

THE 1987 MIXED GENERAL MEETING

When the Capitulants left Rome, on December 18th. 1987, or the following days, all were tired, many had a cold, and the last voting session, lasting well past 10.00 P.M. on the 17th, had sounded a sad final note with its first instance of discordant votes by the two Chapters on an important matter. It was to be expected, therefore, that the first reflections given to our communities after the Chapter would not be enthusiastic, and perhaps not too positive. After more than two months, it might be easier to give a dispassionate assessment of what was achieved and what was left to be desired at that historical meeting.

Agenda and Procedure

The agenda was packed. Establishing the final version of our Constitutions, for both the monks and the nuns, was obviously the main task; but there were also various Statutes to be discussed. Other important matters like the incorporation of the Congregation of Las Huelgas into our Order were added to the list of the usual business to which every General Chapter has to attend as, for example, the reading of some House Reports.

Like any piece of heavy equipment, the Mixed General Meeting was slow to put in gear. More or less five days were needed to polish up the procedure. The Commission for the Constitutions (CoCoRo) was elected on the fourth day of the Meeting, with the mandate to present to the Assembly the Criteria according to which it intended to work. Those criteria were presented to the Assembly on the following day and voted on the 29th, sixth day of the Chapter. One quarter of the working days of the Meeting had already passed.

Revision of the Constitutions

The Constitutions voted at Holyoke and at El Escorial were the fruit of a lengthy and serious work of preparation by all the Houses of the Order and all the Regional Conferences. They were accepted by both Chapters almost unanimously. We could have satisfied ourselves with revising only what really needed correction and with harmonizing the two texts where harmonization was deemed either necessary or desirable. The first Mixed Meeting of Preparation, in a commendable desire to involve all the members of the Order in the final process of

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revision, invited everyone to send in suggestions or amendments. The Law Commission, for its part, made a list of canonical clarifications that seemed necessary. Then the second Mixed Meeting of Preparation made proposals on a certain number of important points and charged the Law Commission to do the final work of preparation on the text of the Constitutions for the Mixed General Meeting. The final result of all this was a working booklet that was very well done but that, in spite of the name "booklet", had the size of a telephone directory. Very few Constitutions or Statutes were left totally unchanged.

All the new or amended texts had to be voted at the Mixed General Meeting in Rome. A very large part of them were to be voted according to our "simplified procedure", that is, without any study in Commissions and without discussion in Plenary Session. Several Capitulants had problems with voting on changes that came on the floor of the Chapter for the first time, even if they seemed of little importance. An intermediary procedure was therefore developed that was much less time consuming than the ordinary one; but still an enormous amount of texts had to be discussed and voted.

Out of respect for the texts of H/E, MMP II designed a procedure according to which there would be a vote to confirm (or not) the H/E text before any vote on a modified or new text. The intention was excellent. In practice, due to the fact that many Constitutions and Statutes were very long and complex, and the changes proposed were numerous, that procedure caused the voting sheets and the voting sessions to be exceedingly complicated and time consuming.

The great number of Commissions (17 of them) could have the work much more burdensome than it was. At the very beginning of the Meeting, after the Commissions had made a first study of the question of the Unity of the Order, the Coordinating Commission asked all the Commissions to give a mini-report composed of at most five statements. That proved to be an excellent procedure that saved a lot of time and that was used later on by the CoCoRo.

Improvement or loss?

What was the final result of that general revision of our Constitutions? At the end of the Mixed General Meeting an European abbot told me that when people unearth our Constitutions, in a few centuries from now, everyone will be convinced that the text voted at the Rome Meeting was the first one, and that the Holyoke and El Escorial texts were improved versions of it...till the day when some good scholar finds out after careful scrutiny that it was the other way around! That crack seems to express the feeling of many. Only a careful, impartial comparison of the two versions will permit to make

an honest judgment on the matter.

There is no doubt that some of the changes were improvements. For example the section on the consultation of the brothers (sisters), the council of the abbot (abbess) and the conventual chapter has been rearranged by the Law Commission in a more logical and more harmonious manner. The section on ordinary and extraordinary administration is now also clearer and canonically more accurate. Other changes harmonized the two texts, inserting into the monks' text some of the theological or spiritual ameliorations made by the abbesses at El Escorial.

On the other hand, several of the amendments proposed and accepted did not take enough into account the overall structure of the whole book of Constitutions, and some represent a mentality different from the one that presided at Holyoke and El Escorial. As a consequence the present version of our Constitutions has lost some of the consistency and overall unity of the former one.

Some of the changes seem also to betray a mentality less open to pluralism and more concerned about "control" than the H/E version was. A good example is the statute about the right of the abbot/abbess to visit the cells of the brothers/sisters! To some articles or statutes mentioning the responsibility of the community, a caveat has been added reminding that the superior has the final word. Surprisingly enough, an example this comes at the end of a constitution on the active participation of the brethren, even if the principle of the abbot's/abbess' having the final word is clearly expressed elsewhere. From this point of view the mentality revealed by some of the new amendments is a return to the mentality of some years ago. It might be an exaggeration to say that it is a return to «before 1969» we can certainly say that 1987 was to 1984 and 1985 what 1971 was to 1969. (The Chapter of 1971 was the one at which, after voting the principle of pluralism two years before, it was felt necessary to render somewhat "uniform" the application the applications of that "pluralism".).

Unity of the Order

In spite of the inevitable complex procedure, the final revision of our Constitutions would have been a reasonably simple task, had it not been for the need to find a formula for maintaining the Unity of the Order while respecting the autonomy of the two "Branches". With perhaps a very few exceptions, nobody wanted to separate the Order into two juridically separate Orders without any form of interdependence. All wanted to maintain the unity the problem was to find out how to articulate it juridically.

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At Holyoke, the Abbots formulated the principle of collegial pastoral solicitude in Cst. 72 in such a way that it could apply to all the superiors, including the abbesses. Cst 73 indicated that the Order was composed of monks and nuns, and stated that the proper law for monks was passed by the General Chapter of abbots and the proper law for nuns by the General Chapter of abbesses. The rest of the Third Part dealt with the male section of the Order only, the Abbots not wanting to prejudge what the Abbesses would want to do.

At El Escorial, the Abbesses adopted the same principle but went a step forward, stating that the matters affecting both monks and nuns together were referred to the pastoral care and authority of the abbots and abbesses gathered in General Chapter either jointly or separately. They cast that vote after long and difficult discussions, during which all the arguments pro and contra were expressed. Therefore the meaning of that vote and its consequences were quite clear for the abbesses who were at El Escorial.

Between El Escorial and the MGM in Rome however, the situation became gradually more complicated and even confused. On the basis of reflections made by Cardinal Hamer to our Abbot General, and of "private revelations" received by various members of the Order from persons having contacts with the CRIS, it was felt at the time of the MMP II that Rome would not accept a General Chapter of Nuns, and that the only way to preserve the Unity of the Order was the formula "One General Chapter of Monks and one Legislative Assembly of Nuns" (the dependency of that Assembly from the General Chapter being understood in various ways). At the beginning of MGM it was felt by most people that this was the only viable formula, although it had not been proposed by any Region before MMP II.

The whole Mixed General Meeting revolved around that question, and the growth towards a consensus was beautiful to watch, although it was amore painful growth than the similar process realized at Holyoke and even at El Escorial (where it was already more difficult).

During the five days spent on Procedure, the Commissions had sometime to make a first study on that question and were asked to give a mini-report on the 27th of Nov. After presenting a synthesis of those reports on the 28th, the CoCoRo was able to offer, two days later, a Preliminary Declaration on the Unity of the Order (based on those mini-reports), that was confirmed by a quasi unanimous vote on the following day (132 yes, 6 no, 3 abs, 2 jm).

A first straw vote, taken on December 1st, showed that, concretely, the two options of either "One Mixed General Chapter" or "One General Chapter of abbots and one General Assembly of Abbesses" were not very

popular. The great majority of the votes were divided among the two possibilities of "One Mixed General Chapter with two Assemblies/Chapters» and "Two interdependent General Chapters".

After the Commissions had made a first study of most of the Constitutions of the Third Part, we moved to study the Second Part, letting the consensus simmer on the back burner. When a second straw vote was taken on Dec. 7th., the consensus was very clear and strong. The large majority of both Chapters saw the possibility of building a consensus at this Mixed General Meeting around the formula of "two interdependent Chapters". There was an atmosphere of hope. Even those who would have desired something else (including those who would have wanted One Mixed General Chapter) felt that we had made significant progress towards a practical solution.

There was some form of backlash on December 10. A fortuitous series of events shook up the consensus.

Earlier in the Chapter, a small Canonical Commission was created in order to avoid technical discussions in the Plenary Assembly. That Canonists' Group presented to the Plenary Assembly, on the morning of Dec. 10, a set of reflections on the Unity of the Order that at least implicitly questioned the wisdom of the former straw vote on that question. The exchange that followed, especially two well structured interventions, stressed the danger of our becoming two Congregations if we had two interdependent General Chapters. By another coincidence, the Mother Federal of the Federation of Las Huelgas unexpectedly presented, that same afternoon, after the coffee break, the request of the Nuns of the Federation of Las Huelgas to be incorporated in the Order as a Congregation. Definitely the specter of the "congregations" brooded over the whole day. All this brought on the Assembly, on the Commissions, and on the work of the MGM in general a cloud of gloom that took many days before disappearing (and probably never completely disappeared).

The consensus seriously shaken up on that day was slowly rebuilt and could be expressed on Dec. 14th. a long series of straw votes concerning all the main structures of the Order treated in the Third Part of the Constitutions, and giving to the CoCoRo some much needed indications on how to prepare the texts to be voted. In the end, most of the final votes, including the one concerning the two interdependent General Chapters were passed with a very high majority, often close to unanimity.

All during the elaboration of that consensus, work was being done on the long Second Part of the Constitutions and also on the First One. The long, painful and boring sessions of vote on innumerable

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little details should not make us forget that some important questions were treated smoothly and with very satisfactory results at the same time: for example the new Cst. 19 replacing fortunately, and without much discussion, the Cst.19-20-21 of H/E, and the new Cst. 29 (replacing 31) on the separation from the world, fruit of several successive redactions in a beautiful atmosphere of dialogue.

Statute of Foundations

The manner in which the Statute on Foundations was treated was also very interesting. After a first study in Commissions and a fruitful discussion in Plenary session, it was felt that a small Commission was better adapted for such technical matters as those that had still to be clarified. A special commission representing various Regions of the Order and various fields of expertise was created and produced a text that was well accepted by the Assembly at the end of the Meeting.

Statute of Formation

There was no time left to study the important Statute on Formation. But that may be just as well. A long and important text received at the Chapter itself could not have been studied seriously right away. A large part of the next Chapter may be reserved for that, the question being of the utmost importance for the future of the Order

Collegiality.

The question of Collegiality is a mysterious one. More than a decade ago some superiors and canonists in the Order thought that the canonical concept of collegiality could be used to give a harmonious juridical expression to the structures that the Order has been giving itself since Vatican II. The idea generated some fears and the image of a Trojan Horse was often used. At Holyoke, after expression of these fears and their exorcism, it was possible to arrive through dialogue and very early in the Chapter at a formulation (Cst. 72, summed up later on in Cst. 4) around which a consensus was developed and upon which the rest of that General Chapter built. Many Capitulants experienced that moment of consensus as an authentic visit of the Holy Spirit, and considered Cst. 72 as something of a "sacred text". The Abbesses, at El Escorial, chose to that text intact.

After Holyoke, and still more after El Escorial, strong objections to the use of that concept of Collegiality were formulated. A discussion went on for a few years, that was not without its fruit, but that has probably monopolized an amount of time and energy that could have been put to better use on other questions. Due to that situation, most of those who had favored that concept in the past came to the General

Chapter without any desire to push that concept further, but simply hoping to keep in the Constitutions the general (and certainly inoffensive) mentions of collegial solicitude that were found in Cst. 72 and Cst. 4, and that had been voted almost unanimously at the two Chapters of Holyoke and El Escorial. The unrelenting and successful efforts made to modify those texts and to replace the mention of "collegial solicitude" by some expression much more vague were difficult for them to understand and were a source of deep pain.

Las Huelgas

Another painful experience was that concerning the request from Las Huelgas. We were obviously not ready to make a decision on that question. But, as the Abbot General told us, expressing clearly his sadness about the whole issue, it was difficult to understand why most of us came to the Chapter unprepared to treat that question, while it had been on the agenda for several years. Dom Ambrose could easily show, for example, that some people were scared at the prospect of things that has been in fact the situation of the last thirty years (like our Permanent Council taking care of their ordinary business with the Holy See). Few Regions have made a serious study of the question.

There was a real fear that to accept Las Huelgas at this time would complicate our dealing with the Holy See concerning the approval of our Constitutions. It is not certain at all that such a fear is founded. In any case, it is to be hoped that, at the next General Chapter(s), after (hopefully) the approval of our Constitutions, it will be possible to study the request of our sisters of Las Huelgas with full objectivity and open minds as well as open hearts. It was certainly unfortunate (although perhaps unavoidable) that such an important question came up for voting on the very last evening of the Meeting. The fact that the vote of the Abbots and that of the Abbesses differed considerably on that question created some disappointment that certainly influenced the following vote on whether we should have in 1990a Mixed General Meeting with the possibility of meeting in separate Chapters or Separate Chapters with the possibility of mixed meetings. The desire has already been expressed by some Capitulants for that question to be reconsidered by the Central Commissions, the argument being that the agenda of the Chapters should be established before we can decide how much work we will do separately and how much together.

In any case, the painful experience of the last voting session should not make us forget that, as a whole, this large mixed meeting has functioned surprisingly well. After the slow beginning due to the large number of participants rather than to the mixed character of the

group, it has functioned much more smoothly than most people had expected, and it has achieved a lot of work. If this has been possible at the first try, and working on extremely complicated matters, a Mixed General Meeting on Formation and other similar basic issues will be the most pleasant and fruitful experience.

Preparation for 1990

Some uncertainties remain concerning the preparation of the two General Chapters of 1990. According to the Constitutions, it is the task of the two Central Commissions to prepare the two General Chapters, coordinating the initiatives coming from the Regional Conferences. But no mechanism has been established for that work of coordination. For example the Regions are entirely free to determine the time and the frequency of their meetings.

If the Central Commission met twice between two Chapters, it could establish an agenda for the next Chapter at its first meeting, then the Regional Conferences could work on that agenda, and the Central Commission could bring their results together and finalize the agenda of the Chapter at its second meeting.

If the Central Commission meets only once between two Chapters, as is the present situation, it can coordinate the initiatives of the Regions in two ways. It may establish the agenda of the next Chapter on the basis of the work of the various Regional Conferences. For this process to be fair, the date of the meeting of the Central Commission should be announced well in advance, and care should be taken that all the Regions meet before the meeting of the Central Commission and that there is enough time for their reports to be communicated to all the members of the Central Commission. Nothing of that is assured presently. Some Regions do not plan to meet before 1989, and although the date of the Central Commission(s) meeting has not been decided, it seems it could be in January 1989. If the agenda of the Chapter is established on the basis of the meetings of only some of the Regions, it is unfair towards the other Regions.

On the other hand the Central Commission could establish the agenda on the basis of its own evaluation of the needs of the Order. Then its meeting should be very early in the three-year period between two Chapters, in order to allow enough time for all the Regions to have a meeting on that agenda and to communicate their results and suggestions to the whole Order long before the Chapter.

Some clarifications of that process seem to be needed in the statutes concerning the Central Commission(s) and the Regional Conferences.

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Conyers, March 17, 1988

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