Towards the Cistercian Millennium

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On 21 March 1998, nine hundred years will have passed since the founding of the New Monastery at Cîteaux. The centennial year will be marked by a variety of celebratory events commemorating the substantial achievements of the last nine centuries. To look back is good. But there is always the danger that the nostalgic eye will see only what it chooses to see, with the result that the lessons of history are not learned, and the momentum that has carried the past into the present will dissipate.[1]

It is for this reason that I would like to mark the ninth centenary by looking ahead to the millennium of Cîteaux. The matter I shall address concerns the future. In the relay race of history the baton has been passed to us. It rests securely in our hand. The question that awaits an answer is this: What will we do with the endowment the past has given us, where shall we take it?

First I shall reflect on what we have received from the past that will equip us for the future, and then I shall point to a number of features in the contemporary expression of the Cistercian charism that may serve as indicator of potential future directions.

1. The Cistercian Patrimony

Many things have come down to us from our Cistercian forebears. There are monasteries and magnificent ruins scattered throughout Europe. We admire the skill with which the medieval Cistercians managed their domains and marketed their produce — as well as their ability to navigate the treacherous shoals of local and ecclesiastical politics. We are intrigued by their ingenuity and technology. We are in awe at the beauty of their architecture and the

1. This article began life as a conference given at Clairvaux on 18 October 1997 to La Grange de Clairvaux, a lay association affiliated with the Abbey of Cîteaux.

dedication evident in manuscripts from their scriptoria. These material things are an integral part of the Cistercian patrimony, but they are not its entirety.

The first Cistercians began a manner of living which has through the ages attracted, sustained and brought to a happy conclusion the lives of tens of thousands of monastic men and women. The Cistercian patrimony is not a matter of lifeless stones, but a living reality incarnate "in the lives and labours of innumerable brothers and sisters" and expressed explicitly by a substantial body of doctrine developed by Cistercian authors of all centuries. We inherit from the past not only buildings and artefacts, not only a lifestyle that many romantically believe "has changed little from the Middle Ages", but a tradition of life communicated in a thousand humble ways from one generation to the next. Beneath the Cistercian reality lies a network of beliefs, values and core practices that embody the energy of the charism. The heart of the Cistercian patrimony is a philosophy of life as validly applied to the twenty-first century as to the twelfth.

How can we describe the values of the Cistercian reform that speak most eloquently to our generation and which are worth developing and transmitting to the future? I would like to mention five areas.

a) Creative fidelity

The Cistercian reform was never intended as a completely new initiative. The founders understood their enterprise as a return to a more integral observance of the Rule of Benedict. The external shape of the monastic day was wholly derived from the Rule: the daily service of the *Opus Dei*, supported by a discipline of life that gave scope for prayer and *lectio divina*. In addition the main features of community lifestyle were prescribed, with shared living space and activities, providing for some measure of interaction and shared responsibility. To balance the spiritual observances, there was room for hospitality and the obligation of real work.

At the level of living the Cistercians were not innovators. The alternative they offered to their contemporaries was not qualitatively different from what was found in the monasteries of the Black Monks. It was somewhat more ascetical, but the main difference (apart from personalities) was that the first Cistercians articulated a body of spiritual doctrine that enabled the monks to **understand** their way of life and to live it in a more intelligent and focussed manner. The spirituality of the first Cistercians was simply the spirituality implicit in living Benedict's Rule, expressed in terms attractive to their

contemporaries. An explicit doctrine, rigorously applied and systematically protected, inevitably led to a high level of morale in communities and was found attractive by those wishing to commit their lives to a worthwhile enterprise.

The idea of living by the Rule was paramount with the first Cistercians. It is important for us who live in a period of history poised equally between alienation from the past and resurgent fundamentalism to read this fact correctly. Robert, Alberic and Stephen had a great reverence for tradition, but they were not enslaved by it. The past was a significant means of structuring monastic life, but they did not hesitate to add, subtract or modify in order to render tradition life-giving for their own times.

The first abbots of Cîteaux saw as their first priority a return to the "purity" of the Rule's observance. This they did by trimming away the customary concessions and mitigations that kept monastic observance under the "critical mass" needed to generate energy. In the forefront of their minds was the desire to be faithful to Benedict's vision. But something else was operating of which they may have been unaware. With the benefit of perspective we are able to recognise that what made the Cistercian initiative so exciting was that it was responsive to the "signs of the times". They proposed a thoroughly "modern" version of benedictine monasticism. They reread the Rule in the light of contemporary aspirations. The reforms they propagated were "novel", as protagonists among the Black Monks complained, in the sense that they departed from conventional usage and provided men of the twelfth century with a lifestyle that did for them what Benedict's Rule had done for their forebears in the sixth.

b) Austerity

The most obvious characteristic of Cistercian life, in the beginning, as now, and wherever its integrity survives, is its relative frugality and austerity. This is sometimes called "simplicity" — but perhaps that is too glamorous a word to describe the inconveniences of a life that shuns consumerism. The areas in which the Cistercian challenge occurs remain constant: buildings, equipment, clothing, food, work, separation from the world and silence. It is a fact, evident in the primitive documents, that the early Cistercians first defined themselves by what they rejected. Superfluity was trimmed to the bone and the result was a life that had a sharp focus and a clear sense of purpose. It was only in the second and third generations of Cistercians that this implicit criticism

of current monastic customs was supplemented by a more coherent exposition of the values underlying the negative reactions. First they practised; then they preached.

Even today when living standards have never been higher, a very simple lifestyle is an effective gauge of Cistercian authenticity. Negative values are hard to market and easy to ignore, but the Cistercian charism cannot exist without them: silence, separation from secular pursuits and mass media, a humble economy based on the monks' work, the avoidance of indulgence and display in buildings and liturgy, a certain abstemiousness in food, clothing, furnishings and equipment. Austerity is not the only value — and there is always the danger of confusing means and ends — but a life that has no bite is not Cistercian.

c) *Experience*

The twelfth century was a time in which emerged an increased appreciation of selfhood, subjectivity and experience. The emphasis on subjective dispositions already found in the Rule of Benedict developed into a keen interest in the inner face of monastic observances. Monastic life moved away from the idea that the monk's task was the performance of certain duties or services, to concentrate more on the quality of his experience. Observances were seen as promoting subjective formation. The performance of prescribed acts was intended to facilitate the growth of persons to fuller humanity.

From their consideration of human beings as created in the divine image and likeness, the Cistercians developed a spirituality based on desire for God. They saw as parallel to the teaching of the Church and objective revelation, an innate sense of mystery that guides, energises and sustains us in our seeking of the transcendent. Religion was not regarded as a matter of external certainties, but of fidelity to inward grace. The search for God was understood to coincide with the deepest aspirations of the heart — human fulfilment and not alienation.

This fundamental optimism was a source of courage in accepting as normal the alternations in experience that mark human progress. One of the characteristics of Cistercian writing was its willingness to identify and describe the obstacles to growth — often with a certain amount of humour — and to suggest means of avoiding them. It is this pragmatic and phenomenological approach which gives these texts a down-to-earth quality which makes them pleasant to read and endows them with a certain timelessness.

d) *Affectivity*

The twelfth century was an era in which love was seen as the primary goal of human existence. The theme of love is one that predominates in all the Cistercian authors of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries and the Song of Songs was their devouring interest. When Bernard spoke to already-mature recruits to monastic life, he described the spiritual journey in terms that resonated with their own experience. It was a pursuit of love, a response to love, a forgetfulness of self in order to make room for love.

Yet Cistercian teachers did more than celebrate love. They also instructed their monks about how to install love as a principle of governance in their lives, how to let love grow to assume its natural proportions, how to implement love's dictates in the details of daily life. The Cistercian phenomenon revolves around the psychology and theology of love. Love expressed itself most naturally in community life. Monasteries were regarded as "schools of love" and there was a strong affective tone in everything that concerned community life. Within communities and between communities charity was the goal proposed, with no divorce envisaged between love of God and of the brothers. Whatever problems may have occurred love remained the ideal.

e) *Mysticism*

Spiritual experience — with a strong affective component — is the engine that drove the first Cistercians forward. Mysticism is the unseen concomitant of external lifestyle. It begins long before entry with devotion and a sentimental attachment to the person of Christ. This leads, perhaps, to an awakening of the spiritual sense (*compunctio*) and thence to conversion. Thus desire is engendered. With the assent of the will, this becomes a seeking of God which gradually assumes the highest priority. It is about this time that monastic life is embraced. The steadfastness of such a resolve is deepened by inevitable hardships, and its self-serving elements are patiently leached away. The Word visits the soul and there is, occasionally, a brief but life-giving encounter that has the effect of intensifying desire. It is at this point that the monk begins to move towards singleness of heart; there is a conformity of his will with God's that leads to spiritual marriage, a unity of spirit or ecstasy. By God's gift heaven seems very close.

Such an itinerary is never far from the mind of Bernard and his friends. Their view of monastic life is thoroughly mystical. Here two provisos are in

order. The mystical teaching of the Cistercians was always biblical; it flowed from an interpretation of scriptural texts and strictly maintained itself within their limits. Secondly, it was not concerned with the extraordinary or parapsychological. It was a profoundly ethical mysticism, with its feet on the ground and its guarantee sought in daily behaviour. Spiritual experience was not reserved for the advanced; its modalities suited persons at every stage of the ascent to God. The anecdotal histories of Herbert of Clairvaux illustrate this beautifully: the monk is open to be touched by God whether he is chanting the psalms, or engaged in private prayer; when he is sick or oppressed by labour or disgusted by monastic cooking or even on the brink of desertion. To these monks it seemed that heaven and earth interpenetrated in the *paradisus claustralis*. What today strikes us as unusual is the fact that mystical experience seems almost to have been taken for granted: the monastery was really believed to be a school of contemplation.

2. The Signs of our Times

These spiritual values are the treasures that we have received from the past. From those who receive much, however, much is expected. To us is given the task to transmit to other times and places the charism that has come down to us. I see this as happening in three different ways.

a) Geographical Expansion

It is a curious phenomenon that although the number of Cistercian monks and nuns is declining with changes in vocation patterns and departures, the number of monasteries continues to increase. In the last 50 years, foundations have multiplied in Africa and the Americas and in the Asian-Pacific area and these newer monasteries are playing an important role in the life of what has become a multinational Order. The Abbot General is Argentinian, the Procurator General Canadian and there is a Japanese nun serving as counsellor at the Generalate. At a General Chapter there are many different faces and races to be seen. It has been remarked, whether accurately or not, that during the Middle Ages one could cross Europe on horseback, without having to spend a night outside a Cistercian monastery or grange. Perhaps with a little hyperbole we could say that in the not-too-distant future wherever in the world you go you will find a Cistercian monastery.

b) Inculturation

The nineteenth century also witnessed noteworthy expansion. Usually, however, it was a matter of implanting a European monasticism in foreign soils. The monks took with them the cultural baggage of the mother-house and of their own country. A sort of monastic colonialism ensued in which regional customs and usages were suppressed without examination. Table manners and standards of hygiene typical of the middle classes in a cold climate were enshrined as "monastic" and propagated everywhere without regard to local culture, tradition or necessity.

The expansion more typical of the latter half of the twentieth century aims at respect for existing culture and custom and has abandoned the *tabula rasa* approach to monastic implantation. Instead we encourage expressions of the Cistercian patrimony that accord with local sensibilities and values. We try not to substitute needlessly the customs of the founding country in matters that do not pertain to the integrity of the monastic vocation. This is more than astute marketing; it is a recognition that some eminently Christian values are more perfectly embodied in other cultures than in our own. By opening the Cistercian patrimony to the possibility of incarnation in a variety of cultures, we give it a possibility of more perfectly expressing the full range of the truth of the Gospel. The patrimony itself grows and is enriched by being subject to manifold inculturation. The corporate poverty and simplicity so loved by our founders is, for example, more radiantly visible in many of the newer foundations than in the prestigious dignity of many established monasteries.

The unanimity so beloved of our Cistercian founders no longer finds expression in uniformity within a single culture, but in a willingness to welcome a plurality of forms in which the charism finds expression and life. This means a commitment to dialogue within the Order, an openness to new forms and a patience with the inevitable mistakes that occur in the early, experimental stages of any process of adaptation. We are called at this time to have the humility to assert that we do not have a monopoly on the Cistercian charism. As William of St Thierry admonished, we must not think that the sun shines only in our own cell, that the grace of God is limited to the forms in which we have experienced it. If we are to go forward bodly into the future we must not bury our talent to safeguard it, we have to allow the precious gift of the Cistercian charism to interact with the real world and with the Church and to gain for the Lord any profit it may.

c) Inclusiveness

The tenor of the times demands that we build bridges and not walls, that we seek to include within our Cistercian family all who feel called to associate themselves with it. In the first place this involves minimising a certain animosity, or at least indifference, that has resulted from the historical divisions within the Order itself. It means recognising that Cistercian monks and nuns share the same charism and must be considered as members of a single Order. Furthermore, it seems that all over the world God is calling men and women of the laity not only to find their spiritual identity in association with Cistercian monasteries, but also to constitute themselves into new groupings that must eventually be recognised as authentic expressions of the Cistercian charism. Who knows what greater levels of inclusiveness the future may bring? Perhaps one could imagine the adventure of Cistercian monks and nuns living in a single community. Perhaps there will be a greater acceptance of temporary vocations, in which particular persons follow a monastic life within a community for a contracted period that is less than a lifetime. And maybe Cistercian monasticism will be called to cross denominational frontiers and become recognised officially as proleptic centres not only of dialogue and *koinonia*, but of intercommunion — prophetic anticipations, as it were, of the unity for which Christ prayed.

Alongside what might be called horizontal inclusiveness is what might be called a vertical inclusiveness. Despite pressure from romantics, the Order seems content to change its stability from the twelfth century to the twenty-first. This involves accepting what is good in contemporary society and using it as a means to further our growth in the purposes for which the Cistercian Order exists. There is, certainly, some nostalgia among the older generation of monks and nuns for the security and tidiness of the "old ways" but not much interest in turning back the clock in a gesture of what Rembert Weakland has called "neo-primitivism".

It seems to me that there is much scope for optimism in the future of the Order. Despite reduced numbers Cistercian monasticism is expanding geographically, it is adapting itself to new languages and cultures and it is less parochial in its definition of its own identity. There is solid ground for hope, but no room for complacency.

3. The Sign of the Shadow

There is another sign that ought not to be ignored. It could be called "the sign of the shadow". Alongside encouraging indications of growth there is evidence of a level of hardship, and even deterioration, that is not totally unprecedented but is certainly somewhat more visible today.

a) The Birth-Pangs of Expansion

The present state of the Order can be interpreted differently in a way that is equally valid, but leaves little scope for triumphalism. It is easy enough to rejoice in the adventure of new foundations and in new forms of inculturation without being aware of the sacrifices that the founders make, the painful misunderstandings that occur between cultures and the inevitable and sometimes serious mistakes that result from the process of trying simultaneously to translate the Cistercian charism into a new idiom and to transmit it to the next generation. We ought to be aware of the price founders pay in responding to their mission; we should not underestimate how hard it is to make the right decisions in a totally new situation. It is a new wisdom that is needed, one that is acquired only experimentally, that is to say only by making mistakes. When mistakes are made pain is caused. We have much to learn about the manner of making and sustaining new foundations and much to unlearn.

In addition to this we find many new monasteries (and some old ones as well) surrounded by political turmoil and sometimes physical danger. These situations require the making of courageous and conscientious decisions — often only possible through prolonged prayer and openness to grace. Again, this is not something to be romanticised. The grinding effects of months and years of life-threatening insecurity takes its toll on personal well-being. Normal monastic growth seems to be suspended and one has to rely on something deeper than pious routines. The seven martyrs of Atlas have captured the public imagination as an eminent example of this. But there are other communities also that face substantial disruption over a long period simply because they have chosen to become "lovers of the place" in areas from which peace has fled.

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b) Diminishing Communities

Meanwhile in the world of established monasticism the situation has altered. Demographic changes mean that there are fewer entrants and many communities are facing the prospect of becoming smaller in number and older than they used to be. This necessarily leads to a process of rethinking such areas as income-generating work, the maintenance of buildings and the provision of services, particularly when there are many older and more infirm members of the community. Such communities cannot hope to follow the single-minded asceticism that is possible and appropriate for the young and healthy. Living off pensions and investments is one way to make ends meet, but it scarcely corresponds to the rugged ideal the Founders had of earning their bread by the work of their hands. Inevitably too this is a situation that has imposed itself without being willed. A community that barely fills a quarter of its choir stalls quickly becomes demoralised and without the stimulus of new recruits it can be difficult to maintain fervour. It seems that without our being aware of it, much of our apparent commitment to monastic values in the past was dependent on the visible success of our efforts.

c) Scandals and Tragedies

The necessary task of *aggiornamento* and the work of writing new Constitutions have been accomplished without serious divisions in most communities. But it has led to a certain discontinuity between generations. With the upheaval of more than twenty significant changes in lifestyle between 1967 and 1972, the steady process of monastic maturation was interrupted. Many of those in mid-life who would have been expected to exercise leadership in the community by virtue of their seniority, felt disenfranchised and marginalised. This resulted in the undervaluing of experience and occasional excesses in adaptation that have been difficult to reverse. All of this had its impact not only on the quality of Cistercian life but also on individuals' sense of well-being. The necessary and providential ferment of these years provided the trigger for a variety of psychological and behavioural disturbances, which have been a source of pain not only to the individuals concerned but also to their communities. Hundreds of monks and nuns have left the Order and some seem to have abandoned the Church. Many of those who have left in recent years have requested dispensations within two or three years of their solemn profession. There have been other scandals and tragedies, some public and

others endured in silence. Does this happen because communities are unable to help individuals find their way? Is it a case of intractable resistance to grace? Is it the result of poor selection and formation procedures or simply human weakness? Who knows? We Cistercians are aware that we are not immune from human aberration. There is no guarantee that when you open tomorrow's newspaper, you will not read of the misdeeds of Cistercian monks or nuns somewhere in the world.

d) Never Lose Hope in the Mercy of God

I have spoken about the shadow to be found behind the signs of growth in the Cistercian Order today. This is not because I am a pessimist. The sufferings, scandals and tragedies that beset us can be seen as a gift from the God who writes straight on crooked lines. No quality is as necessary for monks and nuns as humility. The lesson we must learn from our negative experience is that of ourselves we can accomplish nothing, that all is grace. There is a danger that being "successful" Cistercians may insulate us from our call to follow a crucified Lord, may bring us to the point where we lose our daily dependence on the mercy of God. We may cease to draw our vitality from faith in God and instead find our security in some kind of worldly approbation.

If monasticism is to have a future, it is to be a witness to the power of God's love to renew and restore fallen humanity. It is to be a sign of confidence not only to those of the household of the faith but especially to those who have wandered furthest from God and have become the most desperate. They are most truly Cistercian in whom the mercy of God is most evident.

Only those who have need of mercy receive mercy. Only from the experience of falling and of being raised can we sing the praise of God's gratuitous love. Our Cistercian forebears were the champions of mercy only because they themselves had experienced it. To become like them, we must be content to be numbered among those who rely on God's indulgence and forgiveness. As we celebrate this ninth centenary and look towards the millennium, it would be intolerable if the first Cistercians were praised only for their achievements, when they themselves attributed all to the mercy of God.