

BUILDING CONSENSUS

(Suggestions for the preparation of the 1987 Summit Meeting)

The more or less final text of the Constitutions for the male branch of the order was voted at Holyoke in 1984 and that of the female branch at El Escorial in 1985. Some further revision and some coordination of the two texts will have to be done at the Summit Meeting of 1987. It will be the conclusion of twenty years of work, since the revision of our Constitutions was initiated by the General Chapter of 1967.

Unless we want to spend most of the Chapter of 1987 on this, some serious work will have to be done between now and then. I would like to propose here a few suggestions on how this work of preparation can be approached.

There are several questions concerning the various structures of the order and especially concerning the relationship between the two branches of the Order, on which there is still a good diversity of opinions, and which require more study and dialogue. One question ---- that of collegiality --- has got a good deal of popularity, but it is really only one question among others. There a very large number of issues on which the unity has not yet been made, and people are on one side or the other on those issues, independently of whether they are for or against using the concept of collegiality.

What I really want to stress is that it would be very artificial and not helpful to assume that the Order is divided in two "block", and that dialogue has to be established between those two blocks in order to arrive at some eventual compromises between their positions. The truth of the matter is that there is a large gamut of issues to be clarified and each one of them has to be studied for itself.

In other words, we should work at building consensus and avoid everything that could lead to a polarization that in fact does not presently exist. it would be easy to circulate in the Order a questionnaire that would make people pronounce themselves for side A or side B. Such a polarization would be harmful and would not represent the actual situation of the Order.

The other approach is to take each question separately, and to

analyze it in all its complexity; then to identify on what aspects of that question there is already a consensus in the Order, and on what aspects there is still a diversity of opinion. The next step would be to find a way of expressing clearly the consensus already achieved, and after that to work at building a consensus on the other aspects by clarifying better the issues at stake and analyzing better the value of the arguments on each sides.

This may sound abstract; but let me take a few examples. of the first questions to be voted at the General Chapter of Holyoke was the one concerning the obligation to take part in the divine Office. There were clearly two positions at the time we thought we should start voting on that question. CoCo thought that the best thing to do was to propose an amendment at the time of the final vote, so that people should chose between the two positions. That approach somewhat polarized the assembly, and that vote left a bad taste in the mouth of many. Since the spirit of the Chapter was particularly good, it did not create too much problem; but CoCo learned from that experience, and for the rest of the Chapter it tried to avoid formulations that would polarize uselessly the assembly.

At El Escorial, LaCo was able to profit from the experience of Holyoke, especially in dealing with the burning question of the Enclosure. The opinions of the assembly could not have been more divided than on that question. At the same time, it was evident that there was a large amount of consensus right from the beginning. The technique used was, through six successive versions of the text, to make the assembly express the consensus that already existed and then clarify the aspects on which the consensus has still to be built. At the end there were a few points on which some compromise has to be accepted by everyone; but we didn't start with the idea of finding a compromise.

From that point of view both Holyoke and El Escorial were very good experiences of a whole large group of people honestly working at building consensus. It seems to me that the same thing can be done in the process of preparing the Summit Meeting of 1987.

The more we can do about building consensus *before* the Chapter, the better it will be. But we should by any mean avoid elaborating before the Chapter *compromises* that would necessarily limit the freedom of the assembly.

Let me enumerate the various phases I would see in the preparation of the Chapter:

Phase I: Meeting of the mixed Central Commission/Preparatory Commission (January 1986).

The first task of that meeting would be:

a) to elaborate a list of all the questions that need clarification, and to break them down into as many sub-questions as possible.

b) to ask the various Regions to express their position on each one of these questions before September 1986.

Phase II: (Between September and October 1986)

Elaboration of a report that will show where there is clear consensus in the Order and of a list of questions that need further study.

(This should be done by a small group commissioned by the joint Preparatory Commission. It could be Permanent Council or an *ad hoc* group.)

Phase : November and December 1986.

Elaboration of working papers on question that needs further studies.

It is very important that these should be real *working papers* and not *position papers*. A "working paper" is an objective, detached, presentation of all the positions possible on a specific question and a list of all the arguments *on each*

These "working papers" should not be circulated before the commission "ad hoc" has verified their objectivity their thoroughness. But they should be circulated in the Order before Christmas 1986.

Phase IV: Between January and Easter 1987.

All the Regions study these Working Papers in local communities and in Regional Meetings, and send their report to *ad hoc* Commission.

Phase V: Work of the *ad hoc* Commission (between Easter and September 1987)

Elaboration of a final report comprising:

a) Formulation of votes to be taken at the beginning of the Chapter (without further discussion in Commissions) on all

Document extrait du [site de l'abbaye Notre-Dame de Scourmont](#), qui se trouve sur le territoire de Forges, à sept kilomètres au sud de la ville de Chimay, en Belgique. Notre-Dame de Scourmont est une abbaye de l'Ordre Cistercien de la Stricte Observance.

the questions where a reasonable consensus is manifest,

b) Presentation of questions to be further studied in Commissions at the Chapter: There should be a very clear *status questionis* in each case, enumerating all the aspects of questions and all the arguments put forward so far on each side.

Phase VI: October 1987

General Chapter itself:

A: Voting at the beginning of the Chapter on all the questions on which the consensus is already manifest.

B: Study in Commission of the other questions (study monitored by an *ad hoc* Commission).

C: Vote on those questions.

-- If the Central Commission/Preparatory Commission as well as the *ad hoc* Commission do their work well, the Regional Meetings of 1986 and 1987 should not need spend all their time on these questions. They should have plenty of time left to deal with other business.

Likewise, if there is an adequate preparation, the General Chapter (Summit Meeting) of 1987 should not need spend more than a third of its time on these questions. One third of the time could be left for various ordinary business, and another third for an important topic like formation.

Conyers, September 12, 1985

Armand VEILLEUX