5. to identify the aspects of the present situation highlighted or put into question by the biblical text.
6. to draw from the fullness of meaning contained in the biblical texts those elements capable of advancing the present situation in a way that is productive and consonant with the saving will of God in Christ.

By virtue of actualisation, the Bible can shed light upon many current issues...”

Pontifical Biblical Commission
The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church
IV.A.2.

3. What about Difficulties?

The 1989 Vatican instruction on the study of the Church Fathers recognises that gathering the benefits from ancient texts requires effort and commitment. “Experience teaches that the Fathers reveal their doctrinal and spiritual riches only to those who make the effort of entering into their depths through continuous and regular familiarity with them” (#17). These difficulties, which will also be encountered in studying the ancient Cistercian texts, are not merely the result of limitations or defects on the part of the reader. Texts from another century are necessarily hard to understand because they speak out of a different context, they use an unfamiliar language and address questions which may not be those that we ask. There is an essential strangeness about such texts, which must be accepted and even welcomed before we can begin to comprehend their message.

This strangeness means that the meaning of the text is unlikely to be immediately evident. We have to make an effort to understand it, just as we do when we are speaking with a person from another culture. We have to slow down our reading and pay attention to every detail, to puzzle over what is not clear and not to be satisfied with a superficial understanding. Close reading is required if we are to make sense of our basic texts — we must enter into personal dialogue with what we read, constantly comparing what is said with our own experience of monastic life, and trying to arrive not only of **what** is said, but of **why** it is said.

Close Reading

A line-by-line, word-by-word analysis must be undertaken... The hardest thing of all is the simplest to formulate: every word must be understood. It is hard because the eye tends to skip over just those things which are the most shocking or most call into question our way of looking at things. . . The argument or example that seems irrelevant, trivial or boring is precisely the one most likely to be a sign of what is outside one's framework and which it calls into question. One passes over such things unless one takes pencil and paper, outlines, counts, stops at everything and tries to wonder.

Allan Bloom
"The Study of Texts"
in *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960-1990*,
pp. 306-307.

The advantage of this active effort is that we are enriched by viewing our situation from a different standpoint. Every culture has its blind spots. By moving beyond our culture we perceive better its opportunities and limitations. When we try to understand contemporary Cistercian life through the eyes of the Founders, we are taking steps to liberate ourselves from our habitual manner of assessing our situation and allowing ourselves to become more sensitive to what "the Spirit is saying to the churches".

We have a mysterious communion with our founders; we share their charism. We live substantially the same life as they prescribed, we profess the same goals, we make use of the same monastic means. Understanding creatively the challenges that face us in remaining faithful to the Cistercian vocation is facilitated when our experience makes contact with theirs.

4. The Unity of Cistercian Patrimony

The Cistercian Order has a long history. Our task is not to recreate a particular phase of that history, but to allow the Cistercian gift to interact with the particular situation in which we live. Under the guidance of the General Chapter, “It is for each community, in dialogue with other communities, to find new ways in which the patrimony of the Order can be expressed dynamically in its own culture, according to particular circumstances”(OCSO Constitutions 4.3).

In studying the various texts emanating from the first Cistercian century, it is important for us to be aware of the differences that existed within the Cistercian tradition. Not everything was identical. The charism evolved as new situations arose. The circumstances addressed by John of Forde or Stephen of Lexington, belong to a different world from that inhabited by Robert, Alberic and Stephen. The Order grew numerically, geographically, and in terms of its reputation. Like most organisations it changed from a relatively unstructured adventure to an efficiently administered, multinational organisation. Strong personalities also helped to shape a new identity for Order as it developed. Meanwhile, both society and the Church were changing. Those entering the Order in the 1170s in different parts of Europe were quite unlike the recruits of primitive Cîteaux. As a result, communities were different and so were General Chapters. As the Statutes reveal, difficulties were always present, but the nature of the problems changed from decade to decade.

The fact of such variety should not, however, blind us to the reality of the remarkable continuity or coherence to be found among the first generations of Cistercians. The Order was given a very firm character at the beginning, and this identity remained intact even as the Order evolved to adapt itself to different circumstances and meet new challenges. By studying the initial movement, concentrating especially on Robert, Alberic and Stephen, we can perhaps build up for ourselves an awareness of what is quintessentially “Cistercian” — as revealed in the primitive documents and expressed somewhat differently in the succeeding century and beyond.

There is, as we shall see, some pluriformity among the twelfth-century Cistercians. We need not be alarmed by this, or feel obliged to defend one vision of Cistercian life against another. From the fact that the charism developed differently under different influences we can also learn. Perhaps what we need today is a new vision of Cistercian unity that is based less on rigorous uniformity and more on shared values, a common vision and deep experience of the Cistercian reality. It is to foster such communion that *Exordium* is offered to communities.

Cistercian Coherence

“Cistercian spirituality during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is remarkable for the coherence of its doctrine and for the inner unity of the theory and practice of monastic life. This can be verified in the major authors who, while maintaining their personal vision of monastic life, manifest this profound unity in their works. Such unity was nourished by a common life of monastic and liturgical observances, by [contact with] the teaching of holy Scripture, the Church Fathers and the Monastic Fathers.”

Translated from Edmund Mikkers,
Dictionnaire de Spiritualité 13 (1987), col 766.

This coherence means that our interpretation of the primitive texts may be aided — in some cases and with due reservations — by using the writings of a later generation to make explicit what is only implicit in the earlier texts. For example, when the Black Monks criticised aspects of the Cistercian reform in the 1120s, it became necessary to think about the values underlying the practices adopted at the New Monastery, and to explain them. We may not to read back into the early days, what developed only later. But not everything changed. Sometimes later authors express well in words what the Founders were content to express only in practice.

5. The Program

Exordium aims to promote a foundation for a common reflection on Cistercian values by reading carefully three significant documents associated with the founding of the tradition: the Exordium Parvum, the Charter of Charity and the Exordium Cistercii. To prepare for this we will spend the first two units examining elements of the historical background of Cîteaux. Then we will analyse the texts themselves. Then we will attempt to draw from our reading an understanding of the values that motivated the Founders.

After this Orientation, the program is divided into ten monthly units.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND	ANALYSIS OF TEXTS	SYNTHESIS OF VALUES
1. Historical Context	3. Exordium Cistercii	6. Benedict's Rule
2. The Founders	4. Exordium Parvum	7. Unanimity
	5. Charter of Charity	8. Austerity
		9. Liturgy
		10. Community

For each unit the material to be circulated will usually comprise:

- d) **Introduction** A few pages of text giving a general treatment of the theme and suitable both for public reading and private study.
- e) **Reflection Sheet** A page of points and questions designed to stimulate personal reflection and form the basis for community sharing.
- f) **Primary Sources** Where useful to provide context or comparison, some extracts from parallel documents will be given.
- g) **Further Reading** A few recommendations for those who wish to study the theme in greater depth.
- h) **Visual Aids** Schemas, maps and charts to facilitate understanding. These may be transferred to a transparency for use on an overhead projector.

Some suggestions about practical ways in which the materials can be used in community — according to different local possibilities — are given separately.

6. Lift up your Hearts!

Exordium is intended to help us carry the 900-year Cistercian heritage into the new millennium. The task of handing on a tradition is a grave responsibility, but it is also a great privilege. Surely the grace of this Centenary must include:

- ! a deeper and wiser understanding of the Cistercian Charism,
- ! a more fervent living of the values cherished by our Founders,
- ! a more cohesive vision to unite our communities more closely, and
- ! an openness to greater harmony and collaboration among all those who have inherited the Cistercian gift.

For this let us work. And let us pray.

Let us pray.

O Lord, rouse up in your Church the Spirit whom the blessed abbots Robert, Alberic and Stephen served. Filled with that Spirit, may we strive to love what they loved, and to put into practice what they taught. We make this prayer through Christ our Lord.

Amen