

## **The Quest for Cistercian Identity**

### **The Search**

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.

We are not alone in our search. Each religious family has been on a journey returning to the roots, going back to the founders, back to the original charism. This has brought about a new unity among all the religious Orders and Congregations. Perhaps we feel that more in a “new Church” such as Indonesia where contacts with other religious families are an almost daily experience. In our poverty, we experience the beauty of the Church as an ‘exchange of gifts’. In Europe and North America there is a different kind of poverty, in which the Church and religious in particular have unexpectedly found themselves in a minority position and under heavy criticism as well. There has been an ‘exchange of problems’ that has brought different congregations together, without the defenses, suspicions and rivalry of former times.

According to Louis Bouyer, the differences between religious families grew up as barriers in the nineteenth century, at a time when distinctiveness was sought as

identity.<sup>1</sup> The re-establishment of the religious orders that had been banished by the French Revolution led to a thoroughgoing reconstruction in which there was inevitably a certain degree of artificiality. Institutions were reproduced as they were thought to have been in a certain idealized period, with little discernment made between what was essential and what was relative. Historical distinctions were made between different schools of spirituality and these distinctions were cultivated in and for the sake of affirming their identity over and against other spiritualities. Benedictine, Jesuit, Carmelite spiritualities began to be viewed as so different as to be in competition if not outright opposition. Each religious family sought to create a complete vision of the spiritual world hermetically sealed off from any other vision.

Those efforts were clearly not based on reality. For example, how can Theresian spirituality and Ignatian spirituality be set up as separate edifices when Theresa had Jesuits as her directors? St Ignatius was close to monastic spirituality. Jesuits often had contact with, and inspired renewal in Cistercian monasteries. Well-intentioned disciples can be very unintelligent descendants of the masters they seek to serve. St Benedict, St Bernard, St Ignatius never wished to do anything else than propose perennial Christian spirituality to their contemporaries. That is what happens when any new congregation is born. What happened in France in the nineteenth century was that many religious families were re-established at the same time in the same places and they needed to affirm their identities by having something different.

Vatican II's call to return to the spirit of the founders' could have made the situation worse. However, the document "**Starting Afresh from Christ**"<sup>2</sup> 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. When we start afresh from Christ, we find that what we have in common as religious men and women is more than what differentiates the various congregations and charisms. We need to seek that common ground in which we are all rooted in our contemplative relationship with Jesus - which is the only reason for consecrated virginity in community 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.

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

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<sup>1</sup> See *Introduction to Spirituality*, Chapter One by Louis Bouyer

<sup>2</sup> Published by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life in 2002. See also *Perfectae Caritatis*, 2.a, of Vatican II which stated in 1965 that "since the ultimate norm of the religious life is the following of Christ set forth in the Gospels, let this be held by all institutes as the highest rule."

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.

We are a strange breed of seekers, a motley group: perhaps loners, often rebels, perhaps young idealists, or older 'failures' in the game of life, disappointed, deceived and wounded by the emptiness, meaninglessness and violence of life in this world. 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.

Those characteristics are often found in people who are proud and selfish, who demand too much of themselves and others, who judge and maybe despise the life of ordinary mortals, who want something 'better', something 'higher', something 'special': people who have a more than average need of true conversion of heart.

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. 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.

## **Cistercian Identity and Vatican II**

Since Vatican II we have been in a period of renewal and yet somehow the hoped-for springtime of new life has not always arrived. Life had been too strict, too harsh, too demanding, too inhuman. The letter of the law had often stifled life. Sacrifice had frequently displaced contemplation. Otherworldly spirituality had left little place for human growth and development. Conformity had left no place for freedom. Practices of public humiliations had wounded personal dignity. Absolute silence had squelched communication. Everything was done together and yet individualism seemed to reign supreme. Friendship was suspect. Affection was frowned upon. Control was more important than charity. Authority tended to be absolute and obedience blind.

We found our pre-Vatican *conversatio* was not working and was in need of drastic changes. The *Statute on Unity and Pluralism* opened the doors and windows. The reason for many practices had long since been forgotten. They were simply observances that had to be performed in order to seek perfection and avoid being proclaimed in the chapter of faults. Once the winds of change began blowing, many were dropped with relief, but also without any real evaluation of why those practices had been created in the first place. Renewal meant throwing off the burdens of unhealthy oppression, lightening the ascetic practices, changing the daily schedule, cutting down on community programs to have more time for personal prayer. There was thirst for contemplation, freedom, leisure time, and eremitical life, It meant becoming responsible for one's own monastic life, realizing the psychological damage that had been done and seeking ways of healing and personal growth. Self-service in the dining room sometimes entailed eating at different times, following personal rhythms. The availability of private cells and more free time led to abandoning the common exercise of prayer and *lectio* together in one place. In some communities this process went very quickly and in others very slowly. In some there was the energy of anger at the past, in others hesitations or resistances about leaving the old and accepting the new. Attachment to tradition seemed to be in direct opposition to renewal.

Each community developed a *conversatio* with more freedom in all areas: food, sleep, clothing, personal space, use of time, personal belongings, reading, communication with those outside the monastery, travel, and visits. Work became more varied as agricultural work slowly decreased. Common work almost completely disappeared and the common life was disparaged as too confining and constricting. Participation at the Eucharist, the Office and common meals often suffered as well. Silence became an impossible ideal but communication remained difficult. Latent individualism blossomed. The tendency was to look for solutions outside of our tradition, even outside of our faith: depth psychology, Eastern meditation, Zen. A gaping lack of confidence and trust in the worth of our own identity became evident.

In the history of Benedictine monasticism, movements of renewal usually begin with going back to the Rule. After Vatican II, however, we were more likely to go back to our Cistercian Fathers or even more so to the desert fathers who seemed to be appropriate heroes for our individualistic times. The emphasis was on becoming more Cistercian and less Trappist, less strict, less rigid. We were sometimes embarrassed at our Order's name which vaunts a 'Stricter Observance', giving a bad public image. Often the Rule of Saint Benedict was put on the back burner, neglected, even mistrusted, felt to be a leftover from a patriarchal era that had little to do with our modern experience and was perhaps to blame for the excessive harshness of the past. People were allergic to hearing the "must's", "do not's", "never's" and "will be punished's". In some communities, the practice of reading a section of the Rule together in chapter each day disappeared. It then followed that there was no more reason to go to the chapter room every day either. Personal reading seemed to obviate the need for chapter talks from the abbot or abbess. Maturity meant thinking for oneself and not needing the teaching of another. Mature obedience meant discerning God's will through dialogue and no longer simply accepting the decisions of others.

What happened to our *conversatio*? Does it still have any meaning to identify our charism with a *conversatio*? The world to which we opened the doors was a world seeking comfort and freedom. Have we gone too far in that direction and thus lost an alternative lifestyle that flies in the face of consumerism? Did we adjust ourselves too much to secular humanism without realizing what the differences were with Cistercian humanism? What clear, radical, evangelical proposal of monastic life do we offer to those who have found comfort a meaningless pursuit and humanism a dead end when it is not based on transcendental reality? What challenge do we offer to those who want to give their lives for a better world, for the eternal salvation of those who suffer and die in unjust and violent times?<sup>3</sup>

## School of Love

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>4</sup>

The Magisterium of the Church (*At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, 43 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.

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of this section are taken from my article in CSQ, 2004, Vol 39.2, pp. 197-198

<sup>4</sup> *Fraternal Life in Community*, 26

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>5</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 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 witness we give, the image we present, is an expression of our identity. The Cistercian life used to be known popularly as the most austere Order of the Church: not a very attractive witness. If people go away thinking ‘those people are really holy and living a heroic life that I could never live’, they will go away alienated rather than feeling invited to enter more fully into the communion of God’s love. But on the other hand, if we give the impression of being leisurely country clubs where one can live undisturbed in silence, there is perhaps even less witness and only the wrong kind of attractiveness, perhaps only for those seeking a quiet place to retire.

Many people have been hurt by the Church, influenced by the bad press she receives, confused by ideologies of relativism, deceived by the empty promises of success and consumerism, wounded by their inability to love and be loved, to be faithful. There are people hungry for love, hungry for friendship, hungry for the hope that there is still a meaning in life, hungry for the eternal values of truth, goodness and beauty. People who know in their heart of hearts that Jesus is the only “answer” to their lives and yet have difficulty reconciling themselves to the Church because they haven’t yet experienced the Church as communion. We can offer them a hand and a smile in an authentic way if we are genuinely offering a hand and a smile to our brothers and sisters every day. If the guests are aware of enduring and unresolved conflicts among us, we will only add to their long list of deceptive experiences. But if we are living a life of committed

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 10

conversion aimed at building up mutual love in the community, with all the difficulties and pain that entails, in union with the long-suffering loving kindness of the heart of our God, then they will feel peace, compassion and joy. They will sense the unity that alone can give credible witness that the Church is the sacrament of salvation, the School of Love where all can learn to live together in the Mercy of God.

## **Ideals and Reality**

The title of Lekai's book on the history of Cistercians, *Ideals and Reality*, is full of insight. We are people of high ideals who live a way of life that puts our noses to the grindstone of the reality of ordinary human life in this world in a way that very few people wish to confront it. Our enthusiastic love for Jesus, our idealistic determination to search for and experience the Absolute, has been tempered by the growing awareness and admission of our sinful state that humiliates and confuses us before it liberates and changes us. We live on the thin line between hope and despair, faith and denial, love and rebellion. We face and experience the roots of the human-divine drama of creation, life, sin, redemption, death and resurrection while we go about what seems to others to be a boring, monotonous routine.

Our Cistercian ideal is truly a high one: union with God which is experienced together in community life lived as '*communio*' – the life of the Trinity in the life of the community. We seek a communal experience of God, not just a private, individualistic experience of prayer while we continue to live autonomous lives side by side. It is the basic Christian ideal of living as the early Church: one in heart and mind with all property in common<sup>6</sup> – of being the Body of Christ, of being the Church, the Bride. Our Fathers wanted to create a patch of heaven here on earth – '*Paradisus claustralis*'. One reads, another prays – all in unity as one body. We move as one Body: we eat, sleep, pray, sing, work together, we move from one place to another as a living organism, the Body of Christ.

The ideal itself immediately brings us face to face with the realities of human life in a stark and naked way. The basic human impulse is to run away from anything unpleasant, but we choose to live human life without veils or cushions. We want to see reality the way it really is because Jesus is the Truth, the Way and the Life. We want to see things the way God sees them, to live in the reality of the present moment where God is present. The desire to live together in unity confronts us with all the difficulties of human relationships: our often contradictory needs which put us in conflict with each other, the dimension of sin that separates us from each other and prevents us from experiencing what we seek. Our identity is to cling to the ideal in the midst of the reality of our human poverty is. Maybe that's why there is the danger of abandoning that ideal, each one pulling back into their snail shell of egoism, pride and fear.

Our Cistercian Fathers transformed the Benedictine "school of the Lord's service" into a "School of Love" by using all the observances and tried-and-true means of the Benedictine monastic tradition in order to bring us out of our shells, to bring us together in the Word, the Sacrament, the Presence, into that communion of love, forgiveness

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<sup>6</sup> Acts 2:41-47

and mercy which is the Church. They recognized in the Rule the way to learn to live in communion. They saw all the monastic observances as means to help us to live together in the love and forgiveness of the Father in Christ, in interpersonal relationships in which we find our true selves.

What happened in the years – or centuries – before Vatican II was that the Trappists forgot the reason for the observances, lost sight of the goal of communion, so the observances were lived as a path of personal perfection in accordance with exterior rules. They were used as a means of making you feel strong instead of revealing your weakness. Reality got lost in a false ideal of perfection – which is not our ideal. We have an ideal of love. Then after Vatican II, as we have seen, in many monasteries the observances were cast off as though they were chains and the goal sometimes became contemplation through leisure time, or self-fulfillment by means of psychological methods, freedom from constraints in a friendly atmosphere where the role of authority became even more confused than the concepts of obedience. Somehow or other the ideal got lost in the reality.

Without the ideal, the reality has no meaning. The true Christian identity – mutual love in Christ as the Way to the Father – has to be clung to at all costs in the reality of our human fragility. The Trappists wanted to go to heaven, one by one, in a refusal of the human reality, dualism, disdaining the body, the world and material reality. After Vatican II there was a tendency to embrace the human reality and lose sight of the ideal of the faith. If we substitute the ideal of communion with an ideal of coexistence of tolerance we also lose everything. In individualistic relativism, we seek to live together in peace with no conflicts with lots of space for privacy, which is not the original Cistercian ideal. That kind of tolerance makes forgiveness, reconciliation, truthful correction unnecessary and avoidable. If there is no real ideal of communion, we do not experience the difficulties of living it. It is only when our ideal is strongly affirmed as the real goal of human life, that we experience ourselves in truth and realize our need for the salvation that Christ bestows on us, day by day. If we seek to build up communion, in interpersonal relationships of love in truth, we experience every day our inability to love and forgive and accept and be open, to be meek and merciful, to concretely seek what is good for the other rather than our own self will. Only then can we realize the depth and height of the gift we have been given in being called to Cistercian cenobitic life. Otherwise things can stay very shallow. Perhaps everyone is looking for depth in their own personal life but we keep communication at a very shallow level in order to 'keep the peace'.

### **Observances-Values-Communion**

Our search has brought us to a renewed effort to find the connection between observances, values and communion. Communion is a theological gift of God's indwelling in us and it is our goal – to live what we have been given. The values are dimensions of life that we are attracted to by our personal experience and aesthetics. We see the good in them, we read about them, we get enthused about them. We love solitude. We treasure silence. We value the stability through which we put down roots.



The discipline of regular life puts our lives in a basic rhythm that allows for growth. We desire the soul-refreshing experience of *lectio*. We receive life and energy through the liturgy and sacraments. We give priority in faith to the good of obedience. But their attractiveness does not guarantee that we will live them faithfully. Our love for the values and our ability to live them are two different things. Our consciences are not always that well-tuned and pure to be able to choose what we want most deeply. Beyond the responsibility of choosing the values, we need to be sustained and supported by the choice of concrete observances. We need to have specific ways of living that nail us to those values.

The first Cistercians seem to have been pretty down to earth people. They wanted to live the *Spirit* of St Benedict fully so they wanted to live the *Rule* of St Benedict fully. They found the ideal of gospel living they were looking for in the Rule. They were not looking for arbitrary means for attaining exterior perfection but rather had a very realistic awareness that everything in the Rule was aimed at conversion, union with God, freedom from self-will through the happiness gained from humility and the conformity with Christ gained through digesting his Word and following him in radical obedience. It would seem they knew what they were doing when they lived the observances. They realized they needed the discipline of the Rule in order to attain their high ideals. They knew there is no real communion without self-renunciation. It was clear that their union with God was their union with the crucified Christ and they wanted to embrace him in the harsh realities of a life without comforts and compromises. Perhaps it is not too idealistic to think that when they experienced difficulties they remembered the fourth step of humility was of utmost importance in their path of union with Jesus. Obedience was not mystified away and correction was a necessary grace in order to receive the truth about oneself –something which has been lost in the spirituality of tolerance.

The observances are the means of conversion from *proprium* to *commune* by which we hold on to our ideal of communion in the Trinitarian life. The observances express our ideal in concrete ways and become our path of continual conversion not because we learn to live them perfectly but rather precisely because they show us every day our incapacity to live our ideal, to live for the sake of the other. Yet we persevere: without running from the truth, without discouragement, without throwing in the towel, without demeaning the observances as unrealistic. The point is not to insist harshly that they be lived strictly and judge each other accordingly but rather to encourage each other to keep going in the right direction in the mutual awareness of our weakness.

This brings us to what is perhaps the heart of our Cistercian charism: the path of conversion pointed out by St Bernard in *The Steps of Humility and Pride*. It is the conscious use of all the means of monastic *conversatio* in order to accept the humiliation of ordinary life together as the road to truth about ourselves, the only way of learning compassion for others, the narrow gate that leads towards intuitions and brief glimpses of eternal happiness, moments of true joy in communion.

St Bernard says that no one can stand to see oneself the way he/she really is. Humility is that virtue by which a person can learn to love that misery.<sup>7</sup> We need to see the reality of the disfigurement of sin so we can reach a clearer idea of the glory to which we are called, which we are, which is hidden underneath the mud of our misery and our masks. Bernard gives us a path that is clear and concrete. It is a path of vulnerability, through the *affectus*, through the piercing of our heart, through the revelation of ourselves to ourselves which then widens out to a capacity of being sensitive and merciful and loving. We can have empathy with others because we know how bad our own experience is, so we can understand any one else. It is important to realize that the disfigurement is an effect of sin, something much deeper than psychological woundedness.

The *affectus* has to learn to be vulnerable. If we are hard of heart with others we are being hard of heart with ourselves – we refuse to see what we can't bear to see. The only way we can bear to see it is if the monastic Church continually gives us the mercy we need and helps us to open ourselves to ourselves. The only way to live in communion is through humility, which means saying the truth to each other and helping each other to discover the unbearable truth of ourselves. How can we learn to see ourselves as we really are, to see what we can't stand to see, unless we dare to tell each other? We can't see ourselves but daily life reveals us. We need openness, not just in conversation and dialogue, but openness to that truth about ourselves, wanting to learn through life, through what happens, through what people say to us. We want to accept our misery together so that we can live in the bliss of God's mercy together. We need a lot of prayer that unites us with Christ's suffering heart to be able to do that, to enter in by the narrow way to the fullness of Christian contemplation. I think that is pretty close to the heart of our Cistercian identity. The values and observances are all trying to get us there.

## **Dialogue and Communication**

The role of dialogue has been an important factor in the Order's search for renewal. Many communities have experimented with it, found it a positive means of growth or rejected it as disrupting, threatening or divisive. Even where it has never been tried, dialogue is a challenge that was given to us by the Church and the Order. The themes of successive MGM's (Cistercian contemplative Identity, the community as a school of love, conformation to Christ as the Cistercian grace today) invited us to discuss and seek together.

Building up a common vision of our Christian vocation of mutual love, of our monastic identity and mission through dialogue is a long and arduous journey. It is a paschal experience lived together in which we each have to die to self to listen to the Word and affirm the Truth together, get over personal gripes and own our wounds and sinfulness rather than throwing the blame for our difficulties on others. It is a path of growing responsibility for one's own conversion, a process of maturing as human beings. As we

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<sup>7</sup> Sermon on the Song of Songs, 82/3

find the truth of the values we want to live, it is not impossible to be of one heart and mind on the basic foundations of our life and vocation.

It is a much longer journey to try to live the nitty-gritty of all that in our daily lives, to incarnate it in our relationships and in the observances that we have freely chosen together. We have daily run-ins with our endemic egoism, our instinctive and habitual way of seeing things from our own point of view and acting on our own judgment when it comes down to concrete particular choices. We then defend our points of view and our judgments with practically no awareness at all that our ideal and values go exactly in the opposite direction. "They no longer live by their own judgment, giving in to their whims and appetites; rather they walk according to another's decisions and directions, choosing to live in monasteries and to have an abbot/abbess over them." (RB 5:12)

Working together on improving communication in daily life, understanding the psychological impediments we all have in listening, judging and speaking clearly, sharing concrete experiences of miscommunication are all very useful and revealing ways of getting to know ourselves. All the concrete examples of difficulties boil down to one: we each follow our own instinctive reaction, thought, judgment and so we misinterpret, put aside, 'forget', 'do not hear' the words of others... even the words we ourselves have agreed upon through dialogue.

Communication means 'making communion'. Usually, we don't take the difficulties seriously enough. We take it for granted that communication is or should be simple and if there is misunderstanding we spontaneously assume it is the fault of the other in our omnipresent feeling that we are always right. But communication is love, going out of ourselves in order to be one with the other, finding ourselves in the other and the other in us. Therefore, communication is conversion. It is difficult and demanding. It is not optional.

### **Drawing Things Together**

The conclusion becomes more and more clear. We seek communion in Christ through a path of deepening understanding of and assimilation of his Word. We embrace the precious values of the monastic tradition as ideals we love and appreciate. We decide on and try to live observances as exercises of conversion that incarnate that love and those ideals. We constantly experience our inability to do so on the concrete level. The observances show us that in daily life we are not yet able to live the spiritual values and the communion in Christ that we understand and desire. Our spiritual intelligence has not yet become our reality. If we only read and talk about the spiritual life, perhaps we feel uplifted and feel we are already living what we can talk about. Then we would be deceiving ourselves.

The Cistercian School of Love needs concrete observances which every day make us face the fact that we are still stiff-necked and hard-hearted. They are not a path of perfection but rather a path of reality, a path of self-knowledge that keeps us from falling into gnosis or spiritual pride. They are the path where we know and acknowledge our

need of Mercy every day, not just theoretically but as concrete a need as our need of the air we breathe. They are our path of daily encounter with the gentle love of Jesus that gradually bows us down into meeker and happier monks and nuns as described in the 12<sup>th</sup> degree of humility. In our common misery, we learn to receive the gift of mercy which unites us. It is not our common vision that unites us – although that is necessary as the common base of our life together. It is not our ability to live to perfection the values we have embraced that unites us. Communion is the fruit of our admission of our common '*miseria*' so that we grow in the freedom of living together in God's mercy. Our communion is not the fruit of ideas or ideology but of daily learning to forgive and be forgiven in the sacrament of the Church. The observances that show us our lack of love are the path of humility that humiliates and leads to the deepening awareness of God's gratuitous love. That is how we find out who we are.

What often happens in the Church as in society is that if we see our incapacity to live what we profess, we give up on what we profess, we lower the standards to adjust them to our weakness, we criticize high ideals as unrealistic. "If impossible to be lived, then the ideals are not true, they are hypocritical." "It's useless to demand too much – that's repressive and makes people feel guilty." "We have to fill our needs, we all have wounds that need special care. Better to be lenient and kind and tolerant with ourselves." That soon leads to giving up on the values as well: "Why talk about something we can't live? All that beautiful literature is a little too mystical and flowery. Let's be practical and pragmatic." Then we 'demythicize' the Gospel by saying "Jesus didn't really mean to be as radical as all that", "Jesus was against everything legalistic" or "After all, we're not Jesus". From there we go on down the road of relativism and our beliefs, commitment and motivation are watered down more and more by all kinds of 'rational' reasons. "Christianity doesn't have the corner on the truth, we have to respect and appreciate everyone. If we are too Christian we become exclusive and might offend others." We become very philosophical but not in the philosophy of Christ. Relativism is rather the philosophy of non-truth. It waters down commitment because everything is thought to be basically the same. "If I stay or if I go, it is all the same".

However, maintaining the truth of the ideals and their lived expression is not hypocritical. The opposite is true: if we don't hold up the ideal of concrete observances, we could easily feel quite spiritually advanced with all our liturgy and *lectio*, value and ideas – while we continue to live according to our own self will. Our identity would be hollow – as hollow as those who live the observances without the motivation of living the values and communion.

### **The Future – The Search for Wisdom**

"We must rediscover and embody the complementarity of observances, values and communion so that it can be communicated to new members."<sup>8</sup> Providentially the study program "*Observantiae: Continuity and Reforms in the Cistercian Family*" was inaugurated at the MGM of 2002. The prologue to this program gives an illuminating reminder of how the word "observance" is used in the Rule of Saint Benedict. It also

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<sup>8</sup> Global Vision MGM 2002, Part 3

alludes to Saint Bernard's delightful teaching on the necessity of observances in order to reach the wine of contemplation. We cannot have the former without the latter.

We can understand our search for identity better in the general context of the philosophical turmoil experienced by everyone in the change of epoch that took place in the 20th century. Previously – if discussed at all - values were unquestioned principles of charity, kindness, humility, absolute obedience, total silence, spirit of sacrifice. Observances were objective ways of behavior that were deduced from the universal principles of Christian faith and monastic spirituality.

Formation was in the praxis of those values and observances. There was little personal direction. Subjective experience was not regarded as important and to think or talk of one's own personal experience was dangerously close to pride. What counted was how you acted – in conformity with objective norms of spiritual perfection in accordance with metaphysical certainty about what was right and good and holy.

All of a sudden that metaphysical certainty was lost so that the observances didn't make sense any more. We passed very abruptly from an objective way of understanding and acting to a subjective and personal way of experiential knowledge. An explosion of humanism and personalism occurred within the Church and the Order. Along with all of our contemporaries, we fell into the morass of anti-metaphysical relativism without really knowing what was happening. Objective and absolute principles were all questionable and questioned. It seemed good – freedom, tolerance, room for your own thing, openness to all that is without any moralizing judgments or dogmatic statements.

We need to rediscover our charism as a method, a way of life that enables us to find the Truth and incarnate our life in Christ but **we need to do that in a subjective way**. The observances, understood as the opportunity to see/experience oneself in concrete life, become a path towards monastic wisdom in a very personal search for God. We start off with a desire, perhaps inchoate but worth pursuing. We are faced with an experience – we are invited to enter into the life of the community already in act before we arrive, a group of people following a determined *conversatio*. We choose that *conversatio* – the observances and the values underlying it as a means toward communion. The *conversatio* places us in front of concrete choices day after day. Those choices bring new experiences – values - that either attract us more deeply into the life or which we find difficult or distasteful. There is an evaluation that brings us to a subsequent choice.

So far, we are describing what might popularly be called a subjective, phenomenological approach. We learn from experience, we find positive or negative values that determine our subsequent choices. But whereas the tenets of relativism would propose that each person is the source of the criteria of his/her evaluation, we have the living monastic tradition that brings us the Word of God as the criteria for right living. It comes to us through the Scriptures, the sacraments, the liturgy, the community, the abbot/abbess, the Rule and the Constitutions in a very concrete way. We enter into a method that teaches us discernment – wisdom – from people who have been living under the guidance of the Word and the Spirit for hundreds of years. Starting from

subjective experience, we can reach the Truth. We can learn to use our freedom for the highest good: to live in the love of God. We can learn to trust reality. We can rediscover our charism and taste our identity of being a School of Charity open to the Church and the world.

Martha E. Driscoll -

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