

5th Conference on “A Vision of the Order for the 21st Century”

Dom Erik of Mt St Bernard

VISION

The letter inviting me to give this address instructed me: ‘write a paper [...] on your vision of the Order for the 21st century’. The pronoun was underlined. I will speak in subjective terms, then, from within my frame of reference: such is my brief. My topic is a vision *of* the Order *for* the 21st century, not *for* the Order *of* the 21st century. I take this to mean that I should speak of what I see when I look at the Order. It makes sense. Any future vision depends on an appraisal of the *status quo*. To establish it, we must speak, and listen, to each other. A vision presupposes a point of view. In this assembly, I am a worker of the eleventh hour. Many of you, if not most, have been monks and nuns since before I was born. You can trace patterns I cannot perceive. From this I have much to learn. What *I* can do, I suppose, is to offer a different kind of retrospect, the vision of one more recently arrived of what has been passed on to him. In so doing, I feel gratitude. I also feel perplexity. My perplexity springs from what I see as a crisis of transmission. It is on this I wish to reflect.

When I entered the monastery in 2002, I was conscious of entering a flow of continuous life. I was no less conscious of entering a history of rupture. The story was told anecdotally daily. Most aspects of observance and liturgy invited comparison with former times, which for some, I gathered, represented a primitive stage in monastic evolution, when the law had not yet been tempered by grace; others spoke of it as a lost Eden barred by fiery swords. Whatever the emotional charge of ‘now’ and ‘then’, the gap was evident. The decree of unification had altered the community’s structure; the re-definition of silence alongside the abandonment of dormitories and scriptoria had affected the nature of fraternal relations; liturgical life had been comprehensively reimagined; evolving positions in theology had recast the very nature of Cistercian life. People had come and gone, not just in the novitiate and juniorate. From 1950 to today, our community has seen 60 solemn professions. In the same period, 30 brethren in solemn vows have left monastic life. Even the topography of the house is eloquent. Hardly a room functions now as it did fifty years ago. For a novice, the sea change was bewildering. Amid such upheaval, which were the lines of continuity that mattered? Much that was branded ‘tradition’ went no further back than to fraught community meetings of the 60s, when the brethren were often divided down the middle, with changes introduced *ad experimentum*, to placate the aggrieved.

At this point, let me be clear: I am not attempting to introduce some artificial (and tedious) dichotomy between pre- and post-conciliar Catholicism. Even less do I position myself on a spectrum from ‘conservative’ to ‘liberal’. Tottering as I am on the brink of stolid middle age, I am too old to be charged with the romantic nostalgia supposed to afflict today’s youth. What I see affecting us is a hub of issues that is cultural rather than theological. Ringing in my mind is an English monk’s journalistic account of monastic life in the 1960s. It speaks of the Spirit then making all things new, acting ‘like a cruise missile’. For being racy, the expression captures a mood felt by many. A cruise missile leaves great emptiness behind. The possibilities inherent in this void engendered vast creative efforts. These were coloured by their time, an exceptional time, in the hope of making an ancient tradition speak contemporary language. Lasting achievements were made relationally, spiritually, intellectually. But certain adjustments show their age. Many texts, tunes, interior designs and community manifestos that may have seemed ‘relevant’ then appear touchingly antiquated now, monuments to the ephemeral. If they are still with us, it is not least because our recruitment has, for a half-century, been sporadic at best: within our microcosm, sensibilities have remained fairly constant. Further, time-bound forms have perdured on account of the titanic effort that went into them. In my monastery, there was, by the time of colour

television's triumph, a pronounced creativity-fatigue. The brethren were dizzy with change, tired of talk about change, wounded by conflicts change had caused. They wanted things to stay as they were. When I entered, I encountered a palpable anxiety. The message was clear: 'Don't tamper with things, don't re-release the furies!'

I honour the good wrought by *aggiornamento*: the review of over-meticulous usages; the shedding of liturgical accretions; the strengthening of fraternal bonds; the fostering of sound conversation; the divulgation of our literary patrimony. I am moved by the intention to renew our life that it might be a sign to our times. Yet hopes for a new spring have, for many of us, been unfulfilled. We find ourselves in a state that is decidedly autumnal. There are complex reasons for this. But surely there are questions we must ask, given the scope of the reform in whose wake we sail. Which of its accomplishments are transient, which timeless? How does this graced but trying, by intervals euphoric and tormented, endeavour fit into a longer narrative of shared identity? What have we become? I know that, to some, such questions seem an outright provocation. But I do not ask them to provoke, much less to offend. I ask because I need an answer. When I consider our heritage, I feel frankly overwhelmed by a paradigm of interpretation I often cannot follow because it rests, ultimately, on an unsharable experience: on having been there at the time. The last generation who *was* there is gracefully fading away. How do we latter-born make *our* return *ad fontes* in order to take our charism into the future? This, to me, is a burningly practical concern. With it in mind, I offer some thoughts on what strikes me when I look at what has been handed on to me.

- A. First, I note a passage from idealism to pragmatism. Monasticism, like other institutions, defined itself in the mid-nineteenth century by rigorous first principles on the basis of which material, experiential phenomena were defined. A century's experience of absolutisms made this approach as unpalatable in the cloister as elsewhere. Reflecting on itself, a community such as mine came to ask rather: What meets our needs? What can we manage? What helps us? These were timely questions. Yet the more they are brought to the fore, the vaguer our sense of finality becomes. Caught up in where we are now, we may lose our sense of where we are going.
- B. This prompts a second observation, of a referential change from objective to subjective criteria. A confrère used to relay what his novice master told him in the late 1940s: 'Keep the Rule and up you go!' The saying occasioned mirth. It was meant to show up a primitive legalism consisting of rubrics and regulations. We were told that we, by contrast, enjoyed a charismatic freedom to listen to the Spirit. I share this Pentecostal expectation, yet a paradox befuddles me: when did Spirit and Rule come to stand in opposition? Such narrative discontinuity poses special problems in the lineage of Cîteaux, which has been described - to my mind brilliantly - as an aspiration to pursue 'the spirit that only the authentic letter can set free.'
- C. As a function of the two factors named, I am struck by a shift of emphasis from *praxis* to spirituality. It presents itself in banal ways. In our community, we are quite muddled, now, about ordinary ritual: what counts as right comportment in regular places and common exercises? How do we move *together*? No one is certain. For decades we have had no norms. There was an allergy to codes of conduct; a warning not to fix on externals and to focus instead on the spirit within. I observe that this shift can be corrosive of shared identity. I observe, too, that many monks, the young not least, find our mystical tradition and patrology difficult to access. They yearn to be given something to *do*. I do not think this springs from crypto-Pelagianism. I think it

evidences a desire for a whole life that engages both soul *and* body, a yearning to see oneness emerge from multiplicity.

- D. This evokes a tendency I would call centrifugal. If I may refer again to our community: we have had to work hard to recover basic elements of common life such as daily chapter, shared *lectio* and mental prayer, a culture of shared meals. This unifying work was conducted in the teeth of a scattering trend, evident even in the way our abbey had come to be organised: nothing much went on in the middle; life happened on the periphery. This caused vitality to drain from the *corpus monasterii*. For life to thrive, it seems essential to consolidate the centre.

The ultimate centre of our life is Christ, of course. A crucial objective has been to 'start afresh' from him. This is wonderful, as long as we do not construct our calling in too generic terms, losing sight of Christ's embodiment in forms that are peculiarly our own. Pains have been taken to inculturate our life, be the culture in question simply that of our own community. This, too, is good, as long as we beware of too subjective renderings. In the climate of today, may one risk forgetting that monastic life in each generation is received, not created? Our Fathers stressed the outward expression of inner values. They believed in the power of observance to foster identity and safeguard unity. I perceive that our life has become more formless than it was. I note that we no longer speak readily of observance as 'form'. What we do speak about a lot is the need for more formation. But how can we form people to a form that is elastic to the point of sometimes becoming diffuse? Abbot Cuthbert Butler once commented on the elasticity of Benedictine life. It is a 'very good term', he conceded, then added:

elastic, unless it is worn out, ever tends, as the pressure of [external] forces wanes, to return to its original condition, and when the forces cease to operate, it does re-assume its native form. It is in this property that elasticity lies, and that elastic differs from putty.

My sense is that ours is a time of such release of pressure. I consider the return to form a primary challenge - an exciting, joyful challenge! Fifty years ago, the Order was intensely aware of being caught up in renewal. Dom J-B Porion O. Cart. wrote of an encounter with an unnamed member of the OCSO in November 1967. He summed it up as follows: 'They believe that, through an unprecedented explosion of grace, the charism of the founders is now as widely available as the ability to drive a motorcar.' Our present self-confidence is probably more modest. The task, meanwhile, is no less great: to produce from our treasury things both new and old; to build bridges where connections have been lost; to rekindle our Fathers' faith in the Benedictine Rule's orientation and tools as a sure way to union with Christ; to affirm that this unifying process acquires uniquely lovely features from our patrimony, which is not only literary, but composed of chant, ritual, architecture, agriculture, and an art of forming a living communion in harmony and beauty, ardently contemplative, 'with no discord in our conduct, [...] by one charity, one Rule, and like usages'. Thus we shall be equipped for our mission in the Church. May our sights be set high, our longing be profound, our outlook be well thought-out and hospitable. Such would be my vision. Forgive me for not being able to account for it more briefly.

