

10.3. TRAPPIST-CISTERCIAN FORMATION IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

10.3.1. The Drafting of the 1990 Ratio Institutionis

(by Dom Armand Veilleux)³⁷

The Constitutions of our Order, drawn up between 1967 and 1987, and then approved by the Holy See in 1990, were further filled out by an important document called the *Ratio Institutionis* or “Document on Formation.” This document, written in the same spirit as the Constitutions, was also the fruit of years of work, involving all the communities and all the Regions of the Order; it was then studied, discussed, amended, and voted on at the Mixed General Meeting of 1990. To understand its guiding principles and the meaning that the Order wanted to give it, it could be useful to look not only at its own history but also what came before it.

1. PREHISTORY: THE “RATIO” OF 1958

Up until 1955 in men’s monasteries, with rare exceptions, almost all the choir monks became priests. The formation of the novices was given in two parallel novitiates, one for the choir monks and one for the lay brothers. For the lay brothers, once the novitiate ended, there was, in general, no more systematic formation. They went to the Sunday chapters of the abbot, to the sermons on feasts of sermon, and to the “repetitions” that their father master gave them. In some monasteries these repetitions were merely pious reflections of a nature to stir up fervor (*fervorino!*); elsewhere it was a more solid teaching, like the catechism. As for the choir monks, at the end of the novitiate, they began studying for the priesthood. The formation of the novitiate involved courses on the Rule and the vows, as well as learning the observances, i.e., everything needed to make profession with full knowledge!

On the whole, theological studies in our Order were rather weak, even if certain monasteries had an excellent tradition of spiritual and doctrinal formation. In general the same manuals were used as in the major seminaries, but in most

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cases formation in the monasteries was far from having the same academic value, even though the spiritual formation could be excellent. After the novitiate and theological studies there was little organized formation. There were simply “theological conferences” for the priests.

Then, in 1956, the Holy See issued the document *Sedes Sapientiae* on formation or, more specifically, studies in religious communities. New demands were made of all the communities. In particular it was asked that in monasteries where studies were done (which was the tradition of our Order), it was necessary to have qualified professors with recognized degrees.

Sedes Sapientiae also asked that each religious Institute draw up a *Ratio Studiorum*. Ours was published in 1958. It bore the title *Ratio Institutionis, praesertim studiorum*. The accent was clearly on studies, which was a good thing, because studies had been neglected in the Order up to that time.

It must not be forgotten that this was the time when, under the influence of Fathers de Lubac, Rahner, Congar, Chenu, and many others, theology became oriented toward the rediscovery of its scriptural and patristic foundations. This then led to a rediscovery and new understanding of our monastic tradition, including the tradition of *lectio divina*.

Dom Gabriel Sortais took these demands very seriously, leading to the construction of Monte Cistello, which had about 90 students the year that the Council opened.

1965: Consequences of the Decree of Unification

The Decree of Unification—which did not suppress the lay brothers but rather the distinction between two classes in our communities, establishing a single category of monks—put the question of formation in a new way. At the same time, in several monasteries of men, a current of what was called “lay monasticism” began to emerge. More and more the need was felt to form “monks” before forming “future priests.”

It was at this time also that collaborative efforts between monks and nuns began. All profited from this collaboration: the nuns’ formation had not always been very solid doctrinally, but it had always been oriented toward the monastic life and not toward the priesthood!

1968: Document on Formation

In 1968 the need was felt to revise our *Ratio*, precisely because of all this evolution. A commission of representatives from most of the Regions of the Order (the

Regions had just begun to appear a few years before) was set up to reflect on this theme. This commission did not propose a new *Ratio* but a series of documents containing many extremely useful elements, but which were not put together as a coherent whole. The following General Chapter recommended that the communities take inspiration from these documents but they were never voted in as official texts for the Order.

It was not by accident that a new interest in formation became apparent at the time when pluralism appeared in the Order, pluralism that was a consequence not only of a global cultural evolution, but also of the fact that the Order had suddenly spread to diverse cultures where it had not penetrated before or where it was present but not well represented.

Then came a long period of the renewal of our Constitutions, begun in 1967, which culminated in the Chapters of Holyoke and Escorial in 1984 and 1985, and finally in the 1987 Mixed General Meeting in Rome. During these years the Order did a tremendous amount in the area of formation, at the local, regional, and Order levels. Secretaries for formation existed in almost all the Regions, and several initiatives were very successful.

In the excellent section on formation, the new Constitutions made reference to the preparation of a *Ratio Institutionis* that would be prepared by the General Chapter. This *Ratio* also seemed to be required by the new Code of Canon Law promulgated in 1983.

2. DRAWING UP A NEW RATIO

The 1986 Mixed Preparatory Meeting (MPM I) asked each Region to write a new draft of this *Ratio*—or if that could not be done, a document that would summarize its contents—and send it to the Central Secretary for Formation before March 1, 1987. Fr. Cornelius Justice of Mount Melleray was then elected to this task. His job was to present a synthesis of these texts at the following meeting.

The second Mixed Preparatory Meeting (MPM II) decided that Fr. Cornelius, working with the Regional Secretaries of Formation, would prepare a draft text of the *Ratio* to submit to the next MGM scheduled for 1987 in Rome.

1987: The Chambarand Text / and the MGM of 1987

Fr. Cornelius established an impressive network of communication, and called forth an important reflection in the Order. During a meeting of three weeks with almost all the Regional Secretaries of the Order, he prepared a draft text that

would be known by the name of **Chambarand I** and which was communicated to the Capitulants during the General Chapter, the program of which was already extremely overloaded, since the last revision of the Constitutions had to be finished before presenting them to the Holy See. The only decision the assembly made was to recommend study of the formation document by all the Regional Conferences and those who were responsible for formation.

It was no longer a question of a *Ratio studiorum* (which still had to be done) but of a document that treated all monastic formation.

In the year that followed the Chapters of 1987, nearly all the Regions met and studied this *Ratio* project. On the whole the reactions were positive, but there was also a general desire for a more succinct text with less “psychologizing” while at the same time conserving the recognized importance of the psychological dimension of formation.

The Central Commission Meeting at Cardeña in 1989 ratified these orientations and appointed a commission of three persons to revise the text in time to arrive at the MGM of 1990 with a text already quite acceptable to the majority.

1989 (June): Synthesis and New Texts

This text, ready in June of 1989, known by the name of **Chambarand II**, was sent to all the Regions who had to study it and send their reactions and comments before March 1990. All, without exception, accomplished this task, and, based on their suggestions and comments, a new version, called **Chambarand III**, was presented as a working paper for the MGM of September 1990.

1990—MGM: Definitive Text

A detailed study of this text, paragraph by paragraph and almost sentence by sentence, was made by all the mixed Commissions of the MGM (certain sections were distributed among various commissions). In fact, this study of the *Ratio* took up a large part of the meeting. After several votes on various amendments, the entire text of our *Ratio* was approved by the two General Chapters with a strong majority (Chapter of Abbesses: 51 yes, 7 no, 1 abstention; Chapter of Abbots: 80 yes, 9 no, 1 abstention).

Apart from the Constitutions themselves, no other texts produced by the Order in our time caused so much reflection and work by all the Regions and thus all the cultures in the Regions, both between General Chapters and at the 1990 MGM. Anyone considering a complete or partial revision of the document ought to take into account this enormous work of the entire Order. It would be difficult to think

that a revision could be made without involving the entire Order once again in such an enterprise. Also it would be necessary to be sure that such a project would be opportune before beginning it.

3. SEVERAL IMPORTANT THEMES (OR BASIC INTUITIONS) OF THE DOCUMENT

- a) Personally, I believe that the most fundamental intuition of this document is that formation is a process that lasts all of one's life.

It concerns a process by which a person (man or woman) is progressively transformed into the image of Christ, which is the goal of our monastic life. From now on, by "formation," is meant the whole of this "transformation" and not the beginning period of initiation to the monastic life.

This approach will evidently influence the way we understand the agents of this formation and the means that are used.

- b) The second fundamental intuition is that the two principle agents of this formation or transformation are the Holy Spirit, on one hand, and the subject of formation on the other. All the other people called "formators," with different titles, mediate the action of the Holy Spirit and serve as guides to the subject in formation.
- c) The third fundamental intuition is the essential role that the community itself plays in the formation of a cenobite. This community life is what our Constitutions constantly call the Cistercian *conversatio*.

Several Important Points Resulting from these Basic Orientations:

- a) The document is centered on the "person" in formation, and not on the things that must be transmitted.
- Great respect is shown for this person, and for the particular grace that he or she has and brings to the community.
 - Each person is considered in the whole of his or her history: everything that preceded his or her arrival at the monastery is important.
 - Each person is also considered in all the dimensions of his or her being. It is not a question of simply making someone adopt a so-called "monastic" behavior, to make him or her acquire monastic virtues, etc. It is a question of helping someone to become a man or a woman who is radiant, balanced, and mature—a Christian who has taken on the entire Gospel message—and has decided to live according to the monastic "way," in virtue of a call received from the Lord. Thus one in-

sists on the importance of balance: human, emotional, affective, intellectual, and spiritual.

- Consequently, great importance is given to all the stages of human growth.
- b) Even if persons have a special task in the area of formation (especially initial formation), it will be difficult for their work to bear fruit if there is not a sufficient quality of community life in the community. Therefore one must be attentive to guarantee that the elements of the Cistercian *conversatio* dominate in the community's role as formator. To this end, each community must be attentive to take on the "monastic culture" and develop its own culture.
 - c) This also implies a clear conception of "ongoing formation." In the past, when the word "formation" designated almost exclusively initial formation, ongoing formation was conceived of as some sort of continuation, at a slower pace and more limited frequency than initial formation (a periodic refresher course). Now that formation is understood as the entire process of transformation that extends throughout one's life, initial formation is seen only as an intense time of ongoing formation.
 - d) There is no need to emphasize the importance here of each national and local **culture**. Formerly formation was often a process of acculturation and not inculturation. It was necessary to assimilate a monastic culture cast in very precise forms. From now on each Region is called to adapt the *Ratio* to its cultural context and its needs. This capacity of our *Ratio* to adapt is confirmed by the fact that all the non-European Regions (Remila, USA, Africa, ASPAC) indicated their global agreement with **Chambarand II**, (as Fr. Cornelius pointed out in his presentation of the text at the beginning of the MGM of 1990), while offering suggestions that were integrated into **Chambarand III**. (Curiously, the only Region that had difficulty with **Chambarand II** was Central-North-Europe, which did not appreciate the importance given to the community in the process of formation). At the time of the presentation of the commission reports during the fourth session of the MGM of 1990, the secretary of the seventeenth Commission (the "Young Churches") explained that this text "is a good basic text, for it can be adapted to the various cultural contexts, especially since it does not contain too many details. It also expresses the Cistercian ideal. It is a document that can be useful to the entire Order" (Minutes, p. 21). Moreover, the text of the *Ratio* itself (n. 69) invites the Regions "to help the houses to adapt this *Ratio* to their specific needs and to the particular culture of the Region."
 - e) There is also the importance of pluralism: we tried to write a text that expressed all the important basic principles valid for everyone, but which kept to a minimum those elements that, by their nature, were proper to an individual culture. This was

a difficult choice, because **Chambarand I** gave an extremely valuable advice and clever analyses, but they were not valid for all cultures. We must not forget this first text but return to it often to take from it what can be truly useful for us.

- f) The monasticate was a new reality in several regions at the time the *Ratio* was written, and is still evolving.

4. STUDIES IN THE MONASTIC LIFE.

Our Order has never had a great intellection tradition. (Scourmont, for example, under the influence of Dom Anselm Le Bail, was for a long time an admirable exception. This abbot knew how to harmonize studies of great scientific value with an unquestionable monastic orientation.) Since 1955 we have greatly improved the intellectual life of our communities (monks and nuns). Perhaps, at the present time, there is an attitude that is going in the opposite direction and leading some to remark that the *Ratio* insists too unilaterally on courses and studies.

This reaction is really symptomatic of something else, since we made every effort possible to emphasize in this text that studies are far from being the first element of formation, and that this element ought to be subordinate to many others. We also situated studies in the pluralistic framework mentioned above.

If *lectio divina* is really at the heart of our life, a certain initiation to Sacred Scripture is essential. Thus we put this initiation to Sacred Scripture as one of the things that should be done during the novitiate and continued during the monasticate, and even beyond. This does not mean that everyone should do the same studies of scientific exegesis. For some a simple initiation to a rich reading of the Word of God will suffice. Others will need a more thorough formation. But all need an initiation.

Our spirituality ought to be founded on what is given us in Revelation and on faith. To avoid the trap of sentimental or infantile piety, a solid initiation of Christian doctrine is essential for everyone. Here again, it can take different forms. For some it will be a sort of catechism for adults; for others a more thorough and scientific study. But all need an enlightened faith and therefore a good knowledge of the principle areas of Christian doctrine.

One could say something similar about each of the elements on the list of “subjects” to be treated, either during the novitiate or during the time of temporary vows.

CONCLUSION

The whole of the spirituality of our Constitutions is found summarized in the Prologue of this *Ratio*, which can legitimately be considered a spiritual commentary on the Constitutions. And the total understanding of the ultimate goal of formation is admirably expressed in 2 Cor 3:18, which was used as an epigraph to the text: **“Called to be transformed into the image of Christ.”**