

Beyond the Summit

In Preparation for the General Chapter of 1987

Armand Veilleux

Summits are not usually places where one will want to live. They are locations above the realm of normal and usual life. It is challenging and thrilling to climb up there from time to time, in order to have a look at the valley and at the far distant horizon in all directions. But eventually one has to come down and resume normal occupations. And every professional mountaineer will tell you that coming down is as tricky and dangerous as going up. (Probably as many expeditions have been wiped up by avalanches coming down from Mount Everest as climbing up).

For quite a few years now we have been very seriously planning our "Summit" -- and, alas the preparation is not finished yet. Part of the planning at which we have perhaps not looked sufficiently is that concerning the "after Summit" period.

Few people make a profession of mountaineering. It is a risky business anyway. But one does not need to do it too long before it becomes an addiction. For twenty years now, we have been working on our Constitutions. Although many monks and nuns could not care less about that work, some have developed quite an interest in it. Perhaps an addiction. Trying to find the final solution to the complex problem of the Unity of the two Branches of the Order may become compulsive, just like trying to solve the Rubik cube. (Have you ever realized that the Rubik cube is much nicer when the colors are all mixed than when finally some smart child has figured out how bring together all the little squares of the same color on each face of the cube?...)

With the need to revise our legislation, after Vatican II, the nature of the General Chapter has changed radically. Most of what we have been doing ever since has been just that: preparing some new legislation. At the Summit Meeting in Rome, next December, there will be very few abbesses and abbots from the period anterior to this grand law-making enterprise. Even if we do finalize our Constitutions at that Summit, the Holy See will probably not accept all our solutions without change and/or without dialogue. Which means that some important

questions will probably have to be discussed again at some future Regional Meetings and some future General Chapter (or Summit Meeting, or General Assembly, or whatever you want to call it). The temptation will be great to continue to legislate. And even if our Constitutions were approved as such, we all know that the "Statutes" are of the authority of the General Chapter, and there will probably be many of them that we will feel like adapting at the next General Chapter... Are we going, at last, to break that spiral? Endlessly to continue to make laws could be a very effective way of avoiding more challenging issues of life.

Sure, we have worked very seriously over the past years, preparing the invasion of our juridical promised land. Some of our regional tribes have even sent emissaries to inspect the land of Kibbutzah. Some of these have come back with tales of rich harvest of marvelous fruits, other with tales of Nephilim and other frighteningly dangerous creatures (Num. 13,33). So we have decided to be very prudent about it and we have surveyed all the possible avenues. All the forms of evolution have been suggested, including previously unknown nuances of static development and evolving status quo.

Human imagination is very fertile, especially when the complementarity of the two sexes enters in. Therefore still new formulas could probably be found. The complication is that all the problems are intertwined. The exact role you give to the Father Immediate of a monastery of nuns depends on the type of filiation you adopt for the feminine branch of the Order, and this, of course, depends on whether you aim at autonomy through parallel structures or through integrated ones... Possibilities are really endless -- although they are conditioned by the grace of God and the good graces of Rome -- we could easily continue to move the parts of the puzzle around till the end of the century if not till the Parousia.

My suggestion is that we should all come to the Via Aurelia Summit with the aim of settling for some reasonable solution and go on with life... I believe that some of the formulas that have been proposed are more in line with the general evolution of the Church and the world than others. But, frankly, whatever is the formula that enters into the text of our Constitutions, I don't think it will have a very great influence on the evolution of the life in the Order. Life, in its development, follows its own laws. Of course, some very bad legislation could stifle life of the various possibilities offered, everyone has some good points. And even apart from that, the only difference between them is that one solution may become obsolete a bit quicker than the other. They all will become obsolete eventually.

So, why not agree on some reasonably good legislation as soon as

possible; then joyfully celebrate our consensus, and move on to some other serious business? And the most important business will be to establish an agenda for the Order for the years to come. If we don't establish such an agenda, each Region will develop its own, probably without paying too much attention to what should be the common agenda of the Order. And, of course, there will be the danger of a backlash as the one we had at the Chapter of 1971 after the charismatic Chapter of 1969.

May I suggest a few points that could be on that agenda? First, I will not surprise anyone by saying that I still believe that the area of formation is of the utmost importance. So, after we have finished writing our Ratio Institutionis, we will have to study much more seriously, as an Order, the whole question of formation, that is the whole process through which someone, in the context of the Cistercian monastic way of life, gradually becomes an integrated adult woman or man, and a mature Christian, opening her/himself more and more to the grace of a contemplative union with God.

A *second* question that is not going to diminish in importance in the years to come, is that of the feminist movement. I have been interested in feminist theology for some time (for purely academic reasons, of course). It is fascinating to realize how all the civilizations of humankind have been dominated for thousands of years by various shades of male sexism. Almost everything in culture is sexist, beginning with all the languages of the world -- which makes it very difficult to develop a non inclusive language, and accounts for the frequent awkwardness of the attempts at non inclusive translations of the Bible or liturgical texts.

It is easy to discard feminist theology or even the whole feminist movement, on account of some of its radical expressions. (A good example of radicalism would be the writings of Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, *Gyn/Ecology*, and *Pure Lust*). But other expressions of the same movement are characterized by ponderation and solid scholarship, like, for example, the book of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*. For the last decade or so, all that questioning has taken a larger and larger place in the annual meetings of theologians (like the meetings of the American Academy of Religion) and in the Conferences of Major Superior (especially in countries, like Canada and in Latin America, where the Conferences of Major Superiors have been mixed for quite a few decades).[]

Feminist theology has obliged us to revise our reading of the Scripture, of the Church Fathers and our interpretation of Tradition. Its influence on the life of the Church has been considerable, and much of the evolution of the feminine branch of our Order for the last

thirty years is largely -- albeit indirectly -- indebted to it. All the questioning coming from that feminist movement has always been implicit in our discussions about the Unity of the Order, but has so far not surfaced very much. It is an issue (or a series of issues) that we will have to confront directly and very seriously in the future, unless we want to resume the old Gnostic dream of the return to a supposed original androgyny. Maybe we will be able to do it with more serenity after we have at least provisionally solved the juridical aspect of it.

The particular situation of our Order might enable us to bring to the solution of that question a positive contribution, at the level of life rather than at the level of noisy declarations. But in order to be able to make that contribution it will be important for us to reach a deep awareness of all the problems involved. We should also avoid complacency, since the attitude of the Order towards the nuns has been ambiguous at best from the start. According to a modern historian, nuns had to "worm" their way into the Order in spite of the reluctance, and often opposition, of the monks.

A *third* question that we will have to face more and more seriously is how to prepare people to grow old in a monastic environment. Some people age beautifully. Other just wither. In communities where the average age is often quite high (in many communities it is in the 60ies, and in some in the 70ies), this becomes every day a more crucial problem. The fact of having large groups of old people with very few young ones is a relatively new phenomenon; it creates all kinds of problems to the solution of which monastic tradition has little to contribute directly. And it is a problem facing all the Western societies.

In several countries of the Third World, where we have more and more monasteries, it is just the other way around. A few generations ago there was in most of those countries a very high rate of infant mortality, which medical progress has reduced drastically. Nature, however, has not immediately adjusted itself to that rate of survival, so that the number of births keep being very high, with, as a result, societies where the number of very young people is extremely great in proportion to the people in the forties or above; which creates other types of problems for the "old ones"...

A *fourth* and final point in my agenda: the problems of developing countries are becoming every day more complex and almost depressing. Since our Order is, fortunately, more and more present in those parts of the world, it would be very important for us to reflect on the implications and demands of such a situation for the Order, not only at a spiritual level, but also at a sociological, economic, and even

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.

political level. The first step would be a collective evaluation of the very rich experience of the last thirty years or so. A whole General Chapter could be dedicated to listening to the experience of our foundations in Africa, Latin America and Asia. It could be a fruitful challenge to the monasteries of Europe and North America.

Those are only a few suggestions of what could be the agenda of the Order. What I really want to say is that, after the Summit, we will have to come down to the valley those are some of the problems we will have to cope with. It might be good to have a look at them from the vantage view point at the Summit.[]

Armand VEILLEUX

Holy Spirit Abbey

Conyers, Georgia

20 May 1987