

Feast of St. Bruno
October 6th, 2004



Death of St. Bruno October 6, 1101

"I am making all things new"

Address given to the monks of St. Hugh's
Charterhouse on October 6th, 1994

Vatican II invited the religious orders to a renewal of their lives, on the one hand by returning to their true sources, namely the Word of God and the charism of the founder, and on the other hand by correctly reading the signs of the times and responding creatively to the needs of the contemporary world.

There is therefore a looking back and a looking forward, an opening to the Spirit that animates our Order for all time as a spring nourishes a river in all its length and a listening to this same Spirit as it speaks to us through the conditions and events of the historic moment in which we live.

It is the constant dialogues between old and new, the creative adaptation of the living social organism that characterizes a life at once faithful to its original identity and capable of giving itself new forms and ways of being as historically required.

This implies change and change is threatening to a venerable institution. It is going into the unknown and unproved. By reaction, there is a risk of an institution refusing all change, however necessary, and becoming calcified, a museum of fossils from the past, completely out of touch with the times.

There is the corresponding risk of an institution losing contact with its living tradition and its past and modelling itself, without discernment, on the values and manners of contemporary society that are rarely inspired by the gospel of Christ. We have then to go forward, without falling into one or other of these extremes, in a paschal faith in God's loving providence, humbly prepared to let go of whatever may be an obstacle to the following of Christ and the creative newness of his Spirit.

Renewal involves three principle stages:

1. A perception that things are not perfect, that something needs to be done.
2. A questioning of existing attitudes and structures with all the anxiety and pain that this involves. There is an impression of chaos, a passage through a desert.
3. A formulation of a new understanding of the life and goals of the Institute and a finding of more adequate attitudes and structures, expressing a newfound consensus and integration.

In the light of this, where should we situate the Carthusian Order thirty years after the council? I think that, with the rest of the Church, we are still in the desert period though with some first-fruits of the Promised Land in view. Renewal concerns more than ideas and documents, it demands a change of the attitudes of the heart and personal conversion. We can have very strong resistance, more or less conscious, to it.

There can be the denial that there is a problem that anything needs to be changed. This was the attitude of a certain number in the Order, particularly among the older monks at the time of the council. The call for renewal came from without, not so much from the Carthusian grass roots. They failed to realize that they could not isolate themselves from the global situation of the Church and the world. One can readily understand how difficult it was and is for them to assimilate the new understanding of itself proposed by the Church, at least at the level of the heart.

The Order as such sought to be obedient to the Spirit of Christ speaking to it through the Council. There were consultations of the members of the Order, commissions, meetings, experimentation in some areas, and finally the new Statutes that sought to codify the effort of renewal. Further experimentation was discouraged, without it being possible to revert to the legislative immobility of the pre-Council days. What was the result? Much that was obsolete in the observance was dropped. Solitude was favored by restoring the primitive balance of liturgy in Church and in cell.

The texts of the liturgy were enriched and some degree of vernacular introduced while still maintaining the preponderance of Latin and Gregorian chant. In general, more was left to the responsibility of the individual monk than to detailed legislation, and the exercise of authority was envisaged from a more pastoral point of view. At the level of the Order more authority was devolved to the Houses, and the General Chapter began to function in a more corporate way. A serious effort was made to improve the formation process. The status of the Brothers as fully monks was affirmed. Active participation in the choir and the habitation of a hermitage became possible for the Brothers who desired it.

Are we nearer to the primitive simplicity and authenticity of the life of our fathers? At least the possibility is there. So, everything is fine? Hardly, yet. The communities of the Order, in general, are aging. There is recruitment in the last decade or two but the perseverance is poor, the problems in the field of formation more and more complex. The shape of the future is uncertain.

Our own house illustrates this well. We must admit a real poverty and precariousness as a community, as well as a considerable cultural distance separating us from the contemporary scene. To enter into the Charterhouse nowadays for a young man represents a sort of emigration. This is not entirely negative. Monastic life has often arisen and flourished in times of confusion and chaos so that it can have the role of challenging by proposing a lifestyle based unambiguously on

gospel values without compromise. The Church and the world need that witness. Even the poverty of our community may be seen to be a hidden grace.

We are coming to the end of a generation, the generation that lived through the Council years. We are situated at that point of transition that I spoke of as the time of the desert, a place of paschal dying and rising in Christ to a new life that will be lived by another generation with the same ideals who will carry the torch forward in their own way.

The continuation of the charism of St. Bruno, the charism of a community of men or women living a solitary contemplative life, corresponds to something so fundamental

In human spiritual experience and in the identity of the Church of Christ, that its continuation, to my mind, is assured. The cultural envelope and means of expression may change, but that is not important.

We can go forward in hope, confidence and joy, bearing the face of Christ turned towards the Father, windows of the love of the Spirit of God and human beings. Like St. Bruno, let us do so always with joyful countenance (*semper festo vultu*).

