

October 6, 2003

## The poor of Christ



Feast of Saint Bruno

From: The spirit of place: Carthusian reflections.

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The celebration of the feast of St. Bruno is always an invitation to meditate on the meaning of our vocation. Often, perhaps we center too much on the figure of St. Bruno taken in isolation. He is spoken of as the founder of the Carthusian Order, yet it could be argued that this is not quite correct. He never intended to found an Order, as far as we know.

We tend to forget he was one of a group of men, seven in all, who set forth together. Their life contained, from the beginning, a social interdependence, they formed a community. They were not a group of hermits accidentally living in proximity to one another. They were, and wanted to be, a community of hermits, the charity of their community life being the cement which held

together their solitary life. And, at a very practical level, the community could not function without the complimentary service of the fathers and the Brothers.

Bruno, of course, held a central place in the community. He was the recognized head and an inspirational force, though what concrete form that took we do not really know. It was probably much less structured than nowadays, and based on Bruno's charism. The more juridical organization described by Guigo came some years later, in part, no doubt, under the influence of Guigo's own turn of mind.

When Bruno was called to Italy, after only six years, the community faltered for a moment. The monks, disoriented without their leader, were dispersed. After two and a half years, however, they came back together again, drawn now not by the attractive force of the personality of Bruno, but by their love for the contemplative values of the seeking of God in silence and solitude. This is a more mature community, inspired certainly by the example of Bruno, carrying on his legacy, yet more personally and without his presence.

We know their names. There was Master Lanuin a man of delicate health whom Bruno named as his successor. (In passing, for many years this was the custom, rather than being elected by the community, the Prior was named by the outgoing Prior) Then there were the two Stephens, Stephen of Bourg and Stephen of Die, both former canons of St. Ruf but not priests. The only priest among them was Hugh the chaplain. Finally there were the two converse Brothers, Andrew and Guerin.

We know little about Master Lanuin because of his visit to Bruno in Calabria and the subsequent letter by Bruno to the Chartreuse, but of the others we know little more than the year of their death. There would have been two or three on each side of the choir. The chant would have been rustic, not all would have had good voices. I would not be surprised if one of them had a tendency to begin ahead of the rest! The liturgy, like the life, was very simple. They were a small group of unpretentious monks, who were known as the Pauperes Christi, the poor of Christ.

Yet the spiritual quality of these almost anonymous and unsung men must have been very real, if we are to judge from the fecundity of the lineage issuing from it. They had their trials, of course, for theirs was necessarily the way of the cross. In the year 1132, 48 years after the foundation, an avalanche crushed the monastery, killing 7 of a community of about 15. The house was rebuilt with great difficulty at a site further down the valley, only to be burned down, and rebuilt, eight times in nine centuries. There were outstanding men from time to time across the centuries but basically it was the community, living and passing on its way of life, that lasted through time to our day.



Death of Saint Bruno October 6, 1101

One reason for drawing your attention to this is that the next General Chapter will discuss and try to formulate more clearly the role of the community in the formation of our young monks. This is intended to complete the documents on the role of the novice-master, and to give a more complete picture. The role of the novice-master is clearly very important, but it must be seen within the community. If the community does not fulfil its role, the novice-master alone can do nothing. What then is the role of the community? Why is it so important? Is it, finally, the community who is responsible for the formation of the young? What can we do, as a community, to fulfil our role better?

As you see, I am asking questions, not giving answers. For, I would like you to reflect on this matter. In a month or two, we could perhaps share our thoughts and perhaps come up with some practical suggestions. I would like to be able to communicate to the General Chapter the opinions of the community, perhaps a written document. This will further help us to reflect together on our situation and discern better what God is trying to say to us, here and now.

May the spirit and grace of St. Bruno enlighten our hearts, and give us joy and courage, as they did to the first small group of his companions, who were happy to be poor in Christ.