

OPENING CONFERENCE GENERAL CHAPTER 2022

"My answer is: God speaks repeatedly, truly, but no one pays attention, in dreams, nightly visions when man is in deep sleep or slumbering in bed, then He wants to be heard." (Job 33.14-16)

Brothers and sisters,

One more time - and this is really the last time - I want to talk to you about dreams! Not so much my dreams but your own dreams! I invited you after my election in February to share your dreams about the Order in the regional meetings or other meetings of superiors¹. It was a small beginning to the synodal process in our Order. The reason why, I need not repeat. To my great surprise, you dreamed with great enthusiasm, each in his/her own way, and we discovered together during the meetings but, I personally, also in the rereading of all your dreams, that "God speaks repeatedly, ...in dreams, ... then He wants to be heard" (Job 33).

I promised you that during this opening conference I would collect your dreams to open some windows towards the future. By choosing just a few windows, I am short-changing the rich content of all your dreams. For every dream was worthwhile and, for me, opens a path to the future. For this conference I have searched for the big picture and hope above all to let you have your say. Anonymously, because that is what I promised. In the printed text you can see from which part of the world the dream comes. In this way I hope to reflect something of the colorfulness and versatility of the dreams.

God wants to be heard! For me, that is the great discovery of this exercise in dreams. We may so easily feel today that God is far away, but Pope Francis is right when he says that if we have the courage to dream: *"We see the reality, we discern, and we discover there a sign from God. We do not claim to have the answers but applying the Gospel's criteria and sensing the prompting of the Spirit, discernment allows us to hear the Lord's invitation and to follow it. Our life becomes, as a result, richer and more prophetic, allowing us to respond with the depth that only the Holy Spirit can give us."*²

The dream of St. Benedict

After my election, I took you along this path using a booklet by Pope Francis on dreams. Around the feast of St. Bernard, I gave you the dream of the young Bernard. Today, to conclude this triptych, I want to bring you the dream of St. Benedict. In the second book of the Dialogues, chapter 35, Pope Gregory writes:

"When it was time to go to rest, the venerable Father Benedict reposed himself in the top of a tower, at the foot whereof Servandus the Deacon was lodged, so that one pair of stairs went to them both: before the tower there was a certain large room in which both their disciples did lie.

The man of God, Benedict, being diligent in watching, rose early up before the time of matins (his monks being yet at rest) and came to the window of his chamber, where he offered up his prayers to almighty God. Standing there, all on a sudden in the dead of the night, as he looked forth, he saw a light, which banished away the darkness of the night, and glittered with such brightness, that the light which did shine in the midst of darkness was far clearer than the light of the day. Upon this sight a marvelous, strange thing followed, for, as himself did afterward report, the whole world, gathered as it were together under one beam of the sun,

¹ I received or listened to 138 dreams of superiors. At the moment we have 157 monasteries. 87 %

² Pope Francis, Let's dream! Part II: A time to choose.

was presented before his eyes, and while the venerable father stood attentively beholding the brightness of that glittering light, he saw the soul of Germanus, Bishop of Capua, in a fiery globe to be carried up by Angels into heaven.

Then, desirous to have some witness of this so notable a miracle, he called with a very loud voice Servandus the Deacon twice or thrice by his name, who, troubled at such an unusual crying out of the man of God, went up in all haste, and looking forth saw not anything else, but a little remnant of the light, but wondering at so great a miracle, the man of God told him all in order what he had seen, ...".³

We are with Saint Benedict in the tower of Monte Cassino. He has risen early, while the brothers a few floors below are still asleep. The day before, he had a spiritual conversation with the deacon Servandus. They apparently did this more often. There seems to be a kind of hierarchy in the imagery of this story: Saint Benedict at the top, the deacon in the middle, and the brothers (the community) below. Let us not be blinded by this so-called top-down model but rather see in this story the merging of the hierarchical and the charismatic gifts for the building up of the church. For us, the only important thing now is that the dream of St. Benedict takes place amid his community, and even thanks to the deacon Servandus, in the midst of the larger church community.

Why St. Benedict is in the tower remains a question. We know from history that the towers of monasteries in early Christian monastic history served as lookouts but also as places of refuge in times of danger. Is there danger lurking? Are there problems? Is it a sign of crisis? Is that why St. Benedict can't get to sleep? The others, on the other hand, don't seem to be bothered by it. They sleep like the ten virgins in the Gospel, waiting for Him to come.

The Bridegroom is coming. Not as the knock on the door but as a bright light before our eyes. In a single bright ray of light - reminiscent of the white light of the Transfiguration - St. Benedict sees "the whole world" in a flash. He sees things as they really are: created and loved by God. It is the discovery of the true identity of all that exists. Is this the 12th step of humility? A height to which St. Benedict has ascended by descending?

Historians teach us that in the towers of early Christian monasteries there were four windows. To each wind direction one. So, St. Benedict's dream evokes that passage from Isaiah: "Jerusalem, on your walls I have set watch posts; all day and all night, never should they be silent" (Isa. 62:6). St. Benedict here stands guard in the night, looking out for the coming of the Lord. A beautiful image for our vocation as monks and nuns. A Swiss Benedictine once made this poem:

**Monastic Prayer
at the Edge of the City**

Somebody has to be at home, Lord,
when you come.
Somebody has to be waiting for you
down by the river
before the city.
Somebody has to be looking out for you
day and night.
For who knows
when you will come?

³ Pope Gregory the Great, Dialogues II, 35.

Lord, someone has to
see you coming
through the trellis
of their house
through the trellis -
through the trellis of your words,
your works,
through the trellis of history,
through the trellis of the events
always now and today
in the world.

Somebody has to keep watch
down below by the bridge,
in order to announce your arrival, Lord,
since you come during the night
like a thief.

Keeping watch is our service.
Keeping watch.
For the world as well.
It is often so careless,
walks around outside
and at night it isn't at home.
Does it remember
that you're coming?
That you are its Lord
and will certainly come?

Somebody has to believe it,
to be at home at midnight,
so as to open the door for you
and to let you in,
wherever you come.
Lord, through the door of my cell
you come into the world
and through my heart
to the people.
What do you think we'd do otherwise?
We remain because we believe.
We are here
to believe and to remain - outside,
on the edge of the city.

And Lord, someone has to endure you,
to bear with you,
without running away.
To endure your absence
without doubting
your coming.
To endure your silence

and yet to sing.
To endure with you
your suffering, your death
and to live of this.
Someone always has to do this
together with everyone else
and for them.

And someone has to sing, Lord,
when you come!
This is our service:
To see you coming and to sing.
Because you are God.
Because you do the great works
that no one does but you.
And because you are glorious
and wonderful,
like no one.

Come, Lord!
Behind our walls
down below by the river
the city is waiting
for you.
Amen.⁴

After reading all your dreams, I felt like St. Benedict in the tower of Monte Cassino, searching and waiting for that which God's voice in its goodness has to tell us: the way to life! (RB Prol 19-20). Looking out over all the corners of the world, the Lord, I think, opened four windows for us. The four windows will help us to make our dreams come true.

I have tried to reread your dreams from the three words of the upcoming Synod of Bishops: *communio*, *participatio* and *missio*. I did add a fourth one: *formatio*. This last one I will explain later but for now it just shows that synodality belongs to the essence of the life of religious life and that this obedience to the Word of God and to one another not only founds communion, calls for participation and leads to mission but that it also requires a continuous conversion that need a solid ongoing formation. These dreams were a small beginning to the synodal process in our Order. Synodality, however, is not a one-time event but is a lifestyle.

One of you dreamed, *"without too many illusions,"* that at the upcoming part of the General Chapter *"the word "synodality" will not come up at every turn of phrase in the reports and interventions. One question seems important to me: in the concrete life of our communities, won't the so-called 'synodality' stifle what may remain of Benedictine obedience in our communities?"* Indeed, let us be careful that synodality does not become a buzzword, devoid of any substance. *"To speak of a synodal style, then, means becoming aware that the ecclesial renewal of which there is so much talk.... touches the depths of the Church's experience and is not limited to interventions amounting to no more than ecclesiastical make-up. ... It is, after all, an expression of the Church's need for a profound reform in our way of being and living as Church in the face of a real change of era for Christianity and for*

⁴ Sr. Silja Walter OSB (1919-2011), translation sr. Katherine E. Wolff NDS

the entire world."⁵ This profound reform cannot happen without the ongoing conversion that is based on our obedience to God and to one another.

Before we look through the windows of these four dreams, I want to emphasize that no tower can be built without a good foundation. On this foundation, fortunately, we all agree. None of us dreams about any other foundation! That in itself is worthy of a congratulation! A superior aptly expressed the foundation this way: *"I dream of a Christocentric Order, passionate about the absolute of Christ. An Order restless and unsettled by following Christ."* (Latin America)

On that foundation the tower of our Order is built and four windows open through which the light, in which we may see God's light, radiates. On that foundation are four dreams which I briefly summarize here and will elaborate on later:

1. We dream of an Order in which monks and nuns, of diverse cultures, share a common vision on the contemplative identity, "collaborate and give mutual help in many ways, having due regard to their healthy differences and the complementarity of their gifts" (Cst. 72). Unity in diversity is cherished there.
2. We dream of an Order in which all are able and willing to participate, which is flexible in its structure, with open, transparent communication at all levels and with great respect for the individual, baptismal vocation of the brothers and sisters, the local communities, and the regions, without losing sight of the whole.
3. We dream of an Order in which all its members and communities are people and places of a generous commitment to God, Church and world that gives justice to its "hidden mode of apostolic fruitfulness" (Cst 3.4). It expresses itself in a humble handling of all the gifts of God's creation. 'That God may be glorified in all things!' (1 Peter 4, 11)
4. We dream of an Order that knows how to enthusiastically form its members in 'the philosophy of Christ' (Ratio Institutionis) and 'the language of the Gospel' and equip them with the right means to achieve the final goal of their vocation.

The dream of communion

"The Cistercian way of life is cenobitic" (Cst. 3.1) Called together by the voice of God, we live this communion in a concrete form of living together, in which the search for unity with God and with everything that lives and breathes is central. Everyone in the Order is important! Every brother or sister is a bearer of the same seal received in baptism and confirmation and confirmed in monastic profession. By virtue of this gift, all of us, without exception, are co-responsible for communion with God and with one another. Looking through this window we hear dreams about the mutual relationships in the communities, in the regions, between men and women in our Order but also between old and young and between North and South, East, and West.

**I dream of a community where no one condemns the other but where all are listened to. I dream of a community where we value each other for who we are - God's children - rather than using each other for ourselves or for the survival of the structures. (Europe)*

**We dream that there will be more relationships between our monasteries so that the Order will be more like a big family. For some years now we have been experimenting with sending one of us in turn to the founding house and we would like to continue this experience, with other communities perhaps? and in the form of exchanges: one of us leaves for a year and a senior one comes to us for several months and helps us with the formation. (Africa)*

⁵ Mario Cardinal Grech, *Synodality as a style*. In: Sequela Christi, XLVII 2021/02, p. 72-73

**The question is how to pass this personal desire to the community, to the Order. I recognize that it is a challenge because we are people of diverse cultures and very different formation. But we have a common strength, our Cistercian identity or charism, which is not a museum stone, but a living reality. A reality that challenges us from many sides to name but a few: aging, decrease of vocations, closing of communities.*

The dream surpasses us, surprises us and, without falling into false illusions, we are called to create communities where simplicity, joyful fraternity, the joy of living prayer, the encounter with the Lord in his Word and the sacraments, make us feel and live in fullness the mercy of God, in the style of Mary, queen and mother of mercy. (Latin America).

**One Order: I was impressed from the start at how monks and nuns collaborated, and now, with a single chapter, our Order's way of operating is unique. It's something to be grateful for, to maintain, and to develop for ourselves and perhaps for the church. (North America)*

**my dream: "Evangelical Relationality." At the level of the AG's ministry to the Order there would be a Committee of Elders (senpectae RB 27) which would be appointed by the AG to advise him on more complicated pastoral issues that end up on his desk. This committee would not reside in Rome but meet regularly through a sophisticated computer communication room at the Generalate. They would be selected for their long ministry & creative response to many pastoral issues & could be made up of active or retired superiors. The main purpose of the Generalate would be to facilitate & offer resources for the pastoral commissions of the regions. In more difficult cases these Commissions could avail themselves of the Committee of Elders. The movement of consultation, authority, and responsibility would become less linear & more circular (Mutual Obedience RB 71) drawing on more members of the Order for the pastoral care of communities in special need. (North America)*

**I dream of more pastoral care for each other. We are reacting too much like autonomous houses. We cannot help or we are not willing to help each other. We do not ask for help. If there is a real problem, we find it difficult to help. (Asia)*

The dream of participatio

All of us have the right and the duty to participate in the life of our communities, the regions and the life of the Order with its various structures (CF. Cst. 16,1). A participation rooted in our Benedictine tradition in the vow of obedience. The structures have been given to us throughout the tradition not as museum pieces but to allow each time to be of service to the life of the people of God (cf. Evangelii gaudium, 95). We must therefore have the courage to really listen to one another in order to discern what the Spirit has to say to us. Only in this way can the courage to act from the Spirit arise.

Looking through this window we hear the dreams about the functioning of communities, regions and the General Chapter. Sometimes creative dreams about new ways that nevertheless try to remain faithful to the old and at the same time are entirely new.

**I think, at the Chapter level, that a more considered discussion of the topics would ensue, as each participant would have listened to the opinions of many others beforehand, to have listened to what the Spirit is saying to the churches," so to speak. (Rev 2:7) (Asia)*

**I dream that the General Chapter becomes a forum that is predominantly pastoral and theological. (Europe)*

**Can approving legislation be pushed down to regions rather than spending so much time at the General Chapter at it. Could a synod of representatives from the Regions approve things after regions have hashed them out. Can important decisions that affect houses of the region be dealt with at the local level? (Africa)*

**I wish our regional meetings and general chapters were a little less focused on legislative and practical issues, and more focused on sharing our experiences, our struggles, our hopes, vision, and dreams—all by way of trying to read the signs of the times. (Latin America)*

** I dream that it may be possible to re-envision the functioning of the General Chapter so that it may truly become a holy conduit for the Holy Spirit and a life-giving vehicle for revitalizing our Cistercian Order and allowing it to fulfill its God-given vocation and function within the church and, simultaneously, offer hope to our struggling and suffering world. (Latin America)*

**I dream of an Order that frames itself in such an image of the Church and that radically chooses for equality between monks and nuns and consistently goes that way and looks for new forms (matres immediae), denounces inequality (what will happen to the legislation of the monks if no exemption from Cor Orans is obtained, will they be in solidarity ?) and that this becomes a permanent point of attention at the General Chapter...*

I dream of regional meetings as sanctuaries to share together, to think, to dream about monastic life, in all honesty and vulnerability... With a lot of attention and time for this process.... (Europe)

The dream of the missio

The mission of our Cistercian life is described in the Constitutions as "a hidden apostolic fruitfulness. "It is the contemplative life itself that is our way of participation in the mission of Christ and his Church and of being part of the local church." (Cst. 31)

Looking through this window we hear dreams of a renewed meaning of our lives for the church and the world. Dreams that center on caring for the common home (laudato si) and all brothers and sisters, "fellow travelers sharing the same flesh" (Fratelli tutti, 8).

**I dream that abbeys become pioneers in the field of sustainability and ecological living and that bold choices are made in that field. (Europe)*

**At the ecological level, the rural environment in which we live offers us a framework conducive to this ecological conversion process, which is becoming urgent, and for which we must find very concrete ways to make it happen in our behaviors. Encouragement and practical suggestions would be welcome, now that the pandemic seems (?) behind us, which will allow us to review details in community practices and in the hotel business, where guests are also very motivated for this approach. It remains to be personally involved, and also no doubt with the diocesan service for integral ecology, in this openness to risk, to change, to disturbance, to novelty, which is to say, simply to more confidence in the work of the Holy Spirit in the "yes" of each day. (Europe)*

** The "Church going out" of which Pope Francis speaks to us, avoiding "self-referentiality". I think that, for us Cistercians, we can translate this in this way: first of all, to have our gaze, our attention, our thinking, turned towards God, towards the Paschal mystery of Christ and all that it implies (lectio, prayer, contemplation) and then towards the people, towards humanity (desire, intercession). Not to be self-referential either as a community. We tend to focus too much on our own community, to put too much time and energy into "looking in the mirror", and this is sometimes encouraged by certain structures, for example, the regular visitations every two years: (Latin America)*

Ecology, however, is more than care for creation. It is also our care for an entirely separate ecosystem that is our Cistercian life. Silence and solitude are an important feature of that ecosystem, and many feel the pressure that modern means of communication have on this ecosystem. They dream of becoming more aware and better at handling these means so that we protect and preserve the ecosystem of the common home that is our Cistercian life.

**I dream of ecodigital monastery; a monastery where there is a balance between openness and seclusion; an ecosystem of balanced silence, images and words; a monastic ambience monastery free from the bad influences of excessive sound, words and images. I dream of a sincere reflection in the Order on the influence of the Internet on our lives. That we are willing to face the problem of addiction. I dream of a contemplative life in this world but not of this world (Europe).*

The dream of formation.

Although formation is not a key word of the upcoming Synod of Bishops, I add this word here. Many dreams touched on this topic and also in the synthesis reports of the diocesan phase of the synodal process, which the bishops' conferences around the world sent to the synod's secretariat, it is striking that the desire for formation among the people of God is great. The transmission of faith between generations in a family or in a religious community is no longer evident. We lack insight, language, formation and even faith to pass on life. This also affects the passing on of the Cistercian charism.

The role of the community, the region and the Order in the process of formation is to help each brother and sister to assimilate the essential elements of the Cistercian way of life. (Cst. 45.3) We should be eager to offer generous mutual assistance in making this formation a reality for everybody. (Cf. St. 45.3)

Looking through this window we hear the dreams of a good equipping for all in the Order, not only the one in initial formation but for everyone, even superiors. A formation that is more than philosophy and theology but that also helps the communities to live on the material and economic level.

**That a good monastic formation takes place in the community or communities that promotes the value of tradition and dialogue with our present society. This may certainly happen in cooperation between communities, in the Order or with other religious or non-religious institutions. (Europe)*

** I remember a common formation program between a nun's and a monk's community. I dream that this can happen again. Sharing about our experiences – like the Experientia program. Two or more communities can send their sharing to each other by post or email. I desire a common program of formation for all the communities of the Order. I desire to deepen my knowledge of the Cistercian charism. (Asia)*

**We have access to the Order's history and patrimony like no former generation. A lot of the groundwork that makes this possible is the result of collaboration within the Cistercian family and with lay experts. The wealth of material available now for education/formation is stunning. A certain anti-intellectual attitude I encountered when I first joined the Order has diminished. Nonetheless, there is still a tendency see interest in this area as secondary to the necessities of daily life. (North America)*

**We speak often of a crisis of leadership in the Order. My dream is that we will continue to explore ways to develop the qualities of leadership through our formation programs, the qualities of self-*

awareness, co-responsibility, followership, good zeal, self-sacrifice and life-giving communication skills. The desert fathers seemed good at this.

My dream is that every member of the Order be enthusiastic and desirous for vibrant initial and on-going formation to strengthen our common vision in order to give life to our communities and the Church. (North America)

**In our Cistercian Order today we are experiencing two major forms of precariousness: one is the lack of vocation and aging in the west and the other is the lack of well-trained personnel in our Cistercian root in Africa where vocation to monastic life is currently booming. These two realities threaten the existence and fidelity of our Order; in order words, they favor the extinction and watering of our order respectively. The solution to this precariousness is formation of synergy between the west and Africa. ... I therefore acknowledge the importance of synergy for the survival and growth of our Order in the synodal process within each community, in inter-monastic communities and between the west and Africa. The west should be able to help in the formation of personnel in Africa and Africans should be able to supply vocation in the west despite the disappointments of some Africans who were sent for studies or to fill the gaps of vocations in the past. We should not on that account be discouraged. The formation of synergy ... presupposes what Luke Timothy Johnson termed "communication" as opposed to "closing up" when one symbolic world interacts with another in a pluralistic society, where each group's self-identity is respected. The monastic community that closes up will die. (Africa)*

**To help the communities of Africa. On-going and initial formation: To get local teachers from other Congregations who will stimulate our Christian life hence to integrate our monastic life. Can we get a school (Cistercian Fathers, Benedictines Fathers, and other studies)? This will allow the synodal process. (Africa)*

**That courses and conferences and other training resources in the Order be translated into different languages and offered to different regions (Latin America).*

**I dream of the creation of the same mentality favoring courses and exchange of professors and formandi in the different communities. I dream of the establishment of a monastic school -online-accessible to all monks and nuns, to strengthen our ongoing formation (Latin America).*

Conclusions

Again, this is just a small sample of all your dreams! It does not do justice to the rich content, but it does show me personally where God's voice is heard. At the end of this conference, allow me to draw some lines towards the future. After all, dreaming was necessary to hear the voice of God, to experience where God wants to lead us. After all, after seeing, discerning comes a time of action.

Your dreams challenge me in the time ahead to:

-to give priority to the **revitalization of the contemplative dimension** of our charism. Everything in our lives should be an expression of this dimension, including even a structure like the General Chapter. This contemplative dimension should have consequences in *communio*, *participatio*, *missio* and *formatio*. (I will consider the proposals regarding the functioning of the General Chapter, among others. A renewed discussion about the separation of the world, the private use of means of communication, the handling of money and property etc.)

-to give priority to the **promotion of communion** among us through open and transparent communication at all levels and using modern means of communication. (Proposals related to the (online) sharing of information, spiritual life, work, mutual aid, ecology etc.)

-to give priority to the **fostering of participation** of all members of the Order to find with creative fidelity to the tradition new ways that will make the governance structures in the Order more open and flexible, seeking better and equal representation from all parts of the world and between monks and nuns. (Proposals related to the Abbot General and his council, Mothers Immediate, statute for the accompaniment of fragile communities, functioning of the regional meetings, central commission, council of elders, etc.)

-to give priority to **a better understanding of our mission** in the Church and the world. (Proposals of sharing information on best practices; to promote the study on our Cistercian tradition and the meaning for today; searching the bound with the local and universal Church.)

-to give priority **to deepening of the integral formation** of the whole Order, to enkindle the flame of our first love, and to give more attention to the needs of individual regions. A closer cooperation between the Abbot General, his council and the General Secretary for Formation is of great importance in this respect (proposals for an (online) school of Cistercian life, offering online courses, specific formation for superiors, cellarer, novice masters, chaplains, more attention to formation regarding abuse, addictions etc.).

There in that tower, together with St. Benedict, enjoying that one bright ray of light in which all the dreams of the world converged, I did sigh: 'the harvest is great, but workers are few'. Yet I will not be discouraged by this and ask you all to work with me to realize these priorities. As I said, now is the time to act and to see how we can turn the priorities into concrete actions. I am counting on your help in this, in prayer and deed.

The dreaming among you as superiors was a small beginning of the synodal path in the Order. The process continues and it must become a lifestyle at all levels. Some of you have also taken up my request to dream in your own communities. I hope many will follow. Let your brothers and sisters dream! Dream about their own lives, the lives of their communities and the lives of the Order. Dare to dream to hear God's voice so that you can discern what matters and what you are asked to do.

What is even more important, however - and this is ultimately the purpose of the synodal process - are these words of St. Bernard: *"We have formed, dear brothers, a gathering or synod of bodies (synodum corporum), but it remains for us to form a greater synod: the union of souls (coniunctio animarum). Indeed, it is not praiseworthy to be united in body, if we are divided in spirit; it is useless to gather in a place if we are at odds in our souls. ... Where two or three are gathered, God is amid them (Mt. 18:20), if they are well gathered in the name of Jesus, that is, with the love of God and neighbor: with them it is good to dwell together (Ps. 132:1)"*.⁶

May we do this under the protection of Mary, Queen of Citeaux!

Assisi, 2 September 2022
Br. Bernardus Peeters
Abbot General

⁶ Bernardus of Clairvaux, Sententiae III, 108. (for this quotation I am grateful to Dom Yvon-Joseph of Val Notre Dame who brought it to my attention!)