

**ABBAS GENERALIS**

*Prot. N 01/AG/04*

**2004 CIRCULAR LETTER**

**COMMON LIFE IN A COMMUNITY OF LOVE**

1) with the Gospel as our guide...

2) listening to our Fathers...

3) and to recent statements of the Magisterium...

4) to build *Communio* today.

Rome, January 26th, 2004.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Lord gives us this new year of life as a gift. Let us continue to move forward towards him in the midst of the world's joys and sorrows, in the midst of the Church's graces and sins.

I would like to write to you this time about cenobitic life, which is a great mystery of communion in the Risen Christ by the work of the Holy Spirit. I am not attempting to write a treatise on the subject. Baldwin of Ford has already done so inimitably, and I have kept him near while writing this letter. Our dear Dom Ambrose—Abbot General from 1973–1990—also wrote and spoke a great deal on the theme that concerns us here, and I recommend rereading the following: “*The Community*” (Circular Letter of 1978), “*Unity of*

*the Community, Silence and Speech, Community Dialogue*” (Conferences given at the General Chapter of Abbesses in 1975), “*Unity and Fraternal Relations, Fraternal Correction*” (Conferences given at the General Chapter of Abbesses in 1981), “*The Importance of Love and Charity*” (Circular Letter of 1987). . .

My intention, therefore, is very simple: to offer some thoughts on the subject for your meditation, thoughts taken from yesterday, from today, and from all times, in other words, thoughts from Scripture, Tradition, the Magisterium, and from present-day experience. I hope what I say will provide both light and fire: light to clarify and fire to motivate.

I will state a two-fold conviction from the outset : there will be no monastic renewal without making a serious effort to grow in communication with God and with the brothers and sisters. Moreover, our future depends on the quality of our **common life in a community of love**.

## 1. With the Gospel as our Guide

No one follows Jesus privately. Jesus’ followers were invited to become members of his community, the community of those who “hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21). It is worth noting that in Mark’s Gospel the word *disciples* is always in the plural, never the singular.

What we find around Jesus are concentric **community circles**. In fact, it is easy to distinguish them:

- his intimates, namely, Peter, James, and John ;
- the Twelve, “who ate and drank with him” (Acts 10:40) ;
- the women who accompanied him along with the Twelve (Lk 8:1–2) ;
- the group of seventy-two (Lk 10:1)
- and crowds of others who followed him occasionally or all the time.

Moreover, we can easily make out some of the **characteristics** that identify this community of followers. First of all, an essential and constitutive condition for being part of the community is close presence to Jesus: “And he appointed twelve to be with him” (Mk

3:13–14). Throughout the centuries the Lord reminds us: “Apart from me you can do nothing” (Jn 15:15).

This closeness to Jesus allows the disciples to experience the gratuitous love that creates community and communion. Jesus is clear on this point: “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). And he returns to this point in his priestly prayer near the end of his mortal life: “that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).

Moreover, it is through hearing the Word, through faith, and conversion to the Kingdom that the community is built up, not by ties of flesh and blood :

-“Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5).

-“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother” (Mt 12:50).

-“My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it” (Lk 8:21).

The community is also built and rebuilt by means of some very concrete practices. The five main ones are the following :

-Humble service : “You also ought to wash one another’s feet” (Jn 13 :14).

-The service of authority : “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant” (Mt 20:26).

-The service of fraternal correction : “Tell him his fault . . . . If he listens to you, you have gained your brother” (Mt 18:15).

-The service of forgiving offences : “I do not say to you seven times, but seventy times seven” (Mt 18:22).

-The service of common prayer : “Where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:20).

Last, let us say that the community has a common **mission** and a common purpose: “He appointed twelve . . . to be sent out to preach” (Mk 3:14); “He called to him the twelve, and began to send them out two by two” (Mk 6:7); “The Lord appointed seventy others, and sent them on ahead of him” (Lk 10:1). And this mission is none other than the mission of Jesus himself, that is to say, to announce and live out the Kingdom of God.

This point is so important it deserves a word of clarification. Oddly, Jesus never explicitly defines what the **Kingdom of God** consists of. He takes it for granted that his hearers understand him and that there is no need for explanations. Indeed, his hearers not only understood him but were also enthusiastic about this message, which for them was truly good news.

In saying that the Kingdom of God was near at hand, Jesus meant that God was going to reign. In other words, God was going to impose his merciful and just will. He was effectively going to defend those who could not defend themselves (see Psalms 45 and 72). It is therefore not at all unusual that Jesus’ preaching about the Kingdom found an enthusiastic welcome among the poor masses (the economically needy, the politically oppressed, and the socially marginalized). The only news that is really good news to the poor is that God is on their side and will do something for them (!), as Mary of Nazareth, the singer of the Magnificat, understood perfectly.

Only in this way—by inviting all to conversion and favoring those who are poor, weak, and fragile and who live in precariousness and dependence—can there be universal fellowship in the protective embrace of the one God and Father of all.

Jesus’ community project extended into the **Apostolic Church**. The death and resurrection of Christ reconciled all that was divided (Col 1:20; Eph 1:10; 2:14–16). His Holy Spirit will be the principal agent of unification and community-building (Acts 2:1–36). The charismatic and ministerial gifts of the Spirit are at the service of the community (1 Cor 12–14). *Koinonia* (Acts 2:42–44; 4:32), which is the heart of the community, realizes and expresses itself in the following ways:

- Sharing of goods (Acts 2:44–45; 5:1–11; 11:27–30; 2 Cor 8–9).
- Listening to the Word, prayers, meals in common (Acts 2:42).
- Celebration of the Lord’s Supper (Acts 2:42; 1 Cor 11:17–34).

To summarize, the community of the Twelve and the Women had the predominant role during the public life of Jesus. Among these women the Mother of Jesus held a central place.

All of these together were to become the nucleus of the post-resurrection community (Acts 1:12–14).

The cross made the community disperse (Lk 24:13 ff.) or hide (Jn 20:19), but the Risen Lord called it back together (Lk 24:33–35). Post-resurrection following of Jesus is a community undertaking: salvation and being part of the community go hand in hand (Acts 2:47).

The goal of the Christian community—yesterday, today, and always—is to make present the kingdom of God: filiation and fraternity are the fruit and the realization of the commandment to love God and neighbor. It is to this end that God reigns: offering his favor to the poor and his forgiveness to whomever converts and asks pardon. The Reign of God is radically transcendent and, for that very reason, has deep roots in the history of humankind.

Christian spirituality, understood as a form of gospel living guided by the Spirit, is a community undertaking centered in the God of the Kingdom and the Kingdom of God, and has as its finality communion with God (filiation) and communion among humans (brotherly and sisterly communion).

## 2. Listening to our Fathers . . .

The aim of Benedict's Rule is to set up *a school of the Lord's service* (Prol. 45). The school, however, is not the monastery (which already existed when Benedict wrote his Rule) but rather the rule that has to be lived out in the monastery. And the aim of this school/rule is *to preserve charity* (Prol. 47), or, as Saint Bernard will say in a more dynamic spirit, *to increase and preserve charity* (Pre 5).

And how does charity grow? By putting it into practice, that is to say, by exercising the *instruments of the spiritual craft* (RB 4) and, above all, by exercising *good zeal* with more ardent love (RB 72).

For our **Cistercian Fathers**, the school of the Rule is a *school of Christ*, where one learns love of neighbor, the effect and proof of love of God (see Bernard, Div 121). In other words, the cenobitic ideal consists of an ongoing process of divinization and socialization. In case any doubt remains, the Abbot of Clairvaux confirms this assertion for us: *You love socially if you give yourself over to loving and being loved, if you always show yourself to*

*be gentle and affable, if you tolerate with utmost patience your brothers' weaknesses of body and spirit (PP 1.4). And it is well known that Love of God cannot be perfected unless it is nourished and expanded through love of neighbor (Sent 1.21). Per socialitatem caritas acquiritur! (Div 64.2)*

It would be easy to put together a collection of Cistercian texts that sing the praises of the common life and of the holy community. I won't give in to the temptation to do so. Rather, I'll give into another temptation. I don't know how many of you have read and pondered Baldwin of Ford's *Tractate 15 on the Cenobitic Life*. I offer you a "file" of texts to leaf through as you please:

**-The essence of charity :** *By a sort of inward feeling, charity indicates to our innermost being that its nature is to love and to wish to be loved.*

**-The Communicability of charity :** *In the same way, love, by a certain instinctive movement, longs to pour itself forth and transfer the good it possesses to someone it loves with all its love; it longs to have it in common, to take the other as a companion and to share its possession with him.*

**-The Communicability of charity is twofold :**

*-A love of sharing [or communion of goods] is not enough for the lover: there must also be a sharing of love [or communion of persons]. And since it wants to share its goods, it wants much more to share love itself.*

*-Love does not know what it is to be ungenerous, and it hates to be solitary. By bestowing things so freely and profusely, it strives, as if through the love of sharing, to bring about a sharing of love. If love wanted to keep its goods for itself alone and did not want to have them in common, where would be its generosity ? Or if it stood alone in loving another and not being loved in return, where would be the comfort of love ? It is written, "Woe to one that is alone."*

**-Charity puts individually held goods at the service of the common good :** *By its judgement, charity knows how to convert individual ownership into common ownership, and it does so not by doing away with individual ownership, but by making individual ownership serve a common end. In this way, whatever is individual is not separated from what is common and therefore does not detract from the common good. But since charity loves to share things in common, a distribution of personal ownership which does detract from the common good is contrary to charity. Charity, however, also loves individual ownership when it promotes the common good and does not hinder having things in common. Indeed, although it is possible to have individual ownership without the common good, it is impossible to share things in common unless there is also individual ownership.*

**-Charity brings unity to divided spiritual goods :** *The different gifts are made common in two ways:*

*-When the gifts given to individuals individually are possessed in common by the sharing of love,*

*-and when they are loved in common by the love of sharing.*

*In a way, a gift is always common to the one who has it and the one who does not. If he who has it shares it with another, he has it for the sake of the other; and he who does not have it actually does have it in the other because he loves him.*

**-It is in charity that our likeness with God resides :** *There is nothing in us more similar to the charity which is God than the charity we have in us from God. Through charity the image of God is reformed in us; through charity God is seen and sensed in us much more completely than he is known by faith alone. [...] If it is given us to recognize the giver of the gift from the gift itself, then there can be no doubt that the love of sharing and the sharing of love correspond to the nature of God.*

Stimulated by this aperitif, I hope you will take your place at table, make yourself at home, and take in the whole of that treatise.

**- 3. . . and to recent statements of the Magisterium :**

Let us now move on to a strong statement from our present Pope. By way of a small confidence, I take the liberty of pointing out that those who were involved in the preparation of the Pope's speech asked the good services of our Generalate to locate the reference to Saint Bernard . . . .

*The fruitfulness of religious life depends on the quality of fraternal life in common. Moreover, present-day renewal in the Church and in religious life is characterized by a search for communion and community. Religious life will therefore be more meaningful to the extent that it succeeds in building fraternal communities in Christ, communities in which God is loved and sought above all else (CCC 619). It will lose its reason for existing, however, if it forgets this dimension of Christian love, which is the building up of a small family of God with those who have received the same calling. This fraternal life must reflect "the goodness of God our Savior and his love for all" (Titus 3:4) as was made manifest in Jesus Christ. Thus, if this public witness of religious life does not present itself through apostolic action and personal*

*self-realization, religious communities will lose their ability to evangelize and will no longer be what Saint Bernard defined with his beautiful expression scholae amoris, that is to say, places where one learns to love the Lord and to become, day after day, children of God and, therefore, brothers and sisters. (John Paul II, Speech to the plenary meeting of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, November 21, 1993)*

Present-day renewal in the Church, the Pope says, is characterized by a search for communion and community. And all the more so with regard to renewal of consecrated life and of our cenobitic monastic life: all the documents published by the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life over the last 25 years, in one form or another, invite consecrated persons to be *witnesses and makers of communion*.

The Synod on the Consecrated Life shaped this spiritual sensibility by coining the programmatic phrase “**spirituality of communion.**” The post-synodal document *Vita Consecrata* included it in the context of *sentire cum Ecclesia* (VC 48). The Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, at the closing of the Jubilee Year 2000, explains the phrase’s meaning and scope in a text that is meant to be the Church’s Carta Magna for our century (NMI 43). The Congregation’s recent Instruction, *Starting Afresh from Christ*, presents the spirituality of communion as *an active and exemplary task for consecrated life on all levels* (Starting Afresh 29) and both assimilates and summarizes earlier teachings:

*A spirituality of communion indicates above all the heart's contemplation of the mystery of the Trinity dwelling within us and whose light we must also be able to see shining on the faces of the brothers and sisters around us.*

*A spirituality of communion also means an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body and therefore as “those who are part of me ...”.*

*Some consequences of feeling and doing derive from this principal with convincing logic:*

*sharing the joys and sufferings of our brothers and sisters;*

*sensing their desires and attending to their needs;*

*offering them true and profound friendship.*

*The spirituality of communion also implies the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and to prize it as a gift from God, and to know how to make room for others, sharing each other's burdens.*

And the texts closes with a powerful statement: *Unless we follow this spiritual path, the external structures of communion serve very little purpose* (VC 29, which also cites NMI 43). This statement might serve as an antidote against any epidemics of monastic “observantism” or “rigorism.”

#### 4. To build *Communio* today.

By looking closely at our Order, it is easy to notice a certain diversity—both among communities and within each of them—in the ways we understand and live our monastic life. This diversity is the result of many factors; to list a few: the community’s country of origin, the date of foundation or of the entrance of its members, its open or closed attitude with regard to change and evolution, the formation received, the talents of its members, et cetera. We can at least distinguish three major **models** in the way we live out our charism. I take the liberty to add a fourth, which will need to be further explained so that we do not remain at the level of merely wishing for the utopia of the Kingdom.

We come up with an overall view, though not a simplistic one, along the following lines:

<b>Different (and complementary ? ) forms of living out some of the aspects of our life</b>				
<b>Periods</b>	<b>1900–1960</b>	<b>1960–1975</b>	<b>1975–1990</b>	<b>Utopia</b>
<b>Forms</b>	Ascetical (observances)	Personal (individual values)	Community (common values)	Gospel (experience of communion)
<b>Poverty</b>	Permissions, scarcity, renunciation, hard work	Responsibility, profitable work, necessary minimum	Common goods, economic administration	To be blessed and in solidarity both <i>ad intra</i> and <i>ad extra</i>

<b>Chastity</b>	Prevention, modesty, undivided heart	Experience of God, psychological aspects	Affective community climate, friendships	Mystically to love Jesus and one's brothers/sisters with all one's being
<b>Obedience</b>	Normative observance, renunciation of one's own will	Promotion of talents and personal responsibility	Dialogue, community discernment, team work	That the Kingdom might come through communion of wills
<b>Community</b>	Uniformity and separation from the world	Pluriformity and the value of the individual	Horizontal relations and common vision	Sacrament of communion with Christ and brothers/sisters
<b>Liturgy</b>	Rubrics, sacredness, <i>measure of service</i>	Means for one's encounter with God	Place of celebration in common	To celebrate the Mystery of Christ among and in us
<b>Prayer</b>	Methodical prayer, devotions, and spiritual reading	<i>Opus Dei</i> in the vernacular and <i>lectio divina</i>	Christian contemplation and eastern meditation	To culminate in the Eucharistic Celebration
<b>Virtues</b>	Obedience, humility, and silence	Authenticity and prudence	Communicability and discernment	To live with good zeal or ardent love
<b>Authority</b>	Monarchical and independent	Paternal-Maternal and in subsidiarity	Shared and delegated	For the service of the community and of each

No doubt, these models coexist in our communities and most often take shape according to the different generations. Each model has its value and limitations, so the important thing is to add up what is of value and use it to mend the limitations. Such discernment requires a great openness of horizons and great community sensitivity in order to accept differences to the benefit of the common good. Seen in this way, community is a continual task and, in the final analysis, a miracle of divine grace.

I will now share with you a two-fold reflection: first, a theoretical reflection (which I don't dare call theological) and, second, a practical one.

To begin with the **theory**, it should be obvious to everyone, since it immediately catches the attention, that in recent years consecrated life has shifted from an understanding of

community as “common life” (based on the observances and structures that regulate common living) to an understanding of community as “life in communion” (with stress on the newness and quality of relationships). We have learned that what really creates community is not common exercises but rather Trinitarian *Communio*, which, once it is welcomed as a gift, allows for truly loving relationships.

Therefore, if we want to live fraternal life in common, understood as a life shared in love, our communities not only have to be :

- “communities of observance”: common observance being the primary means of fraternal unity,

- or simply “communities of values”: values (i.e. desirable goods that give life to the observances) as the primary means of communion,

- or even “communities with a common vision”: common understanding of monastic values as a factor of communion among brothers and sisters,

but also communities of :

- able persons: so that each is capable of giving and receiving love, in the image and likeness of God,

- observances that are valued as life-giving because based on a common vision of values as proper means for attaining union with God and with one’s brothers and sisters,

- and that consider the two-fold precept of love as the supreme value that creates communion since it allows Christ to live in and among us.

We know, of course, that our love feeds on that communion with the Body and Blood of Christ, which *realizes in us that charity by which everything becomes common, those things that belong to each becoming common to all* (Baldwin of Ford, *On the Sacrament of the Altar*, commenting on 1 Cor 10:14–21).

Now let us come down to the **practical level**. By observing the lives of our communities in the concrete, I have come to this simple conclusion: the quality of the community depends on the quality of its communication. When I speak of communication I am referring to two pairs of words: **listening-silence** and **word-respect**.

The basis of our communion with God is our communication with God. *Lectio divina*, *Opus Dei*, and *intentio cordis* are the ways listening-silence and word-respect usually take shape. Normally, this is how we live out our love toward God. But that is not the subject we are dealing with here.

Communication among us, whether verbal or non-verbal, falls under the same pairs of words: hearing-silence and word-respect. It can take on different forms, sometimes casual, at other times more formal.

The traditional discipline of silence has taught us to keep our mouths shut, not to speak. But, as some see it, the traditional discipline has not taught us to listen or speak with discretion as the term *taciturnity* and the experience of taciturnity were intended to do according to the Rule of Benedict. Some think the traditional discipline did not even help us keep silence, the proof being that in all regular visitations we use an abundance of words to complain about the lack of silence.

What is urgently needed, then, is a discipline of the discreet word, which implies respectful listening. The discreet word presupposes proper answers to questions such as: Have I listened before speaking? Do I know what I mean to say? Is he/she the person I need to speak with? Is this the right time and place? Am I communicating, informing, complaining, or murmuring?...

The *Ratio Institutionis* mentions some forms of community communication: *Communal discussions and dialogues, forms of Gospel sharing and fraternal correction, can be important means in the formation of the community* (RI 13). Since it would be impossible to address all of them, let us at least say something about dialogues.

Resistance to dialogue often stems from bad experiences in this regard. In fact, we might suspect that, if an experience was not positive, it was not really a dialogue. Community dialogue is a very specific type of communication. It is a kind of group communication clearly delimited along the lines of what Saint Benedict tries to describe in the third chapter of his Rule: *On Calling the Brethren for Counsel*. If we follow what Benedict suggests, we would never have a bad experience !

What do I mean by dialogue? To dialogue is to communicate with each other in a friendly way and to interact in a cooperative way in view of a common goal. Or, to put it in more cenobitic terms, to dialogue is to be truthful, to say and do the truth in love. Above all, such dialogue involves three basic attitudes: to have a positive regard for the others, to give of oneself generously, and to welcome one's neighbor with care and concern.

If we had such attitudes, assuredly we would soon be able to listen and speak in a dialogical way. Some communities, for cultural reasons or because of personal histories, will need to work more on listening, while others will need work on how to speak. One way or the other, a brother or a sister who listens in this way—with the ear of the heart (understanding and loving), with interest and respect (allowing others to be themselves and reveal themselves)—can become the most active participant in community dialogue on account of this listening attitude. The seven golden rules for speaking properly might be expressed along the following lines:

to speak :

-clearly : truthfully

-humbly : without absolutizing

-prudently : appropriately

-in a friendly manner : without interrupting or dominating

-in a committed way : without theorizing

-confidently : without fear

-of the essential : with precision

It is my opinion that, if we work at the art of community dialogue, we will improve our horizontal, vertical, and diagonal relationships . . . , we will be, moreover, more conformed to the gospel, better cenobites, and better ascetics and mystics.

I conclude by joining my wishes to those of another Bernard, that remarkable master of mystical and fraternal love :

*Let there also be unity of spirit among us, beloved: let hearts be united in loving the One, seeking the One, clinging to the One, and being of the same mind. Thus, even exterior division will avoid danger and will not become a scandal. This does not prevent each from having personal concerns, personal points of view about how things should be done, and even different gifts of grace. Nor is it possible for all to work in the same way. Still, interior unity and unanimity keep multiplicity together and embrace it with the bonds of charity and peace. (Sept 2.3)*

With a fraternal embrace in Mary of Saint Joseph,

**Bernardo Olivera**

Abbot General OCSO