



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE FRANCIS
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE GENERAL CHAPTER OF THE ORDER OF THE
CISTERCIANS OF THE STRICT OBSERVANCE**

*Clementine Hall
Saturday, 23 September 2017*

[Multimedia]

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome you with joy on the occasion of your General Chapter. I thank each of you for this visit, beginning with the Abbot General who has acted as interpreter for all of you, also illustrating the aims and objectives of your Assembly. Through you, I wish to send a warm greeting to your brothers and sisters dispersed throughout your monasteries in various countries.

With my heart and mind, I think of your silent cloisters, from which constant prayer rises for the Church and the world. And I thank the Lord for the irreplaceable presence of monastic communities which represent a spiritual wealth and a constant call to seek, above all, “the things from above”, so as to experience in a just measure our earthly realities.

In these days of reflection and exchange of experiences, you are called to identify the objectives and pathways to live your vocation and your consecration with ever increasing authenticity, keeping in mind the needs of the present moment, so as to be witnesses of *constant prayer*, *self-restraint* and *unity* in charity.

Your contemplative life is characterized by *constant prayer*, the expression of your love for God and the reflection of a love which embraces all humankind. By following the example of Saint Benedict, you do not place anything before the *Opus Dei*. I urge you to give great importance to meditation on the Word of God, especially on the *lectio divina* which is the source of prayer and school of contemplation. To be a contemplative requires a faithful and dedicated journey in order

to become men and women of prayer, evermore filled with love for the Lord and transformed into his friends. It is a case of not being “professionals” — in a negative sense — but rather of being enamoured of prayer, taking into consideration the fidelity that is beyond the practises and norms which regulate it and mark its moments, not as an end, but as the means to advance in the personal relationship with God. In this way, you become teachers and witnesses who offer Him the sacrifice of praise and intercede for the necessities and the salvation of the people. And at the same time, your monasteries continue to be privileged places in which to find true peace and genuine happiness which only God, our safe haven, can give.

From the outset, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance were characterized by their great *self-restraint* in life, convinced that it was a valid support in order to concentrate on the essential and to more readily attain the joy of the spousal encounter with Christ. This element of spiritual and existential simplicity preserves its entire value of testimony in today’s cultural context, which too often leads to the desire for ephemeral goods and illusory, artificial paradises.

This lifestyle also favours your internal relationships and those external to your monasteries. You do not live as hermits in a community but rather as cenobites in a unique desert. God manifests Himself in your personal solitude, as well as in the solidarity which unites you to members of the community. You are alone and separated from the world so that you may venture into the path of divine intimacy. At the same time, you are called to make this spiritual experience known and to share it with other brothers and sisters, in a constant balance between personal contemplation, union with the Liturgy of the Church and welcoming those seeking moments of silence in order to be introduced into the experience of living with God. Your Order, as every religious institute, is a gift from God to the Church. Thus, it is necessary that it be well integrated into the communal dimension of the Church itself. I encourage you to be qualified witnesses in the search for God, schools of prayer and schools of charity for all.

The “Charter of Charity”, the document which details the procedures of your vocation, duly certified by the Church, establishes the essential traits of the General Chapter, called to be a symbol of *unity in charity* for the entire Institute. This unity in charity is the paradigm of each religious family that is called to follow Christ more closely in the dimension of community life, and is best expressed in your single monastic communities, in a climate of true and cordial fraternity, according to the words of the Psalm: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Ps 133:1). Saint Benedict’s invitation resonates ever timely: “that no one may be troubled or grieved in the house of God”.

Unity in charity is also expressed in *fidelity to the spiritual patrimony*, that is, to the identity of your Order. The General Chapter is a favourable occasion to renew, in a climate of dialogue and reciprocal listening, the communion of goals in the search for God’s will. I urge you to question yourselves with serenity and truth on the quality of your life testimony, on dynamic fidelity to the charism, on how it is lived by your monastic communities and by individual monks and nuns.

Safeguarding the charism is, in fact, one of the main responsibilities of the General Chapter, and it is a vital experience of the present which lies between grateful remembrance of the past and anticipation of a hopeful future.

Throughout its history, your Order has known times of grace and moments of difficulty; but it has always persevered in fidelity to the *sequela* of Christ, having as its purpose the glory of God and the good of the people. Continuing in the way of your spiritual tradition, you can read the present state of the Order in its stirrings of light and shadows and, in the novelty of the Spirit, identify with courage new opportunities and occasions to witness your charism in the present of the Church and of Society.

I hope that this witness will be made even more eloquent by an increasingly organic coordination between the different branches of the Order.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of God, example of all consecrated life, accompany the work of your Chapter and the journey of the Order with her maternal intercession. As I ask you to pray for me, I impart my Apostolic Blessing which I also convey to all the monks and nuns of your community. Thank you.