

# Monastic Life in the Spirit of Communion

## 1. Introduction: A Monastic Vision

It has often been said that each community needs a common vision of monastic life in order to live and grow in unity. Some communities consider it important to articulate such a vision, others perhaps do not. Even so, consciously or unconsciously, each community does in fact have a vision of what life in the monastery is all about. We are Benedictine-Cistercian cenobites and the common life is at the basis of our vocation.

A common monastic vision is not an intellectual understanding or a rational program. Vision is more a matter of the heart than of the brain, or perhaps we should say that it is the fruit of new unity between head and heart brought about by faith, conversion, and transformation in the Spirit. It is a living vision in constant evolution, constantly integrating new experiences and new knowledge. The basis of our Cistercian monastic vision is already expressed in the Rule, in so many beautiful writings of our Fathers, in their commentators, and more recently in the succinct form of our Constitutions. However, if that vision is only on paper, it does not become a living reality. Our vision is like the atmosphere in which we live in, something we see from the inside

The Second Vatican Council and the entire process of renewal that it put into motion were centered on a rediscovery of the mystery of the Church, the sacrament of salvation. The Council invited us to see the monastic community as a local Church, a specific form of living that mystery. We thus discover our ecclesial vocation to *be the Church*, to live as the Body of Christ, a priestly people, as did the first Christians in Jerusalem. We are called to be a concrete witness of the Unity of the Body. Our conversion consists in living ever more concretely as members of one another in that Body. Our Constitutions clearly reflect this renewed understanding:

The monastery is an expression of the mystery of the Church, where nothing is preferred to the praise of the Father's glory. Every effort is made to ensure that the common life in its entirety conforms to the Gospel, which is the supreme law. In this way the community will not be lacking in any spiritual gift. The nuns and monks strive to remain in harmony with all the people of God and share their active desire for the unity of all Christians. By fidelity to their monastic way of life, which has its own hidden mode of apostolic fruitfulness, they perform a service for God's people and the whole human race. (Cst.3.4)

Jesus gave the Church to all believers as his parting gift to the world. But the Church lives in diaspora, gathering for worship, works of mercy, and mission. The Monastic Church has the privilege of living together as Church all day and all night as a sign and promise of the New Jerusalem. We eat, sleep, pray, work, and relax together at the same times and in the same places. We learn to live and move as one organism. We enjoy nature and art together, we hear the same books and conferences together, we think, discuss, evaluate, decide and act together. Our whole life can be woven into the conscious following of Christ together towards the Father's house. In this light, the monastery is best described as a little church within the Church, having a special vocation:

"The vocation of [the monastic community as] an *ecclesiola in Ecclesia*... is to urge unceasingly the whole body of Christ, which is the Church, to this growth, toward this final term. These "churches" are groups of Christians who are differentiated from the others by their particular endeavor toward this eschatological plenitude, toward which the whole Church must tend in order to be one and catholic in the fullness of love. They are

therefore "pilot" communities which must guide and lead the whole Christian community, the whole Church, toward the sole end, where she can be perfectly fulfilled: her ultimate encounter with Christ at the Parousia... Monasticism, faithful to its vocation, is therefore a vanguard community which should lead, or tend to lead, the whole body of the Church toward its final destiny, resolutely taking the only path that can bring it there."

The experience of 'being Church' is an experience of being loved unconditionally by a group of people who draw an unknown strength from their relationship together in the name of Jesus Christ. It is an experience of coming home, of finding one's place in the universe and in one's own skin. It is what we have always looked for without knowing it. It is the delight and pain of being accepted by those who can see through us and know us better than we know ourselves. It is the realization that we can be who we are because we are called by the experience itself to become who we are. We can accept ourselves and everything that has happened to us and everything we have done and not done.

Thus a Christian community is a group of people who seek to love one another as Jesus loves: incarnated unconditional love—*mercy*. But true mercy only exists when we truly confront the sin and the evil within us, calling it by name and helping each other to know the truth about ourselves. It is by sharing of that unconditional life-giving love that the Church announces Jesus Christ to herself and to the world. The announcement is an experience of life—something different—that provokes questions and invites participation. To those who seek to understand, the Church responds in the words of Jesus himself, "Come and see".

Just as Saint Thérèse of Lisieux found her vocation—"In the heart of my mother the holy Church, I shall be Love" - Cistercians are given the grace to become increasingly mindful that we are called "to be the Church in the heart of our mother the Church." Of course, prayer is the essential of our vocation, but how does that prayer become transformed into life in us as a *pilot community* of ecclesial living?

### ***The Search for our Cistercian Identity***

In China, the underground community asks me, "What exactly is the Cistercian identity? What specific things do we have to do to be Cistercians?" The Novice Directors of the USA ask me "What is the Cistercian identity?" The question comes up again and again in different forms and in different contexts. We try to face it in new ways and deepen our answer in an unending spiral that repeats what we know and yet always seems to be a new discovery. Despite enormous differences in culture, all our monasteries are sincerely asking the same question. That is creating a new unity: we are all together in the same search.

We have been asking ourselves "What is our Cistercian Identity?" for about forty years, the space of a generation, the length of time the people of Israel wandered about in the desert looking for their identity - or rather being formed in their identity as the People of God. Perhaps that search in the desert of uncertainty has been renewing our Cistercian identity of seeking God in a communal desert spirituality and will give birth to a new generation, born of that search. Perhaps the search itself is our identity, our process of becoming who we are as we seek how to search for God with our whole lives and hearts.

It brings us to a new discovery of our identity in the Church and as Church, to our identity as followers of Jesus, to our most profound identity as members of Christ, children of the Father. As I tell our Chinese sisters, our identity is not found by seeking what makes us

different from others in the Church, but by seeking to live more fully the Mystery of the One, Universal Church and understanding our place in it. We have one charism among many – all of them good and beautiful, all of them with the same salvation history, all responding to the same Revelation, all of them centered on Jesus, all of them playing their specific role in the Divine plan of redemption, all of them seeking to spread the Kingdom of Love to the ends of the earth and to the vast expanses of time until all is united in Christ's offering to the Father.

the document “**Starting Afresh from Christ**” invites us not only to go back to our founders/foundresses for renewal but to go back to Jesus in the Gospel for new life.

**We go back to Jesus through the charism of the founders** – the special and enormous grace given to them in their personal encounter with Jesus in view of their call to be fathers and mothers of a religious family. But what defines a Christian spirituality is not any distinction between one group and another. Over-specialization, like its opposite, syncretism - which is so open to everything that it has no identity at all - can both lead to sterility, because our attention is then more centered on ourselves than on the God we meet in Jesus. Our goal is not to be a Trappistine but to be united with the Father in Christ so that his will be done in our lives.

### ***So... what is our Cistercian identity?***

Our identity is us, you and me, all of us, the men and women who are part of the Cistercian Order. It doesn't exist apart from us. What is the identity of a family? It is not the name or the nose or the family business but rather the fact of being part of the family, of being part of a line of descent, of having been generated by those who were generated by others in the family tree. It is a common blood that runs in our veins that ties the members together, like it or not. **Identity is relationship.** It is a breath of the Spirit in which we recognize ourselves as belonging to the same family. We are part of the immense family tree of the Church, one small branch on the limb of monastic, religious life. Our Cistercian identity is a physical, spiritual, emotional, psychological and theological reality more than it is a clear idea. It is being part of a living incarnated charism which we receive from those who received it before us. We are part of the family of God in and through our Cistercian family.

There is a common thirst, a hunger, an unquenchable desire that cannot be satisfied with something less than everything. That dissatisfaction can easily be misdirected and become the cause of a lot of grumbling. It is a half-conscious need to be with Jesus all the time, day and night that is often frustrated and frustrating because the presence of Jesus eludes us.

In each of us there has been some kind of an encounter with the love of God revealed and made flesh in Jesus. We have been attracted and have asked: “Rabbi, where do you live?” and we have responded to his invitation, “Come and see.” Andrew and the other apostle went and stayed for a symbolic day. We, like them, decided to stay for the rest of our lives. The staying is not as romantic and satisfying as it seemed to be at first. Perhaps that *staying* is our identity: that determined, dogged, relentless will to stick it out. The conviction that if there's anything, anywhere, that has meaning, it is Jesus. To whom else can we go? If things don't seem to make sense where we are, they will make even less sense if we leave. It is a choice of the person of Jesus even if we don't understand him. Maybe it is our stubbornness that brings us to an ever deepening abandonment to Him – “he understands so it doesn't matter if I don't”. At solemn profession we put our trust in his

promise and beg him not to disappoint us. We put our trust in the community's willingness to pull us out of every hole we fall into. Our *staying* is a *staying together*.

Our identity is perseverance in faith in a life that is ordinary, obscure and laborious. It is a specific way of knowing and following Jesus. Our identity is Christ and our goal is to grow in his love and bring his compassion to the suffering world. Our aim is eternal life for ourselves and many others. We enter the monastery in order to become fully Christian, to enter into the life of the Trinity, to build up the Church, the Body of Christ in unity and communion, and to incarnate Christ's worship of the Father. It is a gift and a mission in the Church. We learn to live it in and through the universal Church. We can lose sight of it, we can forget it, we can betray it but the objective identity remains.

## 2. School of Love – Communion

When I read *Fraternal Life in Community* (1995), I felt certain that it must have been written by a Cistercian. Our charism – the community as a *Schola Caritatis* - was being proposed to all Congregations and Orders. I felt a profound wonder that the special charism of Cistercian life is truly at the heart of the Mystery of the entire Church.

“Whereas western society applauds the independent person, the one who can attain self-actualisation alone, the self-assured individualist, the Gospel requires persons who, like the grain of wheat, know how to die to themselves so that fraternal life may be born. Thus community becomes *Schola Amoris*, a School of Love, a school in which all learn to love God, to love the brothers and sisters with whom they live, and to love humanity, which is in great need of God's mercy and of fraternal solidarity.”<sup>1</sup>

The Magisterium of the Church (*At the Beginning of the New Millennium, and Starting Afresh from Christ*), has repeated again and again the call to the spirituality of communion. The ecclesiology of Vatican II is the spirituality of our Cistercian Fathers. That was the exciting discovery made at Vitorchiano in the 1960's and 1970's. We have a rich heritage to plumb, to receive and to share with all religious and with the entire Church. Being Cistercian is simply the way we become Christian and participate in the Church.

“Religious community is a visible manifestation of the communion which is the foundation of the Church and, at the same time, a prophecy of that unity towards which she tends as her final goal. As ‘experts in communion’, religious are, therefore, called to be an ecclesial community in the Church and in the world, witnesses and architects of the plan for unity which is the crowning point of human history in God's design.”<sup>2</sup>

If all religious are called to be “experts in communion”, we Cistercians, with a spirituality of communion dating from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, should be experts who can enable others to be experts. We ourselves are vowed to the hidden life but our communities are very visible and we are called to be microcosms of the Church, manifestations of that communion of life to which all are called to find fulfillment in eternal life. We are cities placed on the mountain top – or in a spacious valley. Our mission is to give witness to the reality of the Church as the sacrament of unity, freedom, happiness, peace and personal fulfillment. People who come to visit our monasteries in the vague search for that peace want to discover not only prayer and spiritual direction but a visible reality of human community in

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<sup>1</sup> Fraternal Life in Community, 26

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 10

God. If we are living as a school of love, we give witness to the Christian miracle that it really is possible for people to live together in stable, faithful relationships.

The “theology of communion” of Vatican II underscored more and more the necessity that human relations be formed by the love, the charity of Christ, in mutual understanding and respect, with a conscious and generous reciprocity. The Synod on the Consecrated Life re-proposed such fraternal reciprocity as the condition of vocational authenticity: there is no authentic religious life without authentic fraternal life. Some authors call the religious life: “the sacrament of friendship”. In a world that big economic interests would like to transform into a solitary and competitive multitude, religious life appears as a visible sign of communion; as a sacrament of friendship; as the space which is vitally needed by the brethren in order to exist and grow in their response to God, and for which they feel profound longing if they experience its absence: it is the school of true charity. The orientation that comes to us from the Church is very clear: to educate to love, to faithful reciprocity, to generous integration, to trust that affirms the other, to friendship, is nothing else than the good zeal of the Rule of Saint Benedict (RB 72:1); it is nothing other than to serve in gratuity of heart in order to fulfill the commandment of the Lord: the perennial nostalgia of the early Church, where all were of “one heart and one soul” (Acts 5:32).

### ***In the Spirit of the Son***

What is this communion we seek to live? Sometimes there is confusion about what it means and how to go about building it up. It is not a question of seeking more relationships by talking more, having recreations together, lightening the observances of our Cistercian life, having more free time for leisure, being more tolerant. If we simply seek to create an atmosphere of freer and easier relationships, we can water down our charism until it loses its consistency.

Ecclesial Communion is the life of the Son of God in us – a theological reality, the essence of salvation, the life of the Trinity incarnated in the Church, the image of God in us. The basis is the gift of the Spirit that makes us sons/daughters in the Son.

“Think of the love that the Father has lavished on us by letting us be called God’s children; and that is what we are.” (1John 3:1) This is the first and greatest gift of God from which all the others derive: his Love, the grace of all graces.

Human love is aroused by the sight of something beautiful in the person loved. A person is loved for her beauty, her intelligence, her wisdom, her good works, care and concern for others, etc. But that is not the case with divine love: God doesn’t love us because of some perfection in us. It is the other way round. He doesn’t love us for what we are or do, for this quality or that one. The love of God is completely gratuitous – not because we are good. This gratuitous love has amazing and wonderful effects in us: it creates goodness in us. His love makes us good. And the good that God creates in us is that we are not only called God’s children but we really are!

The Father has loved us with the same love with which he loves his only Son: “He has determined that we should become his adoptive sons through Jesus Christ.” (Eph 1:5) There is nothing greater than to be children of God. Christian holiness is not the fruit of human effort that brings us to moral perfection. Holiness is grace, a gift given to us by the Father: the gift of being *called* children of God and of *really being* his children. Holiness is our divine childhood – our filial relationship with God.

This gift is addressed to our freedom and becomes a task.

St John continues: "whoever has this hope, must purify himself". (1John 3:3)

What hope? The hope that when "what we are to be in the future... is revealed, We will be like him because we will see him as he is". (1John 3:2)

We are called to eternal communion of life in God. This call and destiny is engraved in our being and so we are called to correspond fully to our goal. Divine sonship and 'daughtership' that constitutes our sanctity is both a gift and a task. The holiness given to us must be guarded and perfected in a progressive journey of conformation to Christ. "You are God's chosen, his saints; he loves you and you should be clothed in sincere compassion, in kindness and humility, gentleness and patience." (Col 3:12)

But because we sin every day, we are in need of continual purification. The saints give witness that in the measure that we let ourselves be illuminated and generated to new life with the help of their example, we discover ever more deeply the Love with which God loves us.

St John speaks not of 'the power to be'  
but rather of 'the power to *become*' children of God (Jn 1:12).  
It is the only power that God gives us:  
the power to progressively become children in the Son,  
because the Son has given us his Spirit,  
that is, his own relationship with the Father.

The fullness of the Christian life is to live as children of the Father in the relationship of Jesus with the Father. We know the qualities of this relationship especially through *Lectio* that seeks to understand, to know, to enter into Jesus' way of thinking and feeling and facing reality. Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus describes how he receives life moment by moment from the Father: "The Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise" (Jn 5:19). "For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all that he himself is doing" (Jn 5:20). "My teaching is not mine, but his who sent me" (Jn 14:24). "I do nothing on my own authority but speak thus as the Father taught me" (Jn 8:28). "He who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him" (Jn 8:29). "Only the Son knows the Father and from him receives all things and in him sees and comprehends all things."

To live in this same spirit of being sons and daughters means to live in conscious dependence on the Father. It means to receive gratuitously from his fullness whatever he pleases to give us. Our food and growth is to live in that unity of hearts and wills in which all is received and all is given. Jesus' food was the Father's will. He is the incarnation of the Father's will. He was able to give himself to us as food, so that we can live by the Father's will: "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn 5:26). Jesus does not take credit for anything. He does nothing in his own name. This perfect humility makes him a transparent window that reveals the Father. He receives with gratitude, praises the Father, and pours himself out in pure love in his mission of announcing the gospel and giving his life for the redemption of all the scattered children of the Father.

### **3. Sons and Daughters in the Son - Origin and Destiny**

To be become sons and daughters in the Son  
is to become adults in the faith,  
so as to come to the fullness of filial relationship.  
Filial relationship has nothing to do with childish attitudes - egoism, seeking attention –  
although in the process of being reborn some of those attitudes which have been buried  
within us since our infancy will appear sometimes,  
or an infantile search for protection and the fulfillment of all one's demands.  
No: to be children is a fact of faith, a radical following of Christ  
gazing constantly towards the Father to receive life from him.  
This is the fundamental reality of Christian identity.  
We are his children. We receive our life from him and from others.

The only reason the Son of God became man  
was to prove to us that the Father loves us.  
He loves us from all eternity.  
He loved us before Jesus died on the cross,  
not because Jesus died on the cross.  
It is the other way round: Jesus died on the cross because the Father loved us.  
It is very important to meditate on this.  
We are loved from all eternity.  
Jesus died to save us from the wrong direction  
in which we were heading because of sin  
when we didn't even know that was wrong – autonomy seemed the natural choice.  
God wanted to do more than restore our humanity:  
he wanted to give us divine sonship in the Son.

Man has lost sight of the dimension of mystery.  
He seeks to define the meaning of human life  
only with scientific, psychological, biological or sociological categories  
because he has forgotten where he comes from.

**This is our fundamental sin: forgetting that we have been desired,  
that we exist because we are desired, called into life by God.**

**Sin: we think we have made ourselves.**

**There is a choice of autonomy –**

**that we don't realize is a choice because it seems like reality.**

SO we are afraid and anxious and feel the need to feel strong and capable  
and to prove that we are worth something.

We feel that we have to win God's love by being good and perfect. We want to be loved for  
what we have achieved – morally and spiritually – because we are worthy of being loved.  
But we can't. So we feel frustrated, inferiority complex, even despair.

The root of our rebellion remains: we don't want to be loved in our sin and weakness,  
we don't want mercy, we want to love Allah as equals – not as His children.

We feel that mercy and dependence humiliate us.

It is easier to behave like mercenaries, to act out of self-interest,  
to want to buy and earn the approval and love of God  
rather than to live as children in the supreme freedom of dependence.

It is precisely because we forget our origin.

that we do not know how to receive the gift of our own being

that the Father continually lavishes on us in the Son,

so we lose our consistency as persons: free subjects created to give ourselves in mutual  
love in the image of Divine Communion.

We want to be able to do that - to love – without first receiving love.  
Original Sin : want to be like God by our own power.

The loss of memory of one's origin signifies loss of identity.  
Man has forgotten the dimension of sonship, so he does not know who he is anymore; nor where he comes from, nor towards whom he is going.  
He loses the features of his destiny and of his ontological truth.  
Jesus knew where he came from and where he was going and he wants us to know too.  
Faith is precisely the consciousness that the meaning of every person goes beyond her temporal existence, and goes continually towards her true birth, towards her eternal sonship.

We can only live this reality if we discover within ourselves the voice of the Spirit that makes us repeat: **“Yes, Father, I believe you have desired me from all eternity”**.  
This is our answer to the voice of the Father “You are my beloved child” that Jesus heard and that He wants us to hear.  
Jesus shows us the way in order to hear that voice and respond fully: “yes, Father”.  
Faith is repeating that conviction constantly, especially in moments when we don't feel anything or only confusion, emotions, rebellions, disappointment with ourselves.  
In that conviction we find our true identity as the Father's Beloved Child.  
We find our identity as 'the beloved disciple' of Jesus.

Many people do not have an awareness that they were born and receive life  
Relations of children with their parents become more and more distant, impersonal, lacking in love and affection. Children demand autonomy at a very young age. They become self-sufficient with their hand phones and computers. They don't need parents or teachers. They don't realize that they are dependent on others, receive life from others. Often they don't feel wanted. They don't have the assurance that they exist because their parents wanted them. This creates diffidence, inability to trust people, insecurity and the desperate need to be affirmed, acknowledged. It also leads to desperation and despair, drugs, nihilism, hedonism and suicide.

In the past perhaps many unwanted children were born but they were born and their parents accepted them and perhaps learned to love them. their parents did not tell them. Now unwanted children are killed before they are born. Children realize that parents don't want many children, they are even told that they were a mistake, they were not 'planned'.  
Our most basic need is to be sure that we are wanted – that we came into existence and exist now because we are wanted .  
Without that there is no reason to live.  
There is no strength to face difficulties, challenges or pain.  
What for? It doesn't make any sense.  
Maybe many people were not wanted by their parents but we are all wanted by God.  
Our faith is the conviction that each of us has been desired, loved and chosen, called into life as a unique person by a free choice of God.

The theological foundation of filial relationship is based:  
- on the *conscience of one's origin*, the sense of having been willed from all eternity;  
- on the humility of *receiving oneself from an Other*, that is, from God but also from whoever God places in our path as an authoritative source of life and of growth: the Church, the community, authority;  
- on the experience that *dependence* on God in and through the community

is our real *freedom*: freedom that wants to be born into new life and realizes that a process of growth is needed; freedom that originates from the certainty of our divine origin and adheres to our destiny, and clings to our relationship with an Other to receive our life and being – the life-line of obedience.

to an Other from whom one receives oneself;  
- on the *awareness* that our identity is determined only in our filial relationship with God. We are His children and therefore brothers and sisters.

Our Order has received the special gift of the canonization of a member of the Order, Saint Rafael. The Church canonizes certain people to draw our attention to the particular way they lived the common path of sanctification because there is a special message there for us, a Word of God incarnated in their lives that becomes light and revelation for us in our own path. So the canonization of a Cistercian monk is not just an honor but a special Word for us from God in our times, in our present situation. It is up to us to open our eyes and hearts to discover that message. Christian holiness is not the fruit of human effort that brings us to moral perfection. Holiness is grace, a gift given to us by the Father: the gift of being called children of God and of really being his children. Holiness is our divine childhood – our filial relationship with God.

St Rafael writes repeatedly: “How much God loves me!” “If you only knew how much he loves me!” He’s not ashamed to say so, not proud or boasting when he says it, because he knows that love is gift, completely gratuitous, not because of any merit of his. Rafael lives in the joy of being loved by God.... amidst temptations and aridity and the difficulty of accepting his own misery and that of others. But he is convinced of his identity as a beloved child of God.

**4 Filial relationship – Obedience \**

**5 The Path and the Power > Becoming Sons/Daughters in Ecclesial relations**

**6 The Ecclesial reality /**

#### **4. Filial Relationship – Obedience**

Redemption: We are saved from our autonomy by the life and death of Jesus who gives us his Spirit. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* confirms this: “The fruit of Baptism, or baptismal grace, is a rich reality that includes forgiveness of original sin and all personal sins, *birth into the new life by which* man becomes an adoptive *son* of the Father, a member of Christ and a temple of the Holy Spirit. By this very fact the person baptized is incorporated into the Church, the Body of Christ, and made a sharer in the priesthood of Christ.” (CCC 1279)

The path that leads to the Father, the path of filial relationship, is obedience, that incorporates the whole person into the will of God, to become in all things similar to the Son who “learned obedience through what he suffered” (Heb 5:8). If through baptismal grace we are already “children in the Son”, through obedience we grow into the full likeness and conformity to Christ. Obedience is relationship between the Son and the Father and it is in this Trinitarian relationship that we are born into divine life. To enter into the heart of this filial relationship, we are asked to consent to the life that is given to us;

to acknowledge the gift received, to breathe in its eternal relationship and destiny.

**Education in filial relationship** Obedience is not an effort or an achievement that we give to God in hopes of a reward but rather the path that opens us up to the gift of life from the Father. We learn to be daughters through obedience, not just outward compliance or seeking moralistic perfection, not a passive attitude that does what is asked to avoid problems and conflict, not just wanting to please – to buy attention and approval – but rather through a free, realistic and generous choice that faces the pain of our becoming and the responsibility of our freedom. The testimony of the sacrificial love of Christ, “obedient unto death, and unto death on the Cross” (Phil 2:8), is the great paschal proclamation of the supreme filial obedience of Christ, the source of every freedom, that overcomes our fear and human dismay in the face of pain and death.

The modern world worships the idols of health and comfort: evasion from pain. Because there is no questioning about the mystery of life and death, there is only rebellion in the face of suffering, so everyone seeks to anaesthetize existence not only with painkillers, but above all with avoiding reality by losing oneself in materialism, hedonism and pseudo-mysticism of every kind, seeking compensation in sublimation and superficial emotional excitement. Disobedience and evasion of pain go together, and are precisely the evident symptoms of a humanity that thinks freedom is freedom from dependence on God. But the **true victory over death remains obedience**, because obedience is the bursting forth of the resurrection of Christ in us; it is the light of dawn over the empty tomb of the One who was obedient unto death on the cross and rose from the tomb into eternal life. To obey is therefore to plunge our burden of sin with all our negativity, into the death of Christ, so as to re-emerge from the night of disobedience into the obedient splendor of the resurrection. But sometimes we don't want to come out of the tomb! We sit in the empty darkness, half dead but not accepting the death that gives life. Our 'No' has to be surrendered to the 'Yes' of Jesus – death to self to enter divine life.

Obedience is therefore proposed not only as a path of liberation, but as participation in the resurrection and finally as transfiguration, that is, transformation into that space of listening where the voice of the Father resounds: “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased” (Mt 17:5). The liberation from self-will makes the *new man* emerge, clothed in the resurrection, robed in the victory over death, that is, in the victory over his ontological rebellion, over his desire for self-sufficiency and over the lack of awareness of his origin and of his destiny. Christ redeems this “unconsciousness” of ours on the cross. In his blood poured out for us,

He gives us the new form of redeemed man, of the beloved son.  
The power of transfiguration enters into our limitations as creatures  
So that we too hear the Father's voice:  
'This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased'.

Learning obedience is not based on repressive, disciplinary or normative elements  
but on a awareness of one's identity as daughters in the transfigured and risen Son.  
It is a question of teaching our younger members to become "daughters"  
to learn to face reality as persons who know  
**that they are loved and willed by the Father,**  
**so they yearn to look towards Him constantly,**  
**and to look with complete trust**  
**to whoever authoritatively guides them in His name,**  
**to receive the vital indications that help them to find and walk in their real truth**  
**- in the filial relationship that saves and liberates us**  
**from our false autonomies.**

Filial obedience is a gaze fixed on the Father  
in order to receive indications of how to live,  
which gives the strength to want to exist,  
the meaning of today,  
the significance of tomorrow.

And since we cannot see the Father except in the Son and in the Church,  
**it means a loving obedience to those in the Body of Christ**  
**who represent Him for us,**  
**especially the mother of the community,**  
with the desire to receive everything from the abbot – (RB)  
and allow oneself to be permeated with the relationship of the Son to the Father.

We have to bow our head to God in the human reality of his Church.  
We are challenged to live obedience maturely and responsibly.  
We need to struggle very consciously with our own will and inclinations,  
our own ideas and judgments in order to truly integrate what others say  
and choose to accept what the superior or the community decides  
as though it were my own decision, my own discernment of the will of the Father.  
The sacrifice of our desires and our judgments is always a bloody sacrifice.  
It seems that we are betraying our very selves, our identity, our conscience, our freedom,  
our dignity, our lives.  
Jesus knew something of all that at Gethsemane.

The drama of Jesus' agony is the conflict between his human will not to die  
and his divine will that offers itself to death, for our redemption from the slavery of our 'No'.  
Adam -- and Adam is us -- thought that the "no" to God was the height of liberty;  
that he could only be free by saying "no" to anything that did not come from his own  
thoughts and desires.

This tendency was also present in Christ's human nature, but he overcame it,  
because Jesus saw that "no" is not the greatest liberty.  
The greatest liberty is to say "yes," to conform with the will of God.  
Only in saying "yes" does man really become himself.

Only in the great opening of the "yes,"  
in the unification of his will with the divine will,  
does man become open, he becomes "divine."  
And this is the drama of Gethsemane: not my will but yours.  
Transferring one's will to the divine will, that is how a true man is born.  
That is how we are redeemed. (St Maximus the Confessor)

So obedience is not childish but rather the mature use of human freedom  
in union with the freedom of Christ. That is precisely the liberation we seek.

That freedom becomes happiness, the ability to know and say  
that the only reason for doing anything is because the Father wants it,  
the Father asked me to do it. I want to do it because I love him.  
Whatever I'm doing, I can ask myself 'why?' and the answer is always there:  
because the Father asks this of me.  
Without that certainty, our existence is shattered into separate, senseless moments,  
with nothing connecting them – dependent on events, emotions, feelings.  
We lose the reason for living,  
we are caught in the anguish of nothingness  
we become slaves once again of the frustrating effort to be self-sufficient  
– because of our pride.  
Man attempts to avoid pain,  
but the absence of a Father in whom to confide  
plunges him into the terror of death.

In the mystery of redemption, pain is faced as an inevitable part of birth to sonship.  
Hans Urs von Balthazar affirms that authentic love always implies a death:  
Love is deadly because whoever is touched by love dies to himself, to his past,  
to his claim on life  
and lives only for the one he loves.  
To die to oneself implies pain:  
we cannot deceive ourselves and we must not deceive anyone else:  
it is from the Cross that we receive the promise  
which frees us from the sin of human pride:  
"Today you will be with me in paradise" (Lk 23:43).

We should never tire of repeating and affirming that the fundamental basis  
of monastic life is  
**obedience that expresses this filial relationship in Christ,  
that springs from responsible freedom,  
which renounces proud autonomy, but is capacity for listening and relationship,  
which accepts pain as the passageway to birth and access to the transfiguration.**

## 5. The Path and the Power

Our Founding Fathers wanted to live the Rule in all its completeness. That doesn't mean  
only in strict poverty and a hard life but they wanted to live the real spirit of the Rule. If we  
pay attention, that means living the Rule as a means of living our filial relationship with the  
Father – the essence of all Christian life. The Rule begins with "Listen my child, come back

from the region of forgetfulness, the foreign land of disobedience, come back to the Father who loves you....”

The whole Rule consists of indications about how to live as sons/daughters of The Father in obedience to and dependence on him through the abbot/abbess and the brothers/sisters, how to live as sisters because daughters of the same Father who seek together the only important thing – how to do his will and praise him together for his love.

*About them the Lord has said: as soon as their ears heard, they obeyed me.*

*Whoever hears you, hears Me.*

*They immediately leave whatever they are doing and put aside their own will.*

*They carry out the order as if it came from God himself.*

*They imitate the Lord who said: I come not to do my own will but the will of He who sent me.*

The specific charism of monastic life is:

it is possible to know the Father’s will through the mystery of the continual incarnation of Jesus Christ in his Church and through the abbot/abbess who represents Christ and makes him present.

Without that faith, the Rule is just a collection of rules that demands a life of exterior moral perfection.

If interpreted in that way is not a path of life but rather just a rather frightening disciplinary code.

The Fathers were not just seeking strict observances.

The founders of Cîteaux found Sonship in the Rule and wanted to live it.

Try reading the Rule in the light of all we have said about filial relationship and you will find a new light of understanding.

The entire life of the monk in all its aspects can be lived as sonship – and the struggle that is necessary to live that.

Our Constitutions point out to us:

In thus renouncing his own will, the monk follows the example of Christ who was obedient until death,

and commits himself to the school of the Lord’s service. (OCSO, CST 11)

The Synod on the Consecrated Life confirmed:

the obedience with which we conform ourselves to the divine will is the greatest sign of love and holiness, that is, of the perfection of charity.<sup>3</sup>

The renunciation of self-will to entrust oneself to the school of the Lord’s service, gives rise to a dynamic movement of freedom:

we receive ourselves in order to give ourselves,

renounce ourselves in order to abandon ourselves.

And this demands asceticism, which means an experience of how difficult it is to transcend our self-centered instinctiveness.

It means an experience of pain as an integral part of education in filial relationship.

### ***The asceticism of filial relationship***

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<sup>3</sup> *Vita consecrata*: particularly paragraphs 21, 22, 91.

Our Fathers also took seriously the words of Jesus in the gospel we read on their feastday about the difficulty for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God.

If it is so difficult, let us free ourselves of all riches so that we can find true wealth.

Besides we are promised that if we leave everything behind, we will receive it all back – and that is our experience in the monastery

– house, fields, brothers and sisters, children – in abundance.

But first we have to let go of everything

and continually let go of the illusion of private property.

To begin the journey of becoming daughters in the Son,  
we need **a heart that is poor.**

because only a poor heart knows how to receive and to preserve the gift of life as filial relationship with the Father,

and to travel the path of humiliation and of self-emptying as a path of liberation from the wealth that prevents us from entering through the eye of a needle.

A poor heart knows its need and has the humility to ask for help.

It may take some time before our rich hearts experience their true poverty...

usually through the experience of sin and mistakes  
either before or after we enter the monastery.

In seeking to live our filial relationship with God in Jesus,  
we learn how to use the “*power*” we have been given  
and find it is the source of our human dignity and authenticity.

It is:

- the power to *be emptied* in order to make room for God;
- the power to *serve*, for service is the characteristic of the Son;
- the power that *frees us from our own inclinations and fantasies*:  
and enables us to choose only the will of the Father and give first place to others;
- the power that *purifies* because it is the power to accept the pain of humiliation,  
the power to *accept the necessary pains of birth*
- the power to always be *willing to learn*;
- the power that *sanctifies*, because it is participation in the life of the Son,  
in the sanctity of God; sanctity is the heritage of the children of God;
- the power that is rooted in *obedience, grows through dependence,*  
and is strengthened by *humiliation*

For, without obedience, the Word will never become flesh in our flesh.

There are some conditions that we must fulfill in order to make use of this power:

*1. The renunciation of self-sufficiency:* This means accepting our need of others  
and facing the difficulties of life by entrusting ourselves to God  
rather than by counting on our own abilities.

He knows what we need and knows what He asks of us,

Obedience is never impossible; in fact, what sometimes appears to be impossible  
is really only an opportunity to experience the work of God in us beyond all our imagining  
because nothing is impossible for God.

A chance to open our heart and mind to the infinite possibilities of God.

A chance to believe in the power of the resurrection without limiting ourselves

according to our own calculations. Our obedience allows God to work in us. Renunciation of self-sufficiency frees us from our limitations and opens us up to limitless possibilities.

This is incredibly difficult to do for young people of our times - to depend on someone else seems like self-destruction, loss of self-confidence, abasement beyond all imagination.

They can understand with their heads but in the concrete:

“I don’t want to be under anyone”.

This has to be faced time and again in every concrete situation or the risk of a false spirituality that just covers up autonomy will build up pressures, split them more deeply and cause repeated crises of rebellion. They are rebelling against their incapacity to be self-sufficient without realizing it and then think they are unsuited for our life.

## *2. The choice of meekness:*

Obedience is the choice of meekness in the face of whatever is asked of us without delay, without complaints and protests, without rationalizations and arguments, without refusals or suspicions or feeling the victim of injustice.

But it doesn’t mean simply obeying because you want to be seen as good, because you want to please and be rewarded, because you want to be safe and not be troubled.

It’s too bad that many people interpret obedience in the wrong way for a long time – either by obeying to please in a very superficial manner or by refusing to obey because they don’t want to be childish.

Neither way do they discover true obedience as our divine relationship to the Father. The choice of meekness is a serious decision and a struggle.

A meek heart becomes stronger than the proud brain that likes to protest and to prove one’s dignity by trying to appear autonomous.

Only a meek heart becomes capable of thinking critically in a positive way so as to be able to make constructive suggestions for change, for the building up of the community.

“Yes, I will try” becomes our answer – not to hide unwillingness with politeness but to express openness to the divine energy of the resurrection.

## *3. Openness of heart: to the abbess, to the community.*

A closed heart is an arrogant heart that acts in a spirit of contradiction, refuses dialogue, never questions itself not allow her behavior to be questioned, is not open to the Word that touches deeply, changes and converts, and prefers the heavy burden of rebellion rather than the light yoke of obedience.

Openness of heart means giving up what we feel is most our own; it means confessing the sin of our hidden ambition ‘to be’ by our own power (to be God), and opening ourselves to the mercy of God who saves us.

This comes from a false idea of God – as if God was a powerful, autonomous God and so we want to be like him.

*4. A positive attitude of humility – the reality of our filial dependence:*

overcomes the “no” of our fundamental rebellion and all that is negative in us:  
our defenses, irony, cynicism, or rational justifications,  
our tendency to judge and despise others  
– of saying ‘NO!’ to whatever we don’t like or want  
– “No” to objective reality because closed up in our selfish pride -  
so that we can cling to the truth and remain in reality – for God is in the reality of today.

We can begin to face miscommunications, misunderstandings,  
and difficulties in collaboration with an awareness of our limitations  
instead of blaming others.

We can begin to say: “Sorry, maybe I didn’t express myself clearly....  
Sorry, maybe I didn’t hear you, or maybe I misunderstood what you said, or forgot.”  
We can begin to see the failings of others with awareness  
that we too have faults and limitations.

Humility is the royal path,  
to the deepest ground of our being where we are one with Spirit  
– we get there by discovering and accepting our own poverty.

*5. Reconciliation and forgiveness: the essence of interpersonal relationship.*

A child of God acknowledges her neighbor as another child of God,  
and does not measure herself with others in a competitive way,  
but seeks to see the other with forgiveness, understanding and compassion,  
trusting in the good will of every person.

Always ready to take the risk of seeking reconciliation,  
of being the first to say I’m sorry.

If another person is in trouble, angry, closed – she needs to be loved more not less.

*6. Readiness, quickness and joy are the signs of the vitality of Benedictine obedience,*

which involves the whole life of the monk in a dynamic movement  
that gradually eliminates hesitation, sweeps away fear and allows love to emerge.

Sonship defeats that great enemy of love which is spiritual inertia or *acedia*,

Laziness is a result of our lack of faith,

from our incapacity to believe in the wonder of the eternal vocation  
which has been given to us.

Where love is lacking, there is hesitation, rationalization, calculation,  
comparison, refusal.

To begin to obey is to begin to love

and “to run in the way of his commandments” (*RB, Pro 49*).

This is the path of asceticism of sonship or filial relationship,  
in order to defeat the temptation of omnipotence that is present in every human heart,  
with a deliberate choice of meekness, of lowliness, of docility, of openness of heart,  
by abandoning self-justification, inertia and running away.

We learn to live in the reality of today in gratitude, forgiveness and compassion.

## *The enemies of filial relationship*

The enemies of filial relationship have their roots in the vice of *acedia*, spiritual inertia. According to Evagrius Ponticus<sup>4</sup> and John Cassian<sup>5</sup> the three most recurring enemies are: aversion for the place, aversion for time, aversion for the brethren.

### *Aversion for the place.*

Whoever is not living a filial relationship is always looking for another place - "a better place" - to avoid the pain and the difficulty of staying in the same situation, the same relationships.

The characteristic is that for some reason or other she feels the space in which she lives is inadequate, does not foster the spiritual life; in fact, is an obstacle to it.

If in the depths of our soul we are sad

– and what greater sadness than not to feel wanted as beloved children of the Father? – we continually want to run away from ourselves.

But we project that on our surroundings – we want to run away from the problems and therefore from the place of our belonging.

"Man is afraid to be alone with himself, so he loses his center, and becomes a mental and spiritual vagabond, who is always outside of himself.

The symptoms of this restlessness of the spirit are talkativeness (*verbositas*) and inquisitiveness (*curiositas*).

When we let our thoughts run away with us, our tongues run away also into empty talking.

If we lose the vision of our eternal relationship,

we are doomed to an insatiable search for alternatives – compensations – false identities." (Joseph Ratzinger)

*Aversion for time.* Time is no longer perceived as 'the favorable time', '*kairos*', that is, as the important moment of salvation, as the *today* in which God speaks to me and addresses me.

Outside of our relation with God there is no favorable time.

Outside of the relation with the transcendent, time has no meaning, neither the present nor future. It is just counting hours and days.

Filial relationship alone gives depth to time

and gives the grace to perceive the infinite Presence in the present moment.

Eternity is not in the future: it is present and we find it by living in the present:

An everlasting "Thy will be done".

*Aversion for the brethren* is really disgust with ourselves, sadness of heart, projected on to others.

There is no forgiveness for the past and no compassion in the present.

All that remains is bitterness, discontent, feeling ourselves the victims of injustice and even giving into revenge, considering others our enemies.

The great enemy of filial relationship is really forgetfulness of our birth

and our identity, of our origin and our destiny – and so strangers and aliens to our sisters.

This makes us live on the surface of existence, in our feelings, without a discernment of faith about the truth we are facing

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<sup>4</sup> Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*, 12, Sources Chrétiennes 171 (1971), pp. 521-523. (for English translation, see CS 4, pp. 18-19).

<sup>5</sup> *The Institutes of John Cassian*, Book X: Ch. 1-2.

and leads us back again to the frustrating arrogance and illusion of self-sufficiency.

## 6. The Ecclesiality of Filial Relationship: Belonging

Belonging to Christ, the Son in whom the Father is well pleased, is never an isolated event, but is always an ecclesial event, an experience of mutual relationship and of communion. Christian conversion itself is never just the fruit of one's personal decision. It has a sacramental structure. It is not a private mystical experience but the experience of the essence of Baptism.

Conversion means handing oneself over to a form of life – the form of Jesus Christ - that comes about through the working of the Holy Spirit.

And how does the Holy Spirit work?

By teaching us to remember, teaching us to listen.

The *memory* digs within us a sense of *belonging to our origins*; *listening makes belonging to the Word grow here and now.*

We can only give ourselves to Christ where He who became flesh has remained flesh: in the Church. The Church is the space where the past and present, the subjective and objective meet, here and now.

In a world where gratuitousness is so foreign, how can we walk the narrow path of dependence and trust? How can our egoism and possessiveness be transformed into awareness of God's gift and our self-will be transformed into grateful surrender to the Father's love? Jesus has given us his Spirit and left us the Church as the sacrament of his presence that gives access to the Father.

The Monastic Church enables us to participate more fully in the Trinitarian life, conforming us more and more to the mind and heart of Jesus. That is the content of our continuous contemplative prayer. We choose to live day by day whatever the Father gives us to live, learning not to try to grab anything out of his hand. We learn this dependence by receiving the monastic life with gratitude from those who precede us. We experience what it means to be daughters and sons of the Father in Christ through the experience of being daughters and sons of a particular community. We learn to wait for everything from the Father by learning to accept everything from *these* mothers or *these* fathers. We learn to trust in his long-suffering loving kindness by experiencing his mercy through *this community* of forgiveness. We learn to accept ourselves as forgiven sinners, prodigal daughters through this community that knows us through and through. We learn to obey him by obeying those he has given us to obey in his name, seeking to conform our will to the common will of the Church, to be liberated from our narrow selfishness. We learn to be generated by him moment by moment through the experience of being generated by the community. We learn the hope that dares to take risks through the witness of the community that dares to be firm, dares to correct, dares to find whatever pastoral solution can help each person to find his or her way to this true sonship or daughterhood in Christ. We learn to be mothers and fathers to each other in Christ, which is the only way to learn to love one another as he loved us – giving our lives for the life of others. We learn to abandon ourselves to him unconditionally by entrusting ourselves concretely into the hands of the community.

The two fundamental characteristics of the Benedictine coenobium are *obedience* and *belonging*.

There is a close relation between obedience and stability,  
between clinging to Christ and belonging to the community.

**To obey is not simply to follow a series of commands.**

**It is a state rather than a separate action.**

**To obey is to remain in a stable relationship with God, stable in the will of God,**  
and it means belonging to the concrete space where the will of God has placed me.

The gyrovague (*RB 1:10*) – is one who does not want to remain firm in this will of God,  
and prefers to avoid, to escape, to wander about,

“abandoned to his own will and to the snares of gluttony” (*RB 1:11*).

Even if he remains physically settled in his own monastery,

he does not take the risk of belonging, but continues to wander about,

filling the emptiness of his heart with the emptiness of things. (cf. *aversion of the place*)

The Fathers teach that

“He cannot have God for Father who does not have the Church for Mother”:<sup>6</sup>

We receive life from the whole Christ, head and body, Christ and the Church.

The Church is our Mother in the Spirit,

the reality in which we learn to live the gift of filiation.

The Church is the sacrament of our salvation,

of our conversion to that relationship where we receive the Spirit of Sonship,

learn to live in communion, in unity as sons and daughters of the Father.

We put on the mind and heart of Christ and are continually transformed.

We look toward Jesus to know and fulfill the will of the Father in and through the Church.

We receive his Word and teaching from the Church

- from the pope and the magisterium and the bishops and the abbes.

Together we seek to understand it, live it and pass it on to others.

We live as daughters of the Father by becoming daughters of this abbes,  
this novice director, this community.

We know we are daughters because we receive life from the community

and we are converted from the illusion that we exist on our own.

One who receives, learns to be grateful, to give thanks, to praise.

There is a desire to be fully a part of the community, the Church,

to live in the joy of our true identity as members of the Body of Christ.

There is enthusiasm for building up that Body, for serving it,

for giving ourselves totally into the hands of the community

which is our concrete way of abandoning ourselves into the hands of the Father.

Living in the concrete awareness that we receive our life from the community,

we grow in the awareness of our relationship with the Father who constantly generates us  
and gives us life minute by minute.

Growing in that consciousness we grow in continual prayer "Abba".

As we become more and more aware of the great love, infinite mercy,

the mystery of salvation and forgiveness that surrounds us

we are invited to open ourselves to a real affection

towards the Body of the Lord, towards the Church, the community

from whom we receive life day after day.

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<sup>6</sup> St Cyprian of Carthage, *De catholicae Ecclesiae unitate*, 6.

A true sense of belonging is this overflowing affection for the Church, for the community, the perception of the mystery of grace in our community and gratitude for all we receive. This affection allows our heart to be filled by the Spirit of the Son very concretely so that we only wish to embrace that community with filial trust and fraternal service. The profession of the monastic vow of stability precisely implies this becoming an integral part of the Body of Christ which is the community, fully belonging, and this belonging is sacramentally deepened with profession - our relationship becomes willingness to leave everything so as to follow Christ in this community forever, and willingness to embrace everything about this community to experience a very concrete incorporation into Christ.

The monk/nun is constituted by his belongingness: she hands herself over to every member of the community and every member has become members of her body. Obedience, not only to the abbess, but to every sister, is what makes our belonging visible and concrete and manifests our filial relationship. Belonging implies *recognizing oneself in one's own community*. We find our identity in the community and can say: "This is me!". We recognize ourselves in the community: its history, charism, tradition, and common vision. We are able to say to every sister: "You are a part of me and I live of your life". We attain our truth – we only exist as members of the Body of Christ.

### ***Transmission of Life***

It is not enough to feel part of our community but through our belonging in this local Church, we realize we are small but unique and essential parts of the whole Church. To enter into the truth, unity, and universality of the Church involves a deep awareness and acceptance of history. The integration of our personal life-history into the history of salvation gives our lives meaning and the sense of belonging for which we crave. Tradition is the life of the Church transmitted from one generation to the next, beginning with the apostles down to the present generation. Tradition links us as one Body in time with all those generations since the Resurrection, through which the life of Christ is transmitted to us.

Jesus gave us the gift of the Spirit of adoption when he died, and he confided that Spirit to Mary, the Mother of the Church: "This is your mother. This is your son" (Jn 19:26–27). We can be children of the Father only by being children of the Church, children generated in a special, concrete way by our monastic Church.

As Church we have the mission of transmitting our filial life in the Spirit to others, to the next generation. It is in transmitting it that we live the fullness of that filial life of Jesus who gave himself for the life of others. Spiritual maternity is at the heart of our vocation. Our divine filiation in Christ is not something abstract, not just a theory. It is given to us through human relationships in the community. This is only possible if our hearts and affections are deeply involved and centered on our community.

Our rebirth as daughters in the Son usually happens in and through a relationship with the abbess, novice or junior director with whom a young sister is profoundly involved on all layers of her being. Her affective world comes into play and she may either have a crush on the abbess or her director or be in deep conflict with them, or both. We feel all this is positive because she will experience all her affective needs as well as her rebellion and denial of those needs and can then be helped to direct all her desire to God. She will experience her selfish will to possess exclusively and her childish demands for attention only for herself. She may then experience greed, jealousy, rivalry, anger - all her passions. She may be tempted to try to refuse to feel her deep needs, cutting off her affectivity, because it hurts too much, closing herself up in bitterness. All this is terribly humiliating but is existential knowledge of self and the human condition. Then she can be shown the path to true love that does not repress our needs of affection but transforms them by seeking to realize what it means to love the other rather than using the other for self.

By becoming part of a community of salvation, we become more deeply part of the universal Church in time and space. We find our true identity in Christ as part of the immense flow of salvation history. We enter into the deep waters of tradition and live to pass on that tradition to others in the generations to come so that the kingdom will reach its fullness in Christ.

Tradition is not a way of doing things that is culturally and historically determined. Tradition is not conservativeness or narrow, closed-minded rejection of change. Tradition is a living stream of the living charisms of the Spirit. Tradition means transmission of life. How else do we receive the Spirit except through the Church that precedes us? We are generated in the faith not only through the sacraments and the Scriptures but also through the living witness of those around us. We receive the Spirit through the fidelity of those who have gone before us. They generate us in the Spirit through their death to self. Jesus gave his Spirit by dying. Similarly, spiritual maternity and paternity are above all the gift of the Spirit through the gift of one's own life. Fidelity to our vocation includes the creative concern about how to give that vocation to the following generation, whether in our monastery or in a monastery on the other side of the planet. Without this dynamic, we would be faithful to the past but not to the future. As a result, we would fail to live the challenges of the present.

We cannot reinvent the Church or the monastic life. It is given. We receive it by entering into and becoming part of a living tradition. We have to enter into it by the path of humility. We have to enter into the present, with all the wealth and weight of the past, in order to move into the future. The transmission of life from one generation to the next is a slow, suffered process of gradual change, a dying to be reborn, a passion and death to be undergone before experiencing the reality of the Resurrection.

This work of knitting together the generations is always the keystone for building communion and unity. The axis of most severe conflict in both the monastery and the world is the generational divide—much more so than cultural differences. What is primarily at stake is the transmission of power: the older generation must relinquish its power and entrust it to a new generation. Elders must desire to transmit their responsibility to younger people in whom they have boundless confidence and infinite trust. The younger must accept that gift of trust with humility and gratitude without seeking to grasp the power out of the hands of their elders. They will be able to face the future in security because of the support of their elders who have transmitted all that they

themselves had received and more. It is the process of continual conversion to the common will and the common good, to expropriation of self, to self-oblation out of love.

Transmission of life is at the core of our monastic vocation. We receive the charism, live it out, and pass on to others in radical abandonment to the Father in Jesus. If we do not receive it, we cannot live it. And it would seem that passing it on is an essential element of living it.

We live this mystery at the heart of the Church in order to assure the transmission of life in the entire Church, in our hidden and mysterious apostolate, to assure the passage of responsibility and power peacefully from one generation to the next.

## 7. THE PATH OF CONVERSION

The dimension of the *heart*, which we can also call the “affective dimension”, is the central nucleus of the dynamics of conversion and transformation. It is not enough to understand – we want to really become children of God, That only happens if our hearts are touched and completely involved. The involvement of affectivity in the path of conversion is the path of interiority.

*And I will give them a new heart, and put a new spirit within them; I will take the stony heart out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh. (Ezek 11:19)*

*I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you. (Ezek 36:26)*

*And Jesus looked around at them with anger, **grieved at their hardness of heart**, and said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was restored. (Mk 3:5)*

Hopefully Jesus is not grieved because of the hardness of our hearts. What can we do to change them?

The insistence of the prophet Ezekiel on the heart of flesh is very striking:

“I will take the heart of stone out of their flesh and give them a heart of flesh” (Ezek 11:19).

A path of conversion, if authentic, involves the whole person:

seizes her being, transforms her mentality, modifies her behavior; involves her body and the evident symptom is that “the heart of stone” is transformed into “a heart of flesh”.

Certainly it is God who operates such transformation,

but it is the work of human freedom to enter into the movement of conversion, of return

and that involves all our affectivity: our need of affection and our need to express affection.

Living the observance as an effort of exterior perfectionism

is an almost insuperable obstacle to a person’s growth in conversion.

Proud perfectionism is a search for security and never blossoms

into the warmth of true affection, compassion, forgiveness, tenderness, or maternity.

There is a rigidity of the reason, a hardness of heart,

a critical violence that must soften in order that we may live out a conversion.

There is always a stone at the center of our obstinacy that must be shattered so as to give space to the flesh.

What therefore is this heart of flesh that should flower in conversion?

There is need of a firmness of observance and a dedication to work.

But it is also necessary to make room in our hearts

for the growth of more gratuitous and cordial relationships with the sisters,  
to give space to a greater human warmth, an authentic and respectful tenderness.  
Of course it does not mean to be lavish with compliments and consolation  
which are of no use,  
but to live out that smiling welcome of the other that expands the heart.  
It is necessary in order to **become more human**, more cordial,  
for it is in affection for others that we build up our true selves and our community.  
The vow of stability is precisely the risk of loving more, listening more,  
understanding more, trusting more.

The whole Cistercian tradition emphasizes that the conversion of the affections is  
fundamental. As St Bernard shows in *De conversione*, it is a question of convincing  
ourselves that reason is the first to be aware of what is good and where it lies;  
but as long as affection is not turned toward the good,  
the will does not change and reason itself flounders.  
The need of contrition and tears that has always been emphasized  
throughout the whole course of monastic tradition confirms this:  
it is necessary to involve our feelings, our affective powers, with our rational lucidity.  
Otherwise the path towards love becomes sterile,  
the tears of forgiveness and the involvement of compassion will not spring forth.

The process of conversion implies the struggle against all forms of aggressiveness,  
intolerance, discrimination  
which community life often reveals.  
To give room to meekness, to patience, to gentleness  
is not an easy path because of the instinctivity and violence which we all carry within us.  
But what matters is to be aware of it and to work so as to transform our hearts of stone  
into hearts of living flesh.

Words of Pope John XXIII to Cardinal Wyszyński while strolling in the Vatican gardens:  
“Dear son”, the people are not so bad. The problem is that they don’t know how to love.  
And how can one teach them to love? Only by loving. This is why when we are born the  
Lord gives us a family. A family that loves generates a person who loves. I think we have  
to do the same thing: to love everyone with maternal love. If that were so, slowly, without  
haste, we would gain the whole world.”

A community that loves generates persons who love. We have experienced this. Our  
commitment to educative to monastic conversion believes in the involvement of the heart,  
as a necessary force of fruitful maturation of the person.

Our transformation is at the same time obedience to the objectivity of a Rule.  
Adherence to a specific spirituality is the source of interior unification:  
source of a new humanity, in fidelity to the vocation to which we are called.

### ***Conversion of Heart in our Tradition: Saint Benedict***

When St Gregory the Great tries to define the contemplative experience of St Benedict,  
he speaks of *habitare secum*. This *habitare secum* signifies  
a space of interiority, of profundity, of self-possession and self-determination.

“When Gregory the Great writes that Benedict lived with himself,  
he teaches us the nature of this interior space.

Gregory is categorical:

'Alone, under the gaze of the Supreme Judge, he lived with himself. I can say that this venerable man lived with himself because, always careful in watching over his own self, constantly keeping himself in the presence of God, he continuously examined himself. In his solitude the venerable Benedict lived with himself in the sense that he knew how to dwell within the barrier that he imposed on the flow of his thoughts. He returned to solitude and the solitude began to blossom.'

According to tradition, this language of '*habitare secum*' signifies **keeping oneself at the heart of one's own likeness with God.**

Drawing on the language of Pascal,

we can say that it is **essentially a refusal of amusement, of diversion**, this great temptation of the world by which man is expelled from his own self, from his center, and wastes his time in exterior agitation, dazed by the tumult that surrounds him, heedless of what ought to constitute his essential concern.

**Amusement signifies life in the *instant*, without memory, without proposal, without control over instinct: the very description of exteriority, of superficiality.**

The personal life begins – St Gregory affirms –

with the capacity of breaking contact with the environment, of taking the necessary distance to recover oneself, to collect one's thoughts, to be unified in oneself.

The Rule offers to lead the monk back and keep him within his center and this center is none other than the presence of the Lord in the life of man."<sup>7</sup>

The center of Benedictine education is the first step of humility:

**return to the heart**, which is insight into the humble knowledge of oneself; capacity of the human conscience of living in the presence of God and therein to seek one's own truth;

self-possession that encounters the ontological nucleus of the original likeness with the Creator and, finally, analogous to the vision of St Benedict, the intuitive capacity to perceive the world and every existential reality as a ball of light in the hand of God.

Thomas Merton sees this point of light at the center of every man as the focal point of the divine likeness.

St Bernard defines this vital point as the seal of the divine likeness.

The characteristics of the present generations, without roots, are basically three:

- identification with one's own self (we could use the word narcissism);
- rejection of authority;
- restlessness.

If their families were without fathers or full of marital strife, the result is anger, rejection, irony about the paternal and maternal figure and consequently a rejection of authority;

This causes a real hunger for paternity and maternity, but with suspicion, lack of self-worth, insecurity, an incapacity to decide one's life, accompanied – paradoxically - by a strong need for self-affirmation which is exactly the result of being deprived of the paternal figure.

Narcissism : the person creates her own world for herself where she takes refuge,

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<sup>7</sup> J.M.R. Tillard OP, *Un espace spirituel ecclésial: le monastère bénédictin*, Symposium Romain 17-21 September 1980, in "Collectanea Cisterciensia", 43 (1981), pp. 121-122.

isolating herself from everything and everybody.

A difficulty to accept reality, evasion from the concrete

an egoistic search for gratification, blaming.

the anxiety to get hold of what one considers necessary for “her” life,

clutching at any possibility in order to obtain what she wants

but which then rapidly disappoints, engendering depression, instability,

the tendency to self-pity, the refusal to take risks and the incapacity to dare,

the dread that is felt before the challenge of sacrifice and pain.

Running away from reality, from oneself and one’s limitations causes anxiety which in turn causes the need to have power, to be efficient, to be competitive, to seek success and to be violent in seeking all that.

The dynamics of conversion that we draw directly from the Rule,

is precisely that of a *return to the heart*,

which signifies not only the internalization of the fundamental values of our vocation,

and of the structures that express them. That remains necessary and irreplaceable,

But above all it means the recovery of one’s interiority :

the attainment of the center of one’s being,

of the essential point of the divine likeness at the core of our heart.

It is from this space of encounter with one’s own self in the light of the Word, from this return to the heart,

that the capacity to look without fear at one’s own truth slowly emerges.

That truth is known and redeemed by God’s Love.

Consequently, there matures in us the capacity to face up to our fears,

emotions, rebellions,

the fragility of one’s affectivity and the turmoil of one’s inclinations:

the “sewer of memory”<sup>8</sup>, as Saint Bernard defines it.

In the light of the Word of God that is given to us through authority and the Church,

we are reconciled with ourselves,

with the truth of our misery and grandeur,

of our limitation and our infinite destiny,

as we learn to give the right name to everything that is restless within us.

The holy realism of the Rule struggles against what is approximate, relative,

and superficial.

It also struggles against every kind of flight from reality in the emptiness of sublimations,

behind the masks of a thousand justifications,

in vain rationalizations that weaken the truth and our freedom.

We return to the heart, above all, in order to listen: “Obsculta, o fili”,

In this process towards the space of *interior listening*,

*lectio divina* occupies a central place,

deep and unceasing ruminating of the Word,

to allow it to become in us the fundamental point of reference and of judgment,

that molds us into that *forma Christi*, by which we want to be defined.

In a troubled world of unceasing noise the capacity for listening has become difficult,

often reduced to a mere listening to ourselves;

to a passive approval of the prevailing fashion.

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<sup>8</sup> St Bernard, *Ad clericos de conversione*, III, 4,3, defines it “sentinam aliquam”.

The silence in which the Word is Presence  
generates capacity for profound assimilation of truth  
in a process of conversion, change, transformation, the transfiguration of man.

**the capacity for listening to the objective word that reaches us  
through authoritative teaching, the impact with correction,  
the purification of living together.**

Spiritual deafness is actually a refusal of dependence,  
a refusal of interior change.

*Habitare secum* in relation with *vision*.<sup>9</sup>

Vision is understood as capacity to grasp the presence of God in the present moment  
in which the eternal already plays a part:

the capacity to perceive reality as the place in which the Kingdom already begins.

The relation *vision-presence* is what opens up to *common vision*,  
which is the heart of the communitarian *unanimitas*.

The *Rule* is permeated by an extraordinary sense of what is concrete, real and actual.  
St Benedict always refers to the gesture; the norm always materializes in the precise act,  
and the moment that one is living always has enormous resonance:

“Leaving unfinished what they were doing, let their action follow with the ready step of  
obedience the voice of him who commands” (RB 5:8).

It is the instant that matters. This is why the most concrete elements of living together,  
of belongingness, of service, are the criteria and verification of vocational truth  
in both initial and continuing formation.

Vocational discernment and discernment of our fidelity to our vocation:  
capacity to change, capacity to adhere, capacity to enter the concreteness of life,  
capacity to assume the responsibility of one’s vocation and to motivate it;  
capacity to never consider oneself perfect,  
but always on the road of transformation and needful of conversion.  
growth in the awareness of self and of the vocation received;  
growth therefore in responsibility in front of one’s own self, one’s community;  
in a never-ending dynamic process of conversion.

## **8. Conversion: Living the Church as Communion**

We cannot live a filial relation with the Father by ourselves.

For that reason Jesus gave us the sacrament of the Church, this monastic Church,  
this cell of his Mystical Body where we have been called  
to receive his mercy and pour out our lives.

Conversion is the continual choice of becoming a member of that Body,  
finding our true identity as a living member of that Church  
in which we receive and share the life of Christ.

Our search for God means seeking to fully belong to the community.

**Learning to live together as Church is the content of our conversion.**

Communion is the path and aim of our conversion.

We cannot learn to love each other as Jesus loved us abstractly,

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<sup>9</sup> B. Calati, *Sapienza monastica. Saggi di storia, spiritualità e problemi monastici*, Studia Anselmiana, Roma 1994, pp. 473ss.

alone in our separate corners.

Love does not consist merely of charitable and virtuous actions but rather of personal, face to face encounters, heart to heart communion, head to head discussion, shoulder to shoulder collaboration.

Building friendship, building up the Body of Christ demands a tremendous asceticism.

The asceticism of friendship takes attention off ourselves and our own spiritual growth and places it on the objective we are seeking.

Seeking the good of the community, of the Body, is the positive content of forgetting self.

Saint Benedict already gave us the key indication

“No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else” (RB 72.7).

The Cistercians made it into a slogan:

direct your heart and will away from what is proprium (‘one’s own’) toward the common good (the first degree of the love of God).

The purpose of asceticism is to strengthen us for this effort so that everything is aimed at communion.

### ***Path of Conversion : Working out our conversion at Work***

Although we receive that communion through the Eucharist, return to the source of life throughout the day and the night in the liturgy, and deepen our encounter with the Word in lectio and prayer, we learn to live in communion as one Body most especially when we work.

Faith helps us to accept our particular function in the community as the place of our personal daily encounter with Christ:

this is the workshop of our conversion.

The five or six hours allotted to work each day is the place and the activity where we express ourselves most, grow and struggle in our relationships, and experience the difficulties of learning to love and be loved.

Work is the bread and wine of our self-offering.

We need to work, to use our muscles and our energies, to know the common fatigue of all those who work hard to earn a living, to channel our emotions into constructive action, to coordinate mind and body, to integrate faith and life, to learn to make practical evaluations and decisions, to learn to organize, to face problems and seek solutions, to carry the burdens of risk and responsibility, to awaken creative insight and intuitions and bring them to fruition, to experience our ability to grow in new skills, to accept our physical and intellectual limitations.

We experience ourselves as creatures called to ceaselessly transcend ourselves. Work brings us out of ourselves, our thoughts, our fantasies, because it demands our full attention and presence.

We give ourselves as we are and in that way we get to know others and ourselves and realize the gap between our Gospel ideal and our everyday reality.

At work we experience our pride, our need for achievement, our ambition, our rivalry, our impatience, our jealousy, our difficulty in accepting correction, our tendency to judge people by their ability and efficiency.

Even in the years of initial formation, work is where the struggle is.

Some novices want only to make a good impression, so they do everything they are told and do everything possible to avoid making the slightest mistake. The fear of making a mistake is the driving force of many novices until they finally do make some kind of a blunder. All their fear then becomes manifest, because they often magnify it a thousand times and wait for the axe to fall. For some, the great difficulty from the beginning is obedience. They are so accustomed to being in control of their own lives and so used to being the one who tells other people what to do, that simply following someone else's instructions about anything is unsupportable. The masks start falling as contradictions and conflicts appear. Work becomes a school, a workshop where others get to know us and help us to know ourselves. The image of a workshop is a good one: a place where things are built and repaired, a place where everyone is learning and therefore also making mistakes, a place where we continually need to start over again after each failed experiment.

Work and the obedience it demands are a call to transcend ourselves. They enable us to do what is beyond us. Even a small responsibility helps people to learn that being in charge is difficult, causes tensions and worries. Struggling with responsibility helps one realize that obedience is difficult for both parties, for those who decide as well as those who obey. Monastic obedience is only practiced fruitfully in dialogue, not in bargaining. It requires true dialogue in search of communion in the will of God.

## ***Dialogue***

Dialogue is another important instrument of conversion. The special General Chapters of renewal in 1969 and 1971 invited the Order to begin dialogues as instruments of renewal. These were intended to deepen our awareness of the fundamental elements of our charism, enabling us to choose them more responsibly, and live them more fully. We experience dialogues as sacramental moments of encounter in which Jesus is truly present among us. We gather as his Church in his name, seeking his mind and will for us. Dialogues are existential discussions more than intellectual ones. In them we learn to communicate and listen, but mostly we seek to build common vision and unity, often through reconciliation. We learn to make discernments about whatever situation or difficulty we face, based on our common vision. We question ourselves as to how we are living our vocation, how we are transmitting it, what needs to be given attention, what we need to work on in our journey of continual conversion. We seek to name what we experience. We seek the good of the community and help each other to be faithful to what we want to live. Dialogue is a means of deepening our faith, admitting our poverty and failings, continuing our conversion, and learning to live our coenobitic life concretely in an attitude of openness to the Spirit. It also facilitates our quest to take responsibility for our own conversion instead of casting our complaints on others, on the community. Dialogue is the ecclesial encounter where I receive the love, compassion, forgiveness and correction of the community. I receive my true face, the face others see but I do not.

Living to the full our conversion from selfish individuals to our real identity as members of Christ in our local monastic Church, we become hidden yeast for the same experience in the universal Church. Learning to love *these* people, *this* community, in the mercy we have received at the core of our being, we learn to love all men and women in the universe. God gives us exactly the sisters or brothers we need in order face all our conflicts and grow toward universal love.

### ***Our Mission in the Church***

Transmission of life in the Spirit of Jesus—that is our mission, and we have already spoken of it at length. However, there are other aspects of that mission that we see in a new light today. There used to be a popular image of people living in the cloistered life (especially nuns) as the living dead, already in the tomb. Separation from the world was complete, and monastic spirituality tended to see the world as evil. No one went out and no one came in. Means of communication were excluded. Behind this viewpoint was a mentality that saw monastic life as a timeless, unchanging sub-culture that weaves its way through history without being concerned with what is going on outside the enclosure. People were expected to enter into the monastic life with all its customs and its perennial wisdom, leaving behind all other cares. Monastic life, seen as a higher calling in splendid solitude, afforded little contact with the diocese or other forms of religious life, let alone movements of lay spirituality. But to overemphasize monastic culture in this way is to place it above more common ways of being Christian.

Since Vatican II, we live in a new openness to the events of our times, our nation, the Church, and the entire world. We live a vision of monastic life that is incarnated in the journey of humankind, involved in its struggles, caring and suffering for its wounded, poor and oppressed, in solidarity with all its victims and all the perpetrators of violence. Our mission is not just to contemplate the eternal glory of God but to bring humankind to that glory. We have a special priestly role with the task of being mediators of grace and mercy. We want to let the cries of suffering humanity echo in the fibers of our being and become the voice of all those who plead unknowingly for mercy to a God they do not believe in.

Our monasteries are more and more called to be places of prayer and hospitality for all those who seek God. We have to be ready to give the reasons for our hope and faith. We need not try to become a center of psychological counseling—for which we are not prepared—but instead a place where the faithful come more in contact with the Word through introduction to lectio, prayer and the liturgy.

A monastery is the presence of the mystery of the universal Church at the heart of the local Church, a place where faith is deepened and matured. It is important to dialogue with guests, priests, theologians, and guest speakers about questions and issues facing the Church. As Cistercians today, we need to know about the world, its problems, dilemmas, wars, and fears, because we have a special mission for the people around us in our own country. We need to listen carefully, look deeply, reflect seriously, and to understand the world's conflicts in order to bring them into the light of faith, hope, and love. We cannot pray naively for those who govern while ignoring their oppressive and aggressive policies. Without getting into politics or taking sides with opposing parties we want to become intelligent peacemakers, praying for the conversion of all to the common good. Most of all we want to live our own conversion for the conversion of others, live our own efforts of non-violence for the peace of the world, live our own daily path of reconciliation and mutual forgiveness, in order to foster reconciliation among those who

view each other as enemies. In this sense, our mission is to suffer in union with Jesus on the cross, accepting to experience the suffering that the world wants to avoid.

Living in union with the crucified Christ used to be spoken of in terms of reparation or victimhood, but the same reality can be found in our everyday efforts to live together in communion. When someone offends me, corrects me, forgets me, there is pain. But I often do not want to let that pain in and see what it is that is making me hurt. Instead I blame the other, remember old conflicts, feel that the 'other' wants to humiliate and hurt me. I take the stance that the other is against me. If this process does not become conscious in the light of grace, I will become an enemy to that person. That is a microcosmic view of how every war begins. If, however, I struggle to let the pain in and see what it is that angers me, I will find that the reason for all my emotion is within me. Even if I try to stay in that wound and let the pain penetrate my pride and egoism instead of defending myself with anger and accusations, I find I am usually too weak to do so; the shame is unbearable. If I turn to Christ, naked and nailed to the Cross, I hear him calling me to stay there with him, and I make the conscious choice of not defending myself against pain and shame. I find myself at the heart of our vocation. I can accept that pain as the way to my own salvation and offer myself with Christ for the salvation of the world.

We can only truly become effective intercessors through our own conversion.

### **9<sup>th</sup> Conference - The doctrine of St Bernard**

St Bernard: the heart of the process of conversion is the return from the regions of unlikeness to the regions of likeness, in all its variations:

- from one's own will to the common will;
- from whim to true freedom;
- from self-will to good will;
- from memory-sewer to memory-mercy;
- from carnal affection to spiritual love;
- from rebellious disobedience to filial obedience.

He describes a well-structured process of conversion that develops that one phrase *habitare secum*, or *redire ad cor* which is the very essence of the *Rule*.

*Redire ad cor, revertere domum*: go back to your heart, go back home: go back to the place of your conversion; go back to the space of interiority, of humility, of listening, of obedience and you will be freed from the infirmity that nails you to the dust of your pride. For Bernard, this impassioned cry: "revertere domum", is to pass from a carnal life - perhaps covered up with brilliant intellectual activity but still always centered on self and turned towards mere exteriority - to a life centered on *humble listening* of the truth that liberates the heart; that acknowledges the limitation of human reason and surpasses it in the adherence of faith, in obedience that expands the listening to the more extensive truth of the spirit; that translates it into concreteness of behavior and which, finally, leads man back to the center of his own self, to the *domum* of his heart.

Bernard teaches a two-fold line: the anthropological line of self-awareness

and the theological line of conformity to Christ.

At the anthropological level he bases himself essentially on the calling of the Lord.

It is that calling that puts us dramatically in front of ourselves, our truth and responsibility.

So we do not see ourselves only in terms of our interior conflicts,

but in regard to the response that we must give to life and to the Author of life.

The first degree of truth is always, in Bernard,

the knowledge of self in the light of the Word,

but it never stops at mere verification alone;

it always presses on towards the response,

it arrives at the personal responsibility of man before God:

*In this beam of light which is the Word what effect does it have*

*other than to bring the soul to self-knowledge?*

*It opens the book of the conscience, passes in review the wretched sequence of life,  
unfolds the sad events of its history.*

*It enlightens the reason and the memory is set before its own eyes;*

*the will appears resolved against itself*

*and is dragged before its own tribunal to be judged by its own thoughts.<sup>10</sup>*

St Bernard gives great emphasis to the role of the memory and to the will in the process of self-knowledge.

He conceives the human soul as reason, memory and will, and affirms that it is on account of sin that the reason has become blind, the memory deformed, the will paralyzed.

He describes in a dramatic way the battle of the memory and the will against reason in order to continue to justify the acts of carnal man:

*Do not hope to hear from me what your reason detects in your memory  
that is censured, judged and sentenced.*

*Apply your hearing within, roll back the eyes of your heart,*

*and you will learn what is in this... sewer*

*from which all the disgusting and dirty thoughts drizzle and run off.*

*Weighty is the book wherein all these acts have been inscribed with the pen of truth.<sup>11</sup>*

But when we set out on the path of conversion the role of memory becomes positive.

The reason is reawakened, it becomes aware of its misery

and of the filth that invades the memory.

From the awareness of one's misery there arises the impulse to beg

and the memory is no longer the stinking sewer of falsehood,

but is transformed into the memory of mercy received.

*Is it possible for such wretchedness to make a man happy?*

*It is mercy, not misery, that makes a man happy.*

*But mercy's natural home is misery.*

*(The experience of mercy is inseparable from the awareness of one's own misery)*

*Indeed it happens that misery becomes the source of man's happiness*

*when humiliation turns into humility and necessity becomes a virtue.<sup>12</sup>*

The humble heart remembers that everything comes from the mercy of God

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<sup>10</sup> Id. *Ad clericos de conversione*, II:3, 7-14. For English translation see CF 25, p. 34.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, III:4, 1-10, p. 35

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, VII:12, 14-17. CF 25, p. 46.

and that only the consciousness of the gift of mercy received makes the human heart merciful. The memory of mercy “for the benefits received”, so present in the psalms, is like the taste of truth in every event and in all things, because it is perception of the merciful presence of God in every human event. Only this experience can provoke the shift from arrogance, that judges and is scandalized, into mercy that engenders compassion and welcoming attitude. Life then becomes contemplative space, that is, space filled by the Presence, the place of Mercy that saves.

The will, the reason’s companion,  
is given to us to build up our freedom as children of God.  
In *De gratia et libero arbitrio*,  
St Bernard distinguishes between good will, namely, dependence on God,  
and bad will, namely, “non-dependence”.

*By good will we become God’s. God makes the will good and free,  
so that we may be a kind of first fruits of his creatures;  
because it would have been better for us never to have existed at all  
than that we should remain always our own.  
For those who wished to belong to themselves, became indeed like gods,  
knowing good and evil; but then they were not merely their own, but the devil’s.  
Hence, free will makes us our own; bad will, the devil’s; and good will, God’s.*<sup>13</sup>

And Bernard underscores the three-fold good that comes to the will:

- from creation: God created the good will;
- from freedom: which is the divine likeness in us;
- from conversion: which is deliberate and loving submission to God’s will and which Bernard calls righteousness.<sup>14</sup>

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied”.

Also the words of St Paul to the Romans echo here:

“Thanks be to God,  
that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart  
to the standard of teaching to which you were committed,  
and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness.”  
(Rom 6:17-18).

Ultimately, for St Bernard, the reason is strictly connected with the conscience enlightened by faith, and consists in the capacity to judge and discern in the light of God’s Word.

It reminds us that human rationality in its fullest expression is not measured by the critical and logical capacity of man, but by his faith, and that the act of faith does not belong to the purely speculative sphere and is not an act of rationalization.

It is a unifying act of adherence and entrusting oneself to someone Other than us.  
It is to follow a Person: Christ.

In synthesis, the “education of conversion” is,

- a recovery of interior unity in the acceptance of one’s own truth before God;

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<sup>13</sup> Id. *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, VI:18, 23-29. For English translation see CF 19a, pp. 73-74

<sup>14</sup> Id. *Ad clericos de conversione*, XIV:26, 32. CF 25, p.61.

- a return to the center of one's being; to one's heart, to expose oneself to the judgment of the Word of God, of the Church and of authority, and to receive from this Word the truth of our destiny and the form of our existence;
- a correct use of the memory in order to be aware of and to assume one's past as an experience of mercy, and to arrive at compassion;
- a will that offers itself to become "God's own", avoiding every form of autonomy, fruit of rebellion;
- in the intensity of today's reality, in the concreteness of daily events:  
without flights into abstraction, into rationalization, into dreams.

## Pertapaan Bunda Pemersatu Gedono

1. These conferences are a combination and rearrangement of reflections previously written in two articles :  
*The Monastic Church: Ecclesiola in Ecclesia* which appeared in Cistercian Studies Quarterly a number of years ago.  
*The Search for Cistercian Identity* which appeared in the second volume on the History of the Order in the 20th Century which was distributed at the MGM.
2. *Living Wisdom* and other conferences and writings of M. Cristiana Piccardo.