

CIRCULAR LETTER II

Rome, January 2023

*"We also pray continually that our God will make you worthy of his call, and by his power fulfil all your desires for goodness, and complete all that you have been doing through faith."
(2 Thess 1,11)*

Brothers and sisters,

At the beginning of this new year, I am writing this letter to you to draw your attention to the coming solemnity of our Holy Founders, Abbots Robert, Alberic, Stephen and their companions. The concrete reason for this is vote 4 of the second part of the General Chapter 2022:

THAT EVERY YEAR, ON JANUARY 26TH, THE SOLEMNITY OF OUR HOLY FOUNDERS, ALL THE COMMUNITIES OF THE ORDER UNITE SPIRITUALLY IN PRAYING FOR VOCATIONS AND THE RENEWAL OF THE ORDER.

PLACET 136

NON PLACET 9

ABSTENTIO 6

Amidst all those other important votes on the new *Statute on the Accompaniment of Fragile Communities* and the adjustments to the Constitutions and Statutes because of *Cor orans*, a vote such as this one might be in danger of fading into oblivion. With this second circular letter, therefore, I would like to draw your attention to it.

The background to this vote was the discussion in the regions after the 2017 General Chapter on the need for the spiritual renewal of the Order. Some regional meetings came up with very concrete proposals, including a call by the RéCiF to be spiritually united as communities of the Order in prayer for vocations and the renewal of the Order. During the Central Commission of Cîteaux 2019, this call was placed on the agenda of the General Chapter and was repeated by the Central Commission of Rome 2021. During the second part of the General Chapter 2022, in the third session on Saturday 3 September, by the simple procedure, the above vote was accepted by a large majority (Minutes, p. 32).

Each community is free to find a way to give substance on this day to this prayer for vocations and the renewal of the Order. Whatever form one chooses, the important thing is that on this day – more than otherwise – we as an Order are united in prayer. This united prayer connects us to our Holy Founders who themselves experienced what it means to be without vocations.

"It appeared that they could not pass on their inheritance... to anyone."

In the *Life* of St Bernard, William of St Thierry writes: *"At that time Cîteaux was still a novelty and just a little flock living under venerable Stephen, their abbot. They were beginning to grow dejected because of the lack of vocations, and their hopes for future numbers were fading. It appeared that they could not pass on their inheritance, which was holy poverty, to anyone,*

because although the holiness of their life was admired by all who saw it, they kept away from that severe austerity." (VP 18)¹

The renewal of monastic life according to the Rule of St Benedict threatened to die an early death in young Cîteaux because of a lack of vocations. *"It appeared that they could not pass on their inheritance ... to anyone"* – an articulation of a feeling that many of us also carry with us in these days. However, our Fathers remained faithful to their way of life, proving that vocations are awakened *"by the quality and depth of the personal and communal witness of those who have already responded to the Lord's call."*²

In addition to their fidelity to their way of life and its witness value, they resorted to prayer in their need. The *Exordium Cistercii* testifies to this indirectly with a reference to Psalm 34,15 and to 1 Peter 3,12: *"It truly became manifest how true is what stands written: the eyes of the Lord are upon the just, and his ears unto their prayer"* (EC II.7). As the fruit of their prayer and their faithful witness, our Fathers were permitted to receive St Bernard and his 30 companions into their midst – a gift of God in many ways. *"Now, all of a sudden, God visited them and made them joyful again. It was so unexpected, so sudden. It was as if their house had received this reply from the Holy Spirit"* (VP I.18).

Two pitfalls

Instead of focusing on the quantity of this fruit of their prayer, I want to draw your attention mainly to the fact that they experienced the fruit of their prayer as a gift from God. Prayer for vocations will lead to disappointment if we only pay attention to the number of vocations it will or will not bring us. It is not so much a matter of numbers as about a deeper understanding of our own and others' vocations as a gift of God. It is about receiving vocations as a gift from God. That is the much-needed culture for vocations in a monastic community.

After all, every vocation, first and foremost our own, is given to us from elsewhere. All of us once found the vocation to monastic life and the Cistercian way of life in our hearts without any merit. It is only afterwards that this vocation was cultivated in a community and by ourselves. Vocation is an external call that leads to change. It affects our whole being. A vocation brings us into a new network of those who feel called *"to a holy task, not because of our deeds, but because [God] had decided to do so by grace"* (2 Tim 1:9). Praying for vocations thus brings us back to this call of God and to the network in which this transformation of our humanity takes place, the community. The fruit of this prayer is not so much x number of vocations but a strengthening of a culture in which the call can be heard and cultivated.

All over the world we are experiencing a vocation crisis! I realize that this is a bold statement, but it is my firm conviction. In the Western world, but not only there, there is a crisis in numbers. But a crisis need not be just a lack of numbers; it can also manifest itself in having too many vocations. A lack of proper discernment, a lack of responsibility for giving proper formation in word and example, cause as great a crisis as a lack of vocations.

All over the world, there is a crisis in understanding vocation. The number of requests for dispensation from vows, sometimes even after many years of monastic life, make us ask the question every time: do we really understand our vocation?

¹ William of St. Thierry and others, *The first Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*. Translated by Hilary Costello ocsa. Cistercian Publications CF 76, Liturgical Press 2015. P. 21.

² Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 47th World Day of Prayer for Vocations 2010.

Because of this global crisis, we cannot say that prayer for vocations is only for others. It is a necessity for all of us, even if we have many vocations! It is not a prayer out of pity for others: "Lord, they need vocations so badly!" It certainly should not be a prayer out of contempt: "Lord, I am glad we have vocations and are not like those who have no vocations". True prayer for vocations should open us to God's gift in our own lives and the lives of others.

Renewing our Cistercian life

There is a vocation crisis worldwide because vocation evokes something of the tension between autonomy and surrender, a tension that each of us and thus all our communities experience to a greater or lesser extent. Human beings everywhere in the world tend to respond out of autonomy. We think we do not need a vocation as a gift from God because we ourselves know what is good for us and what we want in our lives. In this way, we try to call ourselves into existence. However, most people confuse vocation with what they do in life, with a role they fill, or a craft they practice. But vocation has to do with our being, and what we bring about in the world is a result of that. If you understand your vocation as the gift of your life, then it will translate into the roles you fulfil in life.

Therefore, the focus on our vocation is closely linked to the renewal of our Cistercian life. When we discover our vocation as a gift, the life we lead will change. This is an ongoing process that takes place repeatedly – unless we are no longer willing to listen to the call of God within us. Living from vocation provides clarity, focus and the confidence to act (the vow of stability). However, it is not always the easiest path (the vow of obedience). After all, living your vocation is not optional and requires you constantly to make choices and sacrifices (the vow of *conversatio morum*).

Are our communities – anywhere in the world – really places where we live out our vocation? Yes, we are all called – but “having” a vocation is not enough. It is about actually “living” our vocation. If the shape of our lives is out of touch with our vocation, then perhaps it would be better if we had no vocation.

The lack of vocations

Our Holy Founders showed us how every vocation is a gift from God. It was this vision that brought fruitfulness. However, it also opens a door for us to deal with a situation where vocations do not seem to come. From a biblical perspective, even the barren can be fruitful. I am grateful to all those brothers and sisters in the Order who continue to live their lives as a gift of God and remain faithful in expectant trust with the hope that God will not let their gift go to waste. They teach us all what it means to fall into the earth like the grain of wheat. *“What you sow is not the body that is to be, but only a bare grain, of wheat I dare say, or some other kind; it is God who gives it the sort of body that he has chosen for it, and for each kind of seed its own kind of body”* (1 Cor 15,37-38). *“Now be patient, brothers and sisters, until the Lord’s coming”* (James 5,7).

When faced with the suppression of a community, some may ask whether our vocation made sense. However, a community may cease to exist but that does not take away the value of all those lives that once gave themselves to God in that community. We do not say that St Bernard's life was meaningless because his monastery no longer exists, do we? Every community that is suppressed hurts, but *“this world as we know it is passing away”* (1 Cor. 7, 31). It takes perhaps the greatest sacrifice to place your barrenness in God's hands.

In communities where there are many vocations, this attitude of surrender is sometimes lost sight of. Therefore, it is so necessary to talk about vocation as a gift of God. *"The profound truth of our existence is thus contained in this surprising mystery: every creature, and in particular every human person, is the fruit of God's thought and an act of his love, a love that is boundless, faithful and everlasting (cf. Jer. 31,3). The discovery of this reality is what truly and profoundly changes our lives."*³

An example

Brothers and sisters, God has given our Order and the Church a great example of this theology of gift: Blessed Christophe of Tibhirine. Marie-Dominique Minassian, who during the General Chapter gave us such an impressive lecture on the meaning of our brothers of Tibhirine, wrote an excellent book on the elements of a theology of gift in the writings of Br. Christophe.⁴

Br. Christophe shows in his spiritual life what I am trying to make clear in this circular letter. He unexpectedly heard the call of God: "Je t'aime - I love you!" He wanted to follow this call, and for it he gave up everything and let himself be formed within a network of others. As a result, this "I love you" increasingly took on the meaning of God, the Gift of Love (Don d'Amour). God himself became the gift of his life and from there, Br. Christophe became a love-gift to others, even in death.

"Vocation: not to choose between one or the other of one's loves even for love of God, but to consent to the Love of God and even before knowing it, to let ourselves be guided by the desire that He puts in us and that must become our only focus in the night we must enter (desert)." (Br. Christophe, *Journal inédit* 9.02.1973)⁵

Conclusion

Praying for vocations is, therefore, brothers and sisters, the discovery of our own vocation within the network of the community and experiencing it repeatedly. In that prayer, the "Je t'aime" (I love you) transforms itself into a personal encounter with God, the Love-Gift, and we ourselves will become a Love-Gift. Only in this way can our communities become healthy cultures in which vocations can be received, accompanied and flourish. Only then can a renewal of the Order take place on a level which is deeper than all the necessary structural changes.

I started this letter with a quotation from the *Life* of St Bernard written by William of St Thierry. I want to end also with a quote from this *Life*:

"Bernard then entered the house of the Lord (Cîteaux), which was poor in spirit, at that time still hidden away and of no importance. He had the intention of dying from the hearts and memory of mankind, with the hope of disappearing like a lost vase (Ps. 30,13). But God had other ideas and was making him ready as a chosen vessel (Acts 9,15), not only to strengthen and expand the monastic order but to carry his name before kings and Gentiles (Acts 9,15) to the ends of the earth. Of course, he did not apply this teaching to himself or even think about it; rather he had in his heart the need to be constant in following his vocation, so that he

³ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 49th World Day of Prayer for Vocations 2012.

⁴ M-D Minassian, *De la crèche à la croix. Éléments d'une théologie du don chez frère Christophe Lebreton*, moine de Tibhirine, Fribourg 2014.

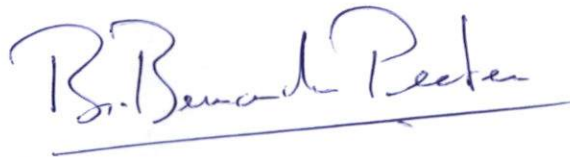
⁵ *Idem*, p. 49.

constantly said in his heart and even often on his lips 'Bernard, Bernard, what have you come for?'" (Vita prima 19.4)⁶

“Bernard, Bernard, what have you come for?” This question should not leave our hearts and lips. It helps us to return to the prayer and witness of our lives. The text from the *Life* of St Bernard is full of hope and shows how prayer and witness can turn “*a lost vase*” into “*a chosen vessel*”. Prayer and witness made St Bernard a fruitful person, for himself, for the community, and for the Order.

I wish you all a blessed feast of our Holy Founders and hope that each of you will find a way to be united with each other on this day more than usual in prayer for vocations and the renewal of our Order.

In prayerful union under the protection of Our Lady of Silence,



Br. Bernardus Peeters ocso
Abbot General



PS

I would like to invite you, if you wish, to share with the Generalate the initiatives you have taken on or around the 26th of January. We can then collect them and forward them to you later in one form or another so that you can see how other communities are shaping this prayer for vocations and renewal of the Order. In this way, we may be able to inspire each other for next time. Please send your contributions to Sr Marilucia: ocsoroma@gmail.com with the subject line 26 January.

⁶ William of St. Thierry and others, *The first Life of Bernard of Clairvaux*. Translated by Hilary Costello ocso. Cistercian Publications CF 76, Liturgical Press 2015. P. 22.