

Selected Notes from OCSO General Chapter meeting in Assisi September 6-27, 2017)

This is the link to the Blog of the General Chapter 2017 at Assisi:
cgen-ocso.blogspot.it

Here are some notes, selected from the daily blog of the just-completed OCSO General Chapter. You will find the opening poem on the OCSO General Chapter blog (the blog intentionally offers impressions not votes or who is elected, etc.) And, inter alia, reference to the International Association of Lay Cistercian Communities on September 13, 2017, The Papal Address (inspiring and challenging) (September 24, 2017), notice of election of Dom Elias to Coordinating Commission (September 26, 2017.)

Again, the blog from which these snippets is not a review of votes and appointments—more a palate of impressions. You are encouraged to visit the blog and note the considerable effort needed to meet, consider issues, vote, and more: the greater sense of devotion and love attendant to the General Chapter and the Order.

Robert V. Johnson

LCG Advisory Council

Wednesday, September 6, 2017

They came from all over the world...



They came from all over the world.
We came from all over the world.

We came from all over the place,
To this little place, this Portiuncula.
All of us responding to the invitation,
All of us answering to the call
To come together,
To be united,
To be one
With the One,
In the One.
We came,
Men and women,
Images of the One.
Men and women of all colours,
Of all nations and races,
Speaking all the languages,
Defying Babel,
Recreating Pentecost.
All wearing black and white,
Perhaps a little grey,
And one splash of orange,
A colourfull bunch
Of brothers and sisters,
Of mothers and fathers,
Abbas and ammas,
To become brothers and sisters again,
All children of Jesus,
Bambini di Gesu,
Fathers immediate
And mothers not so immediate,
Daughterhouses
And motherhouses,

Working together
Towards the one father house,
The house of peace,
The Domus Pacis
In Portiuncula,
The little place,
This little portion of the world.
To write a new chapter.
A new line towards the future.
Will we hear the harp of Saint Francis?
Will we find the true treasure
Of the little poor one?
The riches of the Poverello?
We will seek,
Perhaps we will find.
May our hearts be as a clear spring,
Our minds pure,
Our lives transparent
As Saint Claire
And the chiaroscuro,
Will turn to pure light,
A light to enlighten the peoples,
And bring salvation
To our Order And the world,
For there is only one light,
Christ our light,
The Light of the world.

Fr Jan
Caldey Island

Friday, September 8, 2017

Homily of the Abbot General in the opening mass of the General Chapter

In the opening words of his letter to the Colossians we learn something of the joy of Saint Paul as he rejoices in the Christians of Colossae, the saints, because of their faith in Christ, their love for the community of believers and their hope for a future with God in heaven. Like Paul himself they have understood what Gods grace really is the joy of being saved by God, not because of anything they have done but out of Gods gracious love for them. The message of Gods love for us is the truth that possesses Saint Paul and so he is so happy when others can know what it is to be loved by God. He can trust in the goodness of God because he has known it in his life. And he can offer it to others with assurance. This is not a theory Paul is talking about but an experience, an experience that has taken over his whole life. He knows that he is loved by God, and that is his life, and he wants to share it with others so that they may have true life. And like Jesus before him he is one sent by God an apostle of the goodness of God for all that he has made.

Pauls intensity can at times be a deterrent for us who may feel somewhat overwhelmed by it. The Gospel reading offers us in the person of Jesus a gentler entry of God into our lives. Jesus comes to us, sent by God indeed and God himself present but a healing presence and we see him healing Peters mother in law. But we need to remember too that this healing is a struggle against evil. The fever is rebuked and leaves her so she is made whole and well and she puts herself at the service of Jesus and his

companions. This shows us in a more modest key how the Good News frees us up for service. It is a response to the goodness of God towards us. At sunset, after the heat and the labour of the day people bring their suffering and diseased friends to Jesus for healing and he cures them and delivers them from evil. But next morning he is on his way because he has a mission, he was sent to proclaim the Good News and he must move on. Jesus follows Gods agenda.

In Jesus and in Paul the servant of Jesus we see the Spirit of God at work, preaching, teaching, healing and giving new life. We pray that the same Spirit may make our service pleasing to God, bless our Chapter, our work and our fellowship and accomplish his purposes for us.

Monday, September 11, 2017

A second conference in the morning was given by Dom Mauro Giuseppe Lepori, Abbot General of the Cistercian Order (O.Cist.). He started with quoting St Paul, who ran to end the race without looking back. Looking back prevents us from looking forwards. We must not looking back but memorise the past, by integrating the good things of the past into a living hesitance. The purpose of our life is to transmit life. It is about life (vie) and not survival (survie). Choosing for survival is choosing for death. It is a choice of fear, a choice lacking faith in resurrection. Our

society is focused on survival: surviving natural disasters, surviving terrorism, surviving all kinds of things that threatens us. On the other hand, our charism is a choice of life, as St Benedict said “Is there anybody here who yearns for life and and seek good days?...If you desire true/real life and eternal life...” This is the life we choose, and the life that is a prophetic answer to the challenges of the times.

Greetings from Assisi,

Fr Jan,
Region of the Isles.

Tuesday, September 12, 2017

Impressions: Despite the great variety in our Order there is much unity. On top of the black and white habits are faces of many different shapes and colors – some old, some young. There are many languages and accents. Among the nuns, some have more hair showing, some less. Some have only the front part of their face showing. There is a wonderful variety of belts. Somehow, our belts remind me of our appreciation for manual work. But in spite of all this diversity, there is much more that we have in common than not. We discover that we are kindred spirits in our conversations. And in the meetings, we see that many of the same problems and issues are being experienced across the regions.

There is a wonderful family spirit. No signs of competition or egos are to be seen. There is much mutual support. I am impressed with how much solicitude is given to the houses with special problems. There is no time or energy spared them.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

Wednesday, September 13, 2017

Day 8 of the General Chapter

It was a busy day today. After mass, presided by the Canadian Region, we worked all morning in the Aula.

After the usual practical notices, the moderator, Dom Roberto, introduced three members of the International Association of the Lay Cistercian Communities. Tina, Teresa and Jacques, gave us an introduction into the working, the joys and challenges of the Association. They stressed the importance of the link with the local Cistercian Community, whether ocso, O. Cist., or Bernardines, for the inspiration to live the Cistercian Charisma into their lives as lay people. After their talk and some Q&A, some names were proposed to become a liaison person between the Association and the Order.

Fr Jan,
Caldey,
Delegate of the Isles.

Thursday, September 14, 2017

Day 9 of the Chapter

Impressions: It is wonderful to see how seamlessly the nuns and monks work together at this General Chapter. We are very much one Order, not two. Everywhere you look, men and women are side by side, finding solutions to problems, catching up on old friendships, meeting new faces, or at the head table directing the meeting. It is a true sign of healthy family dynamics. Most of the time we function as equals and value the gifts of each. Canon law reserves some things for the monks. For instance, since we are a clerical institute the Father Immediate of any house has to be a priest. And, of course, administering the sacraments and saying Mass are reserved for priests. This, at times, causes considerable inconvenience for the nuns in some houses, but I don't sense a strong movement to overthrow those rules.

God made men and women different. In an ideal marriage, there is the concept of complementarity, where the strengths of one fill in for the weak areas of the other. One of the nuns in my commission mentioned that idea in relation to how the monks and nuns of our Order work together. Each one brings his own perspectives of the world, and it is refreshing to see them all coalesce.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

Day 16, September 21, 2017

Impressions: I'm impressed with our Order's devotion to the Eucharist. We have a Tabernacle in the sanctuary of our "theater church". Dom Hugues of Les Neiges has the sanctuary very tastefully decorated, with plants and icons and candles. It's a very inviting space. The church is usually fairly dark, too. I think every time I've gone in there, there have been several monks and nuns praying silently. Sometimes a nun is kneeling on one of the steps going up into the sanctuary. I was a Carthusian for eight years and they didn't have this devotion in their tradition. The emphasis there was on the cell, and you didn't linger in the church after an Office or make visits to the Blessed Sacrament in between. I missed it.



Before leaving Genesee, our former abbot, John Denburger, had told me about a favorite little chapel of his around behind the Basilica where the Blessed Sacrament is exposed all day long. I'm including a picture. It really is quite conducive to prayer. While I was there this afternoon, four other Trappists were there also. They had wondered

over independently. To me, it says a lot about the health of our Order.

Each time a new poll is taken, it seems like fewer and fewer Catholics believe in the Real Presence. They say actions speak louder than words. Throughout the Church, I think there are a lot of people coming up short in their reverence and actions toward the Blessed Sacrament. Is it any wonder that belief is slipping? It came out in our house reports, that many of our houses have Exposition and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament every week and Benediction. They noted it as a special time for them.

When I was a little boy I followed my dad all around. If he went to town grocery shopping or for errands, he would take me with him. He would always stop by our parish church and make a visit to the Blessed Sacrament. I was probably only a little higher than his knee. We would walk down the center aisle of this dark church with its special smells and kneel down at the altar rail. I had no idea what was going on, but I sensed something important happening between my dad and that metal box up there. I knew my dad wasn't faking it. And my dad was always very fervent after receiving Communion at Mass. I would be next to him and look up at his face and try to figure this all out. His actions were catechizing me.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

Day 18 September 23, 2017

Papal Audience:

The audience took place in a room (Sala Clementina) that was just right for our group. Everyone was sitting, except for some short people in the back. Pope Francis was sitting up front with a bishop on either side. You could see the excitement on our faces as you looked around. Dom Eamon, our Abbot General, went up front where there was a microphone and gave an address in Italian. Then the Pope read a presentation in Italian. We all thought that was going to be the extent of it, but then the ushers started motioning for us to come up and greet the Pope personally. Professional photographers were in place and clicking away as we filed by and either kissed Francis' ring or clasped his hand. The flow was pretty well-organized, so they were able to knock out 160 people in a relatively short amount of time. We were looking at each other like, "Is this really happening?" When it was my turn, I was feeling a bit like Forest Gump. At the end, they put a chair for the Pope in the midst of us and they took group shots. Then the Pope left the room, waving and smiling. I hear we will be able to order the pictures on the website of L'Osservatore Romano....

Afterwards, we filed out through St. Peter's Square to a pre-arranged place where a car was waiting for us with our packed lunches. We sat on a curb in a grassy spot and ate our lunches, sharing our crumbs with the pigeons. By this time it was nearly 3:00 and we were quite hungry. We then had a little less than two hours to see what we could before getting back to the buses by the 5:15 departure time. The ride home was accompanied with happy and

excited voices. The day had surpassed our expectations. Waiting for us when we returned to Domus Pacis was another great meal. God was very gracious today to his Cistercian children gathered at this General Chapter. I'm sure it put a smile on his face to see us all enjoying it so much.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

Sunday, September 24, 2017: Address of the Holy Father:

**Audience with the participants in the General Chapter
of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict
Observance, 23.09.2017**

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you with joy on the occasion of your General Chapter. I thank each one of you for this visit, starting with the Abbot General who has acted as interpreter for all of you, also illustrating the purpose and objectives of your assembly. Through you I would like to send a cordial greeting to the brothers and sisters of your monasteries throughout various countries. I go with my heart and mind to your silent cloisters, from which the prayer for the Church and for the world continues ceaselessly. And I thank the Lord for the irreplaceable presence of the monastic

communities, which represent a spiritual richness and a constant call to seek first of all “the things up above”, so as to live earthly realities to the right extent.

In these days of reflection and exchange of experiences, you are called upon to identify goals and paths to live with greater authenticity your vocation and your consecration, taking into account the needs of the present moment, so as to be witnesses of assiduous prayer, of sobriety, of unity in charity.

Your contemplative life is characterized by assiduous prayer, an expression of your love for God and reflection of a love that embraces all humanity. Following the example of Saint Benedict, you do not place anything before the opus Dei: I urge you to give great importance to meditation on the Word of God, especially the lectio divina, which is a source of prayer and school of contemplation. To be contemplative requires a faithful and persevering journey, to become men and women of prayer, ever more pervaded by love for the Lord and transformed into his friends. They are not “professionals” – in a negative sense – but lovers of prayer, considering fidelity external to the practices and norms that regulate it and mark the moments not as the end, but as a means of progressing in the personal relationship with God. In this way you become teachers and witnesses who offer Him the sacrifice of praise and intercede for the necessities and the salvation of the

people. And at the same time your monasteries continue to be privileged places where you can find true peace and genuine happiness that only God, our safe refuge, can give.

From the very beginning, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance have been characterised by a great sobriety of life, in their conviction that it was a valid help in concentrating on the essential and in reaching more easily the joy of the spousal encounter with Christ. This element of spiritual and existential simplicity preserves all its worth as testimony in today's cultural context, which too often leads to the desire for ephemeral goods and illusory artificial paradises.

This lifestyle also favours your interior and exterior relationships with the monastery. You do not live like hermits in a community, but as cenobites in a unique desert. God manifests Himself in your personal solitude, as well as in the solidarity that joins the members of the community. You are alone and separated from the world to advance on the path of divine intimacy; at the same time, you are called to make known and to share this spiritual experience with other brothers and sisters in a constant balance between personal contemplation, union with the liturgy of the Church, and welcome to those who seek moments of silence so as to be introduced into the experience of living with God. Your Order, like every religious institute, is a gift made by God to the Church; therefore, it is necessary that

he lives well inserted into the communal dimension of the Church itself. I encourage you to be a qualified witness of the search for God, a school of prayer, and a school of charity for all.

The “Charter of charity”, a document that sets out the ways of your vocation duly authenticated by the Church, establishes the essential features of the General Chapter, called to be a sign of unity in charity for the whole Institute. This unity in charity is the paradigm of every religious family called upon to follow Christ more closely in the dimension of community life, and is expressed first in your individual monastic communities in a climate of true and cordial fraternity, according to the words of the Psalm: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (133,1). In this regard, the invitation of Saint Benedict is always present: “No one is disturbed or saddened in the house of God”.

Unity in charity is also expressed in fidelity to spiritual heritage, that is, to the identity of your Order. In this regard, the General Chapter is a propitious occasion for renewing, in a climate of dialogue and mutual listening, the communion of intent in seeking the will of God. I urge you to question yourselves with serenity and truth about the quality of your testimony of life, dynamic fidelity to the charism, on how it has been lived by your monastic communities, as well as by single monks and nuns. The

safeguarding of the charism is indeed one of the main responsibilities of the General Chapter and it is a vital experience of the present, situated between grateful memory of the past and the prospects for a future of hope.

Your Order, in the events of its history, has known times of grace and moments of difficulty; however, it has always persevered in faith in following Christ, with the objective of the glory of God and the good of the people. Following in the wake of your spiritual tradition, you are able to read the current state of the Order in its moments of light and darkness, and in the newness of the Spirit, identify with courage new possibilities and opportunities to bear witness to your charism in the Church and in society today.

I hope that this witness will be made even more eloquent by an increasingly organic coordination between the various branches of the Order.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, model of every consecrated life, accompany the works of your Chapter and the path of the Order with her maternal intercession. With such vows, as I ask you to pray for me, I impart to you my apostolic blessing, which I extend to all the monks and nuns of your communities. Thank you.

Monday, September 25, 2017

Switching gears a bit, Trappists tend to love farm animals. I would discover that in informal conversations over meals and during breaks, etc. One night at supper I was sitting next to the delegate from the French region, Fr. Bernard from Citeaux. We realized that 30 years ago we were both milking cows in Cistercian monasteries in different parts of the world – he in France, I in Utah. Sadly, many of our houses have had to sell their cows and change to more profitable industries like fruitcakes and candy. For centuries, our Order was agriculturally based, but now, due to economic pressures and lack of personnel, that's slipping away. There's a part of us that's slipping away with it. Also, with the passing away of family farms, and the transition to agribusiness, fewer people are growing up on farms. I have sat at table a couple times with Dom Celsus of Bethlehem in Ireland and Mother Marie of Glencairn in Ireland. All three of us grew up on farms and used to milk cows in the monastery. Mother Marie was even still milking them when she was an abbess. We shared the sadness of seeing the cows go. The two nuns from our priory of Klaarlands in Belgium assured me very sincerely that their cat, Domino, is a very special cat. He's named that because he's colored like a domino. Sr. Tamar was delighted to show me pictures of all their cats, and also their two donkeys. I was happy to hear, in a conversation with Dom Malachias of Echt in Holland, that they raise pigs in their monastery. I think Wrentham, in the US, still has sheep. It broke poor Sr. Robbie's heart when

they sold the cows. I remember how hard it was for Fr. Joseph when we sold the cows at Holy Trinity.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

Tuesday, September 26, 2017

After this exchange of ideas, we voted for the new Coordinating Commission, who will do a as great a job on the net Chapter as the CC did on this GC. Dom Elias of Getsemani is the new kid on the block and we took leave of Dom Bernardo, whose input was very much appreciated.



To end this beautiful day in even more beauty, we listened to the evaluation of the Delegates who said “We are unanimously happy to be here! We leave encouraged to

walk happily towards the same goal. The experience of the GC brings us back to the challenges of our communities: living our lives fully is the only way open to the future.... We are challenged to live in truth. It is like an injection of fresh blood, new wine! It is an unforgettable experience for which we all thank!”

Fr Jan,

Region of the Isles

September 27, 2017

Day 22 of the Chapter. Grande Finale.

Another beautiful liturgy together with many languages represented from the Oriens region. Dom Eamon was the principle celebrant. Our work in the Aula got underway at the usual time. There was much comradery in the air. We went through the presentation of votes 64 through 71. Then those were set aside and we listened to the end-of-Chapter evaluations of the 14 commissions. This Chapter received rave reviews. There was much praise for the Central Commission and the *ad hoc* commissions. Problems and issues had been handled very efficiently when they came up, and with much pastoral solicitude. As one commission put it, “The sensitivity of the Chapter toward difficult situations is remarkable.” Comments were made that this Chapter had more of a fraternal feel to it. The Papal Audience and Mass in St. Peter’s was seen as a highlight. Much thanks was expressed to the translators and secretaries and other staff members of our Order for keeping the Chapter running so smoothly.



After the mid-morning break, we came back to take votes 64-71. There was great unanimity in all the votes, and we finished them quickly, thanks to the electronic voting process and seeing the results on the overhead screen. Then the various members of our support team came into the room and went up front where we were able to give them an enthusiastic round of applause.

Dom Eamon's final address was the last item on the agenda. He is such a wonderful example of humility and simplicity and fatherly love. He commented that this Chapter was full of life, good energy, good humor, and a shared concern about our way of life. This Chapter sparkled with friendships, fraternity and dialogue. He told us that we need to not only go out to others but go deeper into ourselves; we need more interiority. He encouraged us to move more along the path of revitalization. And he pointed out that there will be much from these days to reflect on later, much to unpack from this rich Chapter. He expressed his gladness that the Papal audience had gone so well – this had been our 3rd attempt after two cancellations at the last couple General Chapters. We expressed our gratitude to him with prolonged applause, and he officially closed the General Chapter of 2017 around 11:40. What a blessing to have been part of it.

Impressions: Holiness perfects human nature. I can see it in the faces of the participants of this General Chapter. And it can take such a variety of forms. Many from the outside may see our life as confining, but it produces great freedom. It can be witnessed in the pictures in the "gallery" pull-down tab of this blog page. The Holy Spirit was alive and well in our gathering here this September. A very special thanks to all who prayed for us.

Fr. Stephen, Genesee

The last day of the General Chapter

They came from all over the world,
We came from all over the world,
And we worked together,
Listening to each other,
Hearing the joys,
The sorrows,
The difficulties,
The set backs,
The challenges.
We heard of new life,
Of life lived to the full,
Of life transmitting life.
We tasted new wine
From wise wineskins.
And we looked for new skins,
New and better ways,
To bring this new wine
To the next generation.
And we discovered
That wine must not be kept in the dark,
In the cold,
Enclosed too long.
It must flow.
It must flow from an overflowing source,
A source filled to the rim
With the goodness of living water,
Turned to the better new wine
Through the Word of the Lord.
Do what He saying will,

Said His Mother.
And the water flowed,
The new wine flowed,
From more than six stone jars,
It flowed from more than two hundred hearts,
From the generous hearts
Of Abbots and Abbesses,
Of monks and nuns,
Of brothers and sisters.
And it will bring joy to their beloved,
Peace and joy,
Gentleness and kindness,
Fraternity and mutual support
To live the life of the Word,
The life of Charity,
The life of Faith,
The life of Hope,
The life of Christ
Whose Spirit
Brought us together
From all over the world,
And work together
And listen
To what the Spirit says to the Churches,
The local Churches
Of our communities,
And the Church at large.
And then...
Live accordingly,

Live,
Live to the full,
Live eternally
And share this life
With all who
Seek life.

This General Chapter
Gave life,
Pascal Life,
To all capitulants
And to the whole Order,
And to the world at large.

Thank you,
God be praised.



Fr Jan
Region of the Isles