

Reflections on the El Escorial General Chapter

When trying to evaluate a General Chapter, one is always tempted to compare it to another Chapter. Since I never attended a Chapter of abbesses before, I cannot compare this one with another Chapter of abbesses. That would be difficult anyway, since this Chapter was very different from the preceding ones because it had to deal mostly with Constitutions. Then, for that reason, it is natural to compare it with the Holyoke Chapter.

And I think it is the general opinion of those who attended both that the El Escorial Chapter was more difficult than the Holyoke one. The positions of the Capitulants were more diversified to start with and the consensus was more difficult to reach, especially on very critical questions like that of the enclosure and that of the unity of the Order or the relationship with the male branch.

But one must remember that the abbesses, at this Chapter, found themselves in a situation quite different from the one in which the abbots found themselves last year. The juridical situation was much more complex. In the male branch, we had been working on the Constitutions since 1967, and several important points of the Constitutions had been modified during the intervening Chapters. And in fact the one of Holyoke consisted essentially in compiling and giving a systematic form to the legislation that had been elaborated over the years. A few important questions had to be studied, but not many.

Although the nuns had been working with the monks for years in the elaboration of the Constitutions (the monks profiting greatly from their participation) the abbesses were confronted at the beginning of this Chapter with a large series of important and difficult questions that were not yet resolved. Most of these questions could not even be formulated clearly because they were closely related to a difficult and evolving situation: the relationship between the two branches. That situation was still complicated by the discrepancies between the desires of the nuns and the orientation of the Sacred Congregation for Religious, as well as by the real difficulty to find a way of being one Order while having two different General Chapters.

When Cardinal Antoniutti told the nuns to have their own General Chapter and seemed to push them towards a complete separation from the male branch, the general feeling in the Order was that it was better not to try to clarify too soon the juridical situation and to let life

evolve, according to the very sound principle that legislation should follow life rather than conditioning its growth. That attitude was wise and has permitted a real and good evolution. But my personal conviction is that we reached already a few years ago a point where that attitude of "waiting" began to be counterproductive. I think that the questions at issue at this Chapter, and the possible options in each case, could easily have been formulated more clearly before the Chapter. A lot of time would have been spared and we could have gone further in the elaboration of a new legislation.

Even with a great diversity of opinions and a real difficulty experienced in reaching a consensus on some questions, the general atmosphere of the Chapter was very good. There were naturally moments of tension, but even then there was a good sense of humor in the assembly. Something very healthy.

Liturgy was good; and I would say that for such a diversified group, it was very good. The Eucharist of the whole group together seems to me essential, even if each linguistic group has to make some sacrifices, The Eucharistic prayer in Latin seems a good solution. Personally I prefer to have a bit of every language in each celebration; others would prefer to have each celebration in one language. Other desiderata can be expressed and improvements are possible; but I really enjoyed the daily Eucharist (and also the Divine Office, when I was able to attend).

At Holyoke two questions monopolized the attention and the energy of the Chapter right from the beginning: the liturgy of the hours, especially the individual obligation to take part in it, and Collegiality. At the Escorial, an identical phenomenon happened: two questions also galvanized the assembly: the enclosure, and the unity of the Order with the related question of Collegiality.

Enclosure

The question of the enclosure was one on which the Chapter apparently lost its time. I say apparently, because the agony through which we went was useful. It was a good exercise at authentic dialogue and a very fine example of how a consensus can be built on the basis of what is hold in common, although opinions differ on many secondary points.

The issues are quite complex. That solitude is a very important aspect of monastic life, everyone agrees in principle, the nuns more than the monks for sure. That a material separation from the world is necessary to ensure that solitude, while being simply a means and not an end, is also admitted by everyone. Another generally admitted

position is that enclosure is one of the monastic observances and there is no objective reason to treat it differently from any other.

But the fact is that the enclosure of the nuns has been treated (by the male legislators!) very differently throughout the centuries and that Canon Law - including the New Code - gives it a particular attention, making a special responsibility of the local bishop to watch over it.

Furthermore, ecclesiastical legislation has made the distinction between papal enclosure which seems to be surrounded by a special halo of sanctity and constitutional enclosure, which sounds many as a kind of second class type of enclosure. It seems from the Code that if you want to be considered a strictly contemplative nun with solemn vow, you must observe the papal enclosure, that is you must follow the regulations outlined in Venite Seorsum or in the document that is supposed to replace it (with additional doubts about whether or not, or at least when such a document will effectively come out, and what will be its orientation).

Some abbesses insisted on keeping the papal enclosure, and therefore Venite Seorsum; but it does not seem that there are several monasteries in the Order, if any, that follow exactly the norms of Venite Seorsum... And I would be surprised if any community would like to do so.

All the abbesses wanted the control over the enclosure to be exercised within the Order. In other words they did not want the bishop to have anything to do about it. So far, unanimity. But then, who will fulfill the role that was -- at least theoretically -- fulfilled by the bishop. Most wanted the abbess to do it. They wanted the abbess to have the same authority over the enclosure as the abbot has in his own community. And so, many would have been pleased with Cst. 31 of the Holyoke text. But after a second thought there was a certain number of abbesses who were not too sure whether they wanted the nuns to have exactly the same enclosure as the monks, because they felt that the monks go out too easily; and they would not like their nuns to do the same.

Consequently some desired that the cases in which the abbess can allow the nuns to go out of the enclosure or people to come in be spelled out and that clear norms be elaborated. Others, on the contrary did not want either detailed norms or a list of specific cases. The final result was a compromise text that gives some general directives and enumerates a number of cases (rather obvious) without trying to give a complete list. The responsibility of each sister and of the community as a whole in making a discernment in that matter is

also stressed.

Some felt that the mention of the Father Immediate was important. They agreed that enclosure was just one observance and that, theoretically, it should not have a special treatment. But they felt that since it was question of bringing into the realm of the Order a responsibility that the Code explicitly gives to the bishop, it might be wise to stress the fact that the practice of enclosure is revised at the Regular Visitation and that the Father Immediate exercises some "vigilance" over it (as over any other monastic observance). The word "vigilance" was the object of a good deal of discussion. My feeling was that the problem was largely semantic, the word having much stronger connotation for some than for others, even within the same linguistic group.

On that question of the solicitude of the Father Immediate concerning the enclosure, as on many other questions, it was clear that the concrete relationship between the abbess and her present or past Father Immediate had a great influence on the position adopted.

The Unity of the Order

The most difficult question was that of the unity of the Order. It was difficult for the very simple reason that there were quite different conceptions of what that unity should be. I don't think I can express very clearly the various positions, but I will try.

First of all it is obvious that everyone wants to maintain and to nurture the "communion" of hearts and spirits that exists between the monks and the nuns, between the monasteries of monks and the monasteries of nuns, and also between the two "branches".

Secondly, most (but not all) consider that it is important and necessary to express that communion in some form of juridical structure. They think that since we have two branches with each one its own General Chapter and its own Constitutions, we will become completely separated (or at least will be considered as such by the Holy See) unless there is an organic unity between the two branches built into our respective Constitutions.

Of course there are a few who think that an authentic and active communion expressed in various forms of cooperation and mutual influence could exist and be maintained even if we were two juridically different Order, developing each one its own personality. I have personally expressed that point of view a few times in past years. But the idea has never been popular and it is clear that the vast majority of the nuns (and probably also of the monks) don't want

to go in that direction. So, I have joined the ranks of those who try to find a satisfactory juridical structure for a single Order composed of two autonomous branches.

Here appears the first major difference. For some, we will not have one Order unless there is one common supreme authority. The reasoning is that if we have two autonomous General Chapters, each one receiving independently its authority from the Holy See, through the approbation of their respective Constitutions, we are in fact already two Orders. Even having the same Abbot General does not resolve the question, since our Abbot General is not an authority above the Chapter. So, a juridical solution must be found. The first one that comes to the mind is obviously to have one General Chapter composed of all the abbots and all the abbesses, as the supreme authority of the Order. That raises all kinds of practical problems that we are not (or the Church is not) ready to solve. The whole question of "jurisdiction" does not make the problem more easy to solve.

But others think that such an approach is too legalistic and tends towards a subtle (or even not so subtle) form of centralization. They say that there are other ways of establishing an organic unity between the two branches, than having a common supreme authority. The various forms of interrelation that already exist at other levels are enough, they say.

Apart from the collaboration existing under different forms at the level of Regional Conferences, one must mention the Abbot General and the Father Immediate.

The idea of an Abbess General at the head of the feminine branch of the Order seems very unpopular among the abbesses and probably among the majority of the nuns. I must confess that I do not understand too much the reasons, even when they are explained to me, -- Well, this must be one of those areas where men cannot understand what is obvious to women. Very humbling, isn't it? -- I keep wondering, though, how long, at least in some countries that I know better, the young women who come to our convents will continue to find normal that the General Chapter where their abbesses meet to treat the pastoral and juridical problems of the communities of nuns is always presided by a man.

The traditional way in which the monasteries of nuns have been incorporated into the Order has been through the particular relationship to a monastery of monks of which the abbot becomes the Father Immediate of the nuns. With the exception of some federations like the one of Tart and Las Huelgas, which may have a lot to teach us, the monasteries of nuns did not have in the past the type of filiation that is so essential to the male branch, When a monastery of

nuns becomes autonomous all the juridical relationship with the founding monasteries are ended, although the bonds of communion may continue.

Some think that this was due to a cultural situation where nuns did not have any role in the administration of the Order. They were totally under the jurisdiction of a General Chapter composed entirely of men. Now that such a situation of total dependence is considered unacceptable and that the nuns have their own autonomous General Chapter, some think that a normal evolution would be to have within the feminine branch of the Order the same system of filiation (between founding house and foundation) as within the male branch. Those who are of that opinion generally concede that there should be a period of transition and that the first step in that direction would be a situation where the responsibilities presently assumed by the Father Immediate would be divided among him and the abbess of the founding house.

To that, many will respond that there is something wrong in the nuns trying to copy everything the monks have or do, and that we should not aim at having identical parallel structures. We have in the feminine branch a different tradition concerning the filiation and it has worked well so far, they say. Why not keep it? This seems to be presently the position of the majority of the abbesses, if we judge from the votes of the Chapter.

The votes concerning the various responsibilities of the Father Immediate seemed many not to be entirely consistent. The reason was probably not that the abbesses were being inconsistent, but that there was there a great number of entangled questions that were not yet formulated clearly enough and that will need to be studied more in depth before the next General Chapter.

Personally I was surprised to hear some abbesses in some of the commissions saying that they thought the Father Immediate of the monks had more power over his daughter-houses than the Father Immediate of the Nuns. Which is certainly not the case. At the same time I was still more surprised when the abbesses voted to give to the Father Immediate rather than to the Abbot General the very important responsibility to accept the resignation of an abbess (while her election had to be confirmed by the Abbot General).

Collegiality

Collegiality is really only one of the aspects of the question of the unity of the Order. I treat it here under a different heading because it was a bone of contention at the Chapter. And although, at

some point, it seemed to be a discussion between men, the question was important to large groups of abbesses.

One of the challenges of the Holyoke Chapter had been to find a satisfactory systematic juridical expression of the various structures of the Order, both ancient and new. The abbots had seen in the Charter of Charity that as soon as Cîteaux had made a few foundations, the abbots of the various monasteries had assumed a collective responsibility for the whole Order and had exercised it every year at the General Chapter. In many cases they had exercised it in other ways, for example delegating their authority to a group of "definitors" to solve problems that the Chapter did not have the time to solve.

It seemed to some that the juridical concept of collegiality could be used to express that reality. In that line of thought it is considered that the supreme authority of the Order resides in the College of all the superiors of the Order. Such supreme authority and collegial pastoral solicitude are exercised when the abbots meet for the General Chapter. It is also the same collegial solicitude, and in some cases authority, that are exercised, under the control of the General Chapter, in the traditional forms like the system of filiation, the visitation, or in recent forms like the Regional Conference (which are given by the General Chapter at least the very important function of preparing the next General Chapter), the Central Commission, etc.

Before Holyoke, and at Holyoke the fear was expressed that this might be a Trojan horse, a subtle way of giving special powers to presidents of regions or regional conferences, etc. But little dialogue was needed at Holyoke to convince everyone that nobody in the Order had such plans, and a formulation (Cst. 72) was finally reached at Holyoke, early in the Chapter, that did not leave any place to such fears, since it expressed very clearly that every exercise of that collegial responsibility outside the General Chapter was necessarily subject to the directives and control of the General Chapter. That text was voted with a very great majority early during the General Chapter; and the concept of collegiality was operative in the elaboration of many other numbers of the Constitutions.

It was explained at Holyoke that if Collegiality was a Trojan horse, that horse was full of nuns! The idea was that such a juridical concept could be used to give a juridical expression to a situation without parallel in the Church. I mentioned above that many in the Order think that we cannot remain one Order (or, to put it in a different way: the Holy See will soon force us to become practically two separate Orders) unless we have, in one way or another a common

supreme authority. Then we can say that the Cistercian Order is one because the pastoral solicitude for and the supreme authority on the whole Order resides in the College of all the superiors of abbots and abbesses.

Once that principle is admitted we can find various practical ways of expressing that one collective authority either through a mixed Chapter or through parallel Chapters (one way would be to have a mixed General Chapter meeting once to approve the Constitutions of both branches, and convening again perhaps every twelve years, and, in the meantime, delegating its power to the Chapter of abbots for things concerning the monks and to the Chapter of abbesses for things concerning the nuns. Cst. 72 of Holyoke was carefully written in such a way that it remained open to such an evolution while not saying anything that was unacceptable to those who did not care about the principle of collegiality. And therefore it was voted easily.

After the Holyoke Chapter the various regions worked in different directions and with different preoccupations. Some regions, for which the concept of collegiality was important, worked on the basis of what Holyoke had voted and tried to elaborate the nuns' legislation in that line. Other regions while being happy with Cst. 72 of Holyoke, simply forgot about the whole idea of collegiality (it is interesting to see, for example, that a computerized concordance in French of all the important words of the Holyoke text does not have the word college, or collegially, or collegial, while an English similar concordance lists seven references under the word "collegiality"...).

All this explains that when the question of collegiality came up at the Chapter of abbesses a group of abbesses took for granted what others had not even thought about. It obviously made for a difficult dialogue. The fact that, when information was given about the Holyoke text, differences of opinion appeared among the abbots present did not make the whole question less complex, and could have given to some abbesses the impression that this was simply a discussion among men. Which it was certainly not, since many abbesses of various regions were extremely interested.

In the end the abbesses voted to keep Cst. 72 exactly as in the Holyoke text and a new Cst. 73 that goes a bit further and approves the possibility of all the abbesses and abbots exercising the collegial responsibility on the whole Order either in a mixed Chapter (at least, at any rate, for the election of the Abbot General) or in parallel Chapters.

There was a good deal of difficult dialogue on that question, and it led to a significant consensus. But it left everyone with the

awareness that several issues are not yet clearly formulated and that we will all have to do our homework before the Summit Meeting of 1987.

The Future

It will obviously be necessary to treat again of Constitutions at the next General Chapter, that is at the Summit Meeting of 1987. But I think it would be a pity if a large part of the Chapter were dedicated to that. It can be easily avoided if we do our homework between now and then and if the Central Commission and the Commission of Preparation, at their next meeting, set up an efficient system for the preparation of the Chapter. Most of the Meeting could still be dedicated to the important question of formation.

I hope to be able to make, in separate papers, some concrete proposals concerning the preparation of the next Summit Meeting and how the question of formation could be treated by such an assembly.

Conyers

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