



Christmas vision St. Bernard - dalmatic Abbey of Tilburg 1936

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Rome, 17th August 2022

LET'S DREAM!

Brothers and sisters,

Six months ago, the General Chapter elected me as your Abbot General, and from all sides you expressed the wish that the new Abbot General would inspire the Order with regular circular letters – not an easy task but, from my own poverty, I will try to give what I have.

The feast of St. Bernard of Clairvaux seemed to me a good occasion for this first circular letter. I am encouraged in this not-so-easy task by St. Bernard's words at the beginning of his commentary on the Song of Songs: "*Who is going to divide this loaf? The Master of the house is present, it is the Lord you must see in the breaking of the bread. For who else could more fittingly do it? It is a task that I would not dare to arrogate to myself. So look upon me as one from whom you look for nothing. For I myself am one of the seekers, one who begs along with you for the food of my soul, the nourishment of my spirit. Poor and needy, I knock at that door of his which, "when he opens, nobody can close..."*" (SCC I.4).

After my election I told the General Chapter that in the time between the two parts of the Chapter I would like to visit the regional meetings. I began to do so, and through this I not only got to know the superiors of the Order better but also experienced the joys and needs of the different regions. In all the regional meetings, I asked the superiors to share their dreams for the Order with me. They did so – and with what dedication did they dream!

Some of you may have frowned at all this dreaming. What is it for? Where does it come from? What does the new Abbot General want to achieve with it? Doesn't the present time and the current situation of the Order call rather for action? Isn't all that rubbish a denial of reality? Wasn't Ecclesiastes right: "Too much work leads to dreaming and too much talk leads to blabbering" (Ecclesiastes 5:2)?

Let me explain! During the first part of the General Chapter, I read Pope Francis' booklet with the (English) title: "Let's dream!" He wrote that booklet during the pandemic. For him, dreaming is a way to get out of a crisis. A crisis, he says, "*...is a moment to dream big, to rethink our priorities – what we value, what we want, what we seek – and to commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of. What I hear at this moment is similar to what Isaiah hears God saying through him: Come, let us talk this over. Let us dare to dream.*" (Prologue)

In this circular letter, I want us to look together at the importance of dreams as a way out of the crisis. It is not about the dreams themselves but about what lies behind or beneath them. "*The dream symbolises the spiritual life of each of us, that inner space that each of us is called to cultivate and guard, where God manifests himself and often speaks to us*" (Pope Francis, Audience, 26th January 2022). All of us have dreams in the midst of the crisis that our Order is in; dreams not only about our Order but also about the Church and the world of which we are a part – dreams even about ourselves! Let us not forget the words of the prophet Joel: "*Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions*" (Joel 2:28). When we no longer know how to dream, it is as if the inner space within us where God speaks to us has dried up.

For me, dreaming has everything to do with the revitalisation of our Cistercian charism, a theme that is close to the hearts of many in our Order. Today, we must clearly put the charism first again: "*...our lives are wholly directed to the experience of the Living God... We are ready to receive from the Spirit the gift of pure and uninterrupted prayer. This search for God animates our whole day*" (Declaration on Cistercian Life). This was the dream expressed by the General Chapter of 1969, but in this letter I want to show you that it was also the dream of St Bernard, and hopefully it is also our common dream.

The dream of the young Bernard

When William of St. Thierry wrote the life of Bernard of Clairvaux, what he wanted to do was to tell the stories "*from which one tastes that Christ lives and speaks in him (Bernard)*" (Vita Prima 15). William is concerned not so much about the person of Bernard but about showing, through these wonderful stories, how the gospel became flesh and blood in this man. The gospel is nothing other than Christ himself. The secret of Bernard's life made a great impression not only on William of St. Thierry but also on other contemporaries. Thus we read in Caesarius of Heisterbach that people wanted to follow Bernard on his monastic path because in him "*the Gospel had come to life again*" (*Diagolus miraculorum* I.6). This is what William of St. Thierry wants to relate through his *Life* of Bernard.

Let us consider an incident from Bernard's youth, as related by William. "*Bernard progressed considerably in his faith, and the Lord appeared to him just as he had once appeared to Samuel in Shiloh and revealed his glory to him. On the solemnity of the Lord's Nativity, when at night they were all getting ready, as was the custom, for solemn Vigils, the Lord came to him. Since the hour for celebrating the Night Office was put off a little, Bernard was sitting there waiting with everyone else, and his head drooped in sleep. Then it happened that the child Jesus revealed himself in his Holy Nativity to the little boy, awakening in him the beginnings of divine contemplation and increasing his tender faith. Jesus appeared to him like the spouse coming forth from his chamber. He appeared to him before his very eyes as the wordless Word being born from his mother's womb, more beautiful in form than all the children of men. Bernard was taken out of himself so that his child-like love was transformed by the holy Infant. So persuasive to his mind*

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was this moment that he is convinced and still maintains that he was present at the very moment of the Lord's birth" (VP II.4).

This dream of the young Bernard points to the Cistercian charism, still hidden in the youth of this child, but which will become a living reality once he becomes an adult. First of all, the dream shows us something, expressed in many images. It happens at night, and therefore it is dark. The people are not looking ahead but sitting with bowed heads waiting, slumbering; a kind of sleeping state in which people see in a different way. Then the dream leads to a discernment: a distinction is made. That which is seen becomes clear in the light of the day and the hour of the Lord's birth. Finally, the dream led to Bernard acting concretely on it.

After the brief account of the dream, William of St. Thierry writes: *"From those who often listened to [Bernard] it is obvious that the Lord showered him with blessings at that time, since he has spoken about this mystery more frequently and delved into its meaning more profoundly. Afterward he wrote a little book in praise of the Mother of God and her Son and his Holy Nativity among his works and treatises, taking his material from the gospel of Saint Luke, where we read, 'The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city in Galilee'."* The dream resulted in concrete actions of Bernard in writing and in deeds.

Seeing-Choosing-Acting are precisely the three words that Pope Francis links with the courage to dream. For him, a crisis is a time to see, a time to choose and a time to dream.

A time to see

Let us go back to St. Bernard's dream for a moment and take a closer look at these three words. They can help us as an Order, as a community, and as individuals, to find an answer in the crisis in which we live today. You may think that I use the word "crisis" too often, but if we look closely at the situation in the Order, and in the Church and in the world today, then we certainly are living in a crisis, a time in which many things are changing and are under pressure. Scholars are even speaking today of a unique situation of an accumulation of crises. Entire systems are under heavy pressure and demand solutions. This is a time, not to close ourselves off, but to see with the eyes of the heart what matters now; a time to make the right choices and a time to act.

The way in which William of St. Thierry describes the context of young Bernard's dream evokes an image of a paralysed gathering of people; a community in a small but recognisable crisis. The liturgy of Christmas Eve does not start at the appointed time for some unclear reason. People have gathered to celebrate Christmas but everything seems to have come to a standstill; they are waiting, not knowing. Instead of celebrating with conviction, everything seems to be frozen. The people fall asleep, their heads bowed towards themselves. They are no longer paying attention to each other, or to God, but only to themselves. People move back into the sleep of indifference.

You can see reality by distancing yourself. But distance does not mean losing sight of the concrete, the detail. In the midst of the dozing community, William lets a concrete child, Bernard, dream. Where first there seemed to be no attention to the individual, suddenly there is attention on the part of the young Bernard. God breaks through into his darkness by showing him - his beloved - in full light, something that is at the same time great and yet very close. God becomes human in this concrete reality. The mystery of the Incarnation can be seen only when we dare to distance ourselves from it and, at the same time, keep an eye on concrete reality in which this wonderful mystery takes place.

Pope Francis often puts his finger on a sore spot when he talks about the virus of indifference. On the Christmas night of Bernard's dream, this virus was present and everyone was infected by it. Indifference is a virus that makes us fail to see reality, that increases the crisis through its side effects of narcissism, discouragement and pessimism. If we dare to step back, we will see this virus of indifference and its side effects not only in this short story but also in our Order, in the communities and perhaps in ourselves. That is why it helps to dream!

Precisely in this small crisis William situated the dream of the great mystery of the Incarnation, a dream that would become the heart of the Cistercian charism. God becomes human. He sees each one of us. He does not remain indifferent, involved only with himself; God goes out, to the periphery, to each one of us, to encourage us and to give us the light of life.

To discover the charism, you need a time to see.

A time to choose

Pope Francis writes, *“Between the first step, which is to come close and allow yourself to be struck by what you see, and the third step, which is to act concretely to heal and repair, there is an essential intermediate stage: to discern, and to choose ... For this second step, we need not just openness to reality but a robust set of criteria to guide us: knowing we are loved by God, called to be a people in service and solidarity. We need, too, a healthy capacity for silent reflection, places of refuge from the tyranny of the urgent. Most of all, we need prayer, to hear the prompts of the Spirit and cultivate dialogue in a community that can hold us and allow us to dream. Thus armed, we can read aright the signs of the times and opt for a way that does us all good”* (Pope Francis, *Let’s Dream*).

In the dream of the young Bernard this process takes place in an atmosphere of prayer, in the midst of a community, and leads to the discernment *'that this was truly the hour of the Nativity of the Lord'*. This dream was the discovery of a sign of the times. The incarnation became for St. Bernard the real sign of the time that the world was longing for.

Here we are at the heart of the Cistercian charism. *“Our life [is] wholly directed to the experience of the Living God.”* The incarnation is for St. Bernard nothing other than the experience of the Living God in our human weakness. Pope Benedict XVI summed it up aptly: *“For St. Bernard, true knowledge of God consisted in a personal, profound experience of Jesus Christ and of his love. And, dear brothers and sisters, this is true for every Christian: faith is first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love. It is in this way that we learn to know him ever better, to love him and to follow him more and more. May this happen to each one of us!”* (Audience, 21 October 2009).

To discern the charism you need a time to choose.

A time to act

St. Bernard saw the secret of the Incarnation. He saw how God cared for him and emptied himself to become human, transcending himself to become the last of all. In this seeing and in the discernment of that moment, St. Bernard discovered the dignity of the human person in the light

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of the Incarnation: 'O marvellous goodness of God to seek us, O exalted dignity of man, so to be sought'.

In this way, a dream became a reality in St. Bernard's life, and it grew to become the core of his life, his spirituality. Thanks to this lived reality, Bernard was able to return again and again to this core of his life. This, I believe, is the meaning of the last sentence of the dream, as recorded for us by William, '*He is convinced and still maintains that he was present at the very moment of the Lord's birth*'. Every moment when we see and discern the dignity of our humanity and act accordingly, is the true hour of the Lord's Birth.

And from this hour we may act. The Incarnation of Christ becomes for us the school of becoming human. This action is the mission of our Cistercian charism entrusted to us by the Church. The General Chapter of 1969 said: "*The Church has entrusted a mission to us which we wish to fulfil by the response of our whole life. . . To give clear witness to that heavenly home for which every man longs, and to keep alive in the heart of the human family the desire for this home.*" In that school of the Incarnation, St. Bernard teaches us to act, to act not as a child but as a spouse, not as an earthly person but as one who seeks the things of heaven, not as someone separated from God but as one who is like God. That is our charism; that is the mission entrusted to us!

To live the charism you need a time to act.

Dare to dream!

Brothers and sisters, I hope that if we have the courage to dream today, in the midst of the crisis in our Order, we will discover the Cistercian charism given to each one of us. It may be hidden within us, as was the case with the young Bernard, or it may already be clearly visible at an adult level. Or perhaps it has been lost, submerged in confusion and not-knowing. But we must continue to believe that the charism is present by virtue of the gift of God given to each one of us.

One way out of the crisis is a rediscovery, through dreaming, of the charism: a rediscovery through seeing, choosing and acting; a rediscovery of the fact that we are seen, wanted and loved by God. We therefore belong to God, and not only to God but also to each other because the purpose of the Incarnation is not the salvation of an individual but of the whole people of God.

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This time for action invites us to recover our sense of belonging, the knowledge that we are part of a people. The rediscovery of our charism is first of all a mystical conversion which is also a social conversion.

So dreaming is of great importance! If our actions are not based on the discernment born of contemplative seeing, we will soon fall from stress and fatigue. Especially in times of crisis, it is important to remain attentive to the primacy of our prayer life. Let's take time for prayer, for reflection, so that we can take some distance to see where and how we can love. Our answer in the crisis should be love based on our prayer, because to pray is to love, to love is to pray!

Brothers and sisters, I hope that young Bernard's dream can help us all to start dreaming (again). A popular Dutch church song says: "Thou sowest thy name in our deepest dreams." Let's listen to that voice of God inside us. There you will find the Cistercian charism! Share those dreams with each other! That is not an easy task, because it is tempting to say, with the brothers of the patriarch Joseph, "Here comes that master dreamer! Come on, let us kill him" (Gen. 37,19-20). Let us really listen to each other and not kill each other's dreams or neglect them but see, discern and act on them.

May this be my first small contribution to that desire of many for the revitalisation of the Cistercian charism entrusted to us all. I wish you a beautiful and blessed feast of St Bernard. I commend the second part of the General Chapter to your prayers that there too we may have the courage to dream! May Mary, who married a dreamer, intercede for all of us!

Dom Bernardus Peeters

Abbot General