

amusing to see this important council called Central! There is reason to think that, given the wonderful experience of the last forty years or so, these two Councils will continue to render their invaluable service to the entire Order.

At an extraordinary session of the first General Chapter of the Congregation of N.-D. de la Trappe in France, in May 1835, the abbots decided to have a seal for the definitions that they established, and they designed a *sigillum* that shows Our Lady holding her cloak over the six abbots, who at that time represented the two observances. Since three of these wore the famous *chaperon* and three did not, it was decided not to put three on one side and three on the other, but to mix them up to show that, while there was diversity exteriorly, there was perfect unity and affection among them. One might think of Our Lady, Queen of Cîteaux, holding in the folds of her cloak all the members of these two Councils, united in their very diversity and in their charity.

### 8.2.3. Reflection on the Relations between the Central Commission and the Regional Conferences

*(This is the conclusion of a long article by Dom Armand Veilleux, on the history of the Central Commission, which completes the preceding presentation, stressing the consequences that the development of this structure could have on that of the Regional Conferences.)<sup>4</sup>*

#### POSSIBLE LINES OF EVOLUTION FOR THE FUTURE

The Central Commission was born at the moment when the Regional Conferences were just beginning. Not only did the two structures evolve at the same time, but also there was continual interaction between the two.

As we saw, as soon as an idea came from a commission for the preparation of the General Chapter, Dom Ignace thought it important that all “parts” of the Order be aware of it. The meeting at Monte Cistello in 1964 had already proposed an interaction between the Central Commission and the Regions, thus indirectly recognizing the Regions, whereas the Order continued to be reticent about recognizing them directly and explicitly.

It must be said that for many years several abbots saw the Central Commission

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Histoire de la Commission centrale*, in *Un bonheur partagé. Mélanges offerts à Dom Marie-Gérard Dubois*, Cahiers Scourmontois 5, pp. 213-236. Our quote goes from p. 232 to the end. Dom Armand Veilleux has been abbot of Scourmont since 1999, after having been abbot of Mistassini (Canada) from 1969 to 1976, of Conyers (USA) from 1984 to 1990, Procurator of the Order from 1990 to 1998.

as a sort of mini-Chapter between less frequent General Chapters. As said above, this idea had already been launched by Dom Gueric of Scourmont in 1964, but was upheld especially by the USA Region and one or another abbot from the Canadian Region during the 1970s.

In reaction to this trend, which was considered a decentralizing movement, many insisted—even in the formulation of the Constitutions in 1984 and 1987—that the representatives of the regions be simply designated by the Regions, but really elected by the General Chapter.

The parallel and interdependent evolution of these two new structures of the Order that are the Regions and the Central Commission has certainly been fruitful. It has also had its drawbacks. If it allowed the Regions to contribute actively, each in its own way, to the transformation of other structures of the Order and to the elaboration of the new legislation (Constitutions and various Statutes), it has perhaps often led to giving second place to the aspect of mutual pastoral help, which was the first goal of these meetings of abbots and abbesses.

Throughout the evolution of the Central Commission and the *Consilium Generale* (a complex and interesting evolution), the representation of the Regions remained a fundamental element since 1967. Each time that it was a question of revising certain Regions or creating new ones, it was this question of representation at the Central Commission (and also of the delegate to the General Chapter) that caused difficulty. This was an understandable concern, because the number of members on the Central Commission could not increase indefinitely, and it would not be right for one region of three or four monasteries to be represented on an equal footing with a region of twenty.

In order to give new momentum to the Regions and to allow their geographical distribution to evolve freely, the time has perhaps come to imagine a composition of the Central Commission that would be decided on a basis other than representation by Regions.

The Regions were born in the perspective of mutual pastoral aid between the monasteries of the same geographic area. Their increasing involvement in the other structures of the Order has, in several cases, caused them to lose much of this pastoral dimension and to spend most of their time on juridical questions or problems of organization. Moreover, the increasing role taken by the Regions in the preparation of the General Chapters has caused several larger and better-organized Regions, with facility of communication and numerous competent persons, to acquire a preponderant influence on the movement of the Order. At the same time, the Regions farthest from Europe, with more limited means of communication, have often had to be content to “watch the train go by.”

In our day, a more important element than that of the Regions is culture. We

have become more and more sensitive to the multiculturalism at the heart of the Order. The distribution of the Order into Regions has immoderately promoted some cultures very close to one another, like the great European cultures (and their replicas in the Americas), represented by many powerful and influential Regional Conferences, while the numerous cultures of Africa on one hand, and those just as numerous and rich in Asia and Oceania, on the other, find themselves grouped into two Regions that, for practical reasons, can only meet rarely, and thus have a very limited influence on the course of the Order.

To Constitution 81 on the Central Commission was added a Statute, which says that it prepares the General Chapter, “coordinating the initiatives of the Regional Conferences.” At the time this Statute was written, I do not think people realized that it greatly limited the role of the Central Commission. In effect, since this time, it has been the Regional Conferences that prepare the General Chapter. The role of the Central Commission is very subordinate compared to that of the Regions. Concretely, each time that a Region requests that a question be submitted to the General Chapter, especially if it is the object of a vote within the Regional Conference, the Central Commission feels obliged to put the question on the program of the General Chapter. The Central Commission has only to determine by what procedure the question will be treated and, if need be, ask that someone prepare a working paper. Apart from that, each of the last five or six meetings of the Central Commission reviewed the procedure for the study of the House Reports, lightly putting the finishing touches on this procedure at each of its meetings.

One can legitimately wonder if this type of activity of the Central Commission really justifies the expenditure of time, energy, and money implied in a meeting of forty persons coming from all parts of the world. It is true that this meeting can also serve as a Plenary Council for the Abbot General, but so far experience has shown that this activity takes up a very small part of each meeting, and that there is no special reason to deal with questions ordinarily dealt with by the Abbot General and his permanent Council, other than the fact that the Plenary Council has gathered. A much smaller commission could do the same work in a much more effective and rapid manner.

Moreover, the fact that most of the members of the Central Commission are considered, on the one hand, as delegates of their respective Regions and, on the other hand, as elected by the General Chapter, does create some problems. Obviously their presence allows them at times to better explain the positions and points of view of their Region, already known by all through the Minutes of the Regional Conference, but what should they do if their personal opinion differs from that of their Region when it is time to vote or make a decision? Should they express their Region’s point of view or their own in this vote?

If we would dissociate the composition of the Central Commission from the system of Regions, we would have much greater freedom in finding a creative way to work with the multiculturalism of the Order at a Central Commission of more “human” dimensions, and each Region could develop its own identity and respond to the needs of the monasteries concerned without worrying about whether it is too small or too large. Nothing would impede the existence of small Regions of three or four monasteries belonging to the same culture or even the same geographic territory; and nothing would impede the creation of a whole range of interaction among several Regions. This would have a much greater chance of success than the numerous projects of sub-regions, which, with few exceptions, have not been successful.

Besides, given the fact that the style of General Chapters has changed considerably since the completion of the Order's great legislative effort, no doubt there is also reason for modifying the style of the Central Commissions. Much of the work could be done by a “Secretariat of the General Chapter,” composed of a small number of persons, who would meet for the first time one year before the General Chapter and a few times after that. The few superiors that it would be necessary to add to the Council of the Abbot General to form an “enlarged council” could be chosen at each General Chapter on the basis of the same criteria that have been laid down for the election of the members of the Council of the Abbot General.

One can only hope that this new structure of the Order, born in the aftermath of Vatican II and continually evolving in response to the changing situations and needs of the Order, will continue to transform and evolve, and not succumb to the danger of sclerosis that sooner or later threatens all structures.