

SOLEMNITY OF THE FOUNDERS OF CITEAUX

January 26, 2014

There was a time, in the early 70s, when it was common in monastic circles to ask, "What is a monk?" Right after Vatican II there was a lot of uncertainty in the monastic life in general, so much so that the General Chapter thought it necessary to publish a document of only a few paragraphs entitled, "Declaration on the Cistercian Life" and a companion piece called, "Document on Unity and Pluralism". These documents were meant to express the essentials of our life. Nonetheless people, including monks kept asking what is a monk? It got so bad that an acceptable answer was "A monk is someone who asks what is a monk!" And so life went on.

Here is an answer to our question taken from one of the earliest documents of our founders, *The Charter of Charity*. Here a Cistercian monk is described as someone who is a lover of the brethren and of the place. This is how St. Stephen Harding described St. Alberic.

Now place is extremely important to us; when we are born we are given a place in the family which means a place at the family table, a place to sleep etc. When we start school we are given a place in a classroom, when we graduate we have a place to work. Place is important in monastic life also. Remember, the *Book of Regulations* had a chapter on the Regular Places. When we join a monastery we are given a place in choir, a place in the refectory, a place called a cell to read and pray and sleep in, a place in the chapter room. One of the prerequisites of all these places is that they are secure. No one can arbitrarily take them from us. If you are thirty years old and still living with your parents, they might hint that it is time to have a place of your own but most likely they would not kick you out.

The first Cistercians were said to have gone to a place called Citeaux because it was remote, in fact in the early documents the author borrows from Deuteronomy in describing Citeaux as, and I quote, "a place of horror and vast solitude" (Dt 32:10. Another translation has it as "a wasteland of howling desert" (NAB). Our founders transformed this howling desert into a garden of Paradise: a place where the monk gradually regained his image of God. The names they gave to their monasteries bear out their love of the place: Bellefontain (beautiful fountain) Aiguebelle, (beautiful waters) Mellifont, (Sweet Fountain) and of course St. Bernard's monastery, Clairvaux (valley of light). I have visited all the monasteries of the US Region and without a doubt your setting in the Ogden Valley surrounded by mountains is one of the most beautiful – a true Cistercian site.

But no matter how beautiful the place and no matter how much we love it, we know our true homeland is in heaven. The Psalms are a wonderful reminder of this in so many passages about the passing of time and how our life is over like a sigh, or our days are like grass that withers by evening.

Lovers of the place *and of the brethren*. This, of course is more important than being lovers of the place. Our first reading addresses this fact, “You must not exact vengeance, nor must your bear a grudge You must love your neighbor” (Lv 19:17–18). This reading is addressed to the community of Israel. The founding of Cîteaux was a community effort; there were twenty-one monks who left Molesme. Robert, Alberic and Stephen are named founders, but all the monks were founders. Isaac of Stella has a wonderful homily on community life. In it he asks the question, “Why, brothers, are we so little concerned to seek one another’s well being, why can I not patiently bear the weaknesses I see in my brother which, out of necessity or because of physical or moral weakness cannot be corrected. This is indeed the law of Christ who truly bore our weaknesses in his passion and carried our sorrow out of pity, loving those he carried and carrying those he loved” (5th week of ordinary time, Saturday, *Breviary Office of Readings*).

It is relatively easy to be a lover of the place, but to carry each others burdens and be concerned about the well being of our brothers in community is not easy, especially in this age of individualism. We are trained to be independent and not to depend on others (I have a brother in law who says he raised his kids to be independent and succeeded beyond his wildest expectations).

Community living is called in monastic jargon, the common life. Living in common and sharing with others is not easy, but it is what we are called to do. It is our vocation and a way to imitate Christ who lived with a community of disciples. These disciples tested Jesus’ patience. They did not understand many of his parables; at a most inopportune time two asked for seats at his right and left missing his point of coming to serve and not to be served. One betrayed him resulting in his death, and Peter denied even knowing him, and all but one ran from him when he was dying on the Cross. These were his chosen ones just as we are his chosen ones. Forgiveness is the hallmark of the Christian life and of our Cistercian life. Forgiveness makes community life possible. Without it there is no Christian community.

So let us be true Cistercians by being lovers of the place and above all of the brethren.