



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CISTERCIAN FAMILY
ON THE OCCASION OF THE NINTH CENTENARY
OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE ABBEY OF CÎTEAUX**

*To the Members of the Cistercian Family
on the Occasion of the Ninth Centenary
of the Foundation of the Abbey of Cîteaux*

1. This year, when the Abbey of Cîteaux is fervently celebrating the ninth centenary of its foundation, I am pleased to join in the joy and thanksgiving of the great Cistercian family which through this event seeks to draw on the sources of its founding charism in order to discern there the promise of a new vitality.

2. At the approach of the third millennium, as the whole Church prepares for the Great Jubilee, we recall *the prophetic work of Robert of Molesme* and his companions, who established the "new monastery" in 1098, in order to fulfil their ardent desire "from now on to adhere more closely and more perfectly to the Rule of the blessed Benedict" (*Exordium parvum*), which they reinterpreted in the light of earlier spiritual tradition, while clarifying it by their reading of the signs of the times. In living the demands of monastic life more authentically, they were to find the inner harmony needed for seeking God in humility, obedience and holy zeal.

Indeed, by faithfully observing the Rule of St Benedict in its purity and rigour, the founders of Cîteaux, Robert, Alberic and Stephen, gave birth to a *new form of monastic life*. Their religious life would be totally given to the experience of the living God, an experience they would have by following Christ with their brothers, in simplicity and poverty according to the Gospel. Through solitude they would seek to live for God, while building a fraternal community. In self-denial, in an austere and laborious life, they would strive to foster the growth of the new man.

3. The charism of Cîteaux, which spread rapidly, made a *very important contribution to the history of spirituality and culture* in the West. From the 12th century, the 400 monasteries already in existence became centres of intense spiritual

life throughout Europe. For the founders and their disciples - notably Bernard of Clairvaux, William of Saint-Thierry, Gueric of Igny, Aelred of Rievaulx, Isaac of Stella, Amadeus of Lausanne, Gilbert of Holland, Baldwin of Ford, John of Ford and Adam of Perseigne - the Rule offered eminent guidance and counsel for the interior life. In Benedict they discovered a wealth of teaching on humility, obedience, love and the fear of God; even more, they were spurred to draw directly from the Gospel and the Fathers of the Church.

The Cistercians very soon developed *a profound spirituality* based on a solid theological anthropology, itself centred on man's image and likeness to God. Similarly, other aspects of the spiritual life already hinted at in St Benedict, such as knowledge of self, the teaching on love and mystical contemplation, would be further developed. The *dominici schola servitii* also became a *schola caritatis*. Here one can see a deeper understanding of man in his ability to love and to respond freely to love while letting himself be guided by reason. This humanism was based on the divine economy and on grace, particularly on the Incarnation in its most human dimension.

4. The Cistercian reform would thus leave a deep mark on the renewal of *the liturgy*, which it simplified and unified. Today, in their community celebrations marked by nobility and restraint, monks and nuns give luminous expression to their vocation to praise God and to intercede for the Church and for the world, in communion with the prayer of all Christians. In the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, which unfold the mystery of Christ and show the Church's true nature, they give a significant expression to their intimate union with the Lord and his work of salvation. Finding in it their daily nourishment, in serene balance with their life of work, they give powerful witness to the reason for their special mission among men.

Cistercian art too, put at in the service of monastic life, developed with harmonious beauty in buildings that proclaim the divine splendour and glory. By its elegance, stripped of everything that might hinder the encounter with the Creator, it leads man towards God, giving him a taste of his nobility and goodness. Thus it invites him to pray and to foster the interiority which leads to knowledge of the Lord.

Brothers and sisters, heirs of the Cistercian heritage, I ask you to remain ardent and enthusiastic witnesses to the search for God, by celebrating the liturgy, the source and summit of your monastic life, by *lectio divina*, the diligent listening to and meditation on God's Word received in humility and in joy, as well as by the frequent practice of mental prayer, in keeping with the invitation of your father, St Benedict. You will find it to be an inexhaustible source of interior peace which you will be eager to share generously with everyone.

5. Our age is experiencing a new fascination with *the Cistercian cultural and spiritual heritage* expressed in your monasteries, which are very familiar with the particular details of their history, the context of their presence or their way of responding to the expectations of the local Churches. For many people the essential spiritual questions can be expressed and explored thanks to the *welcome* which the monasteries offer them. A fraternal community of faith makes it possible to see

a stabilizing influence in a society where the most fundamental reference points are disappearing, especially for the young. Sons and daughters of Cîteaux, the Church expects you to make your monasteries "eloquent signs of communion, welcoming abodes for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of study, dialogue and culture for the building up of the life of the Church and of the earthly city itself, in expectation of the heavenly city" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 6).

I also encourage you, according to the circumstances, to discern prudently and with a prophetic sense the participation of the lay faithful in your spiritual family as "so-called associate members or, in response to conditions present in certain cultures, as people who share fully for a certain period of time the institute's community life" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 56), and its commitment to contemplation, provided that the specific identity of your monastic life does not suffer.

6. The commemoration of the foundation of Cîteaux also reminds us of the place of this great movement of spiritual renewal in the Christian roots of *Europe*. I am delighted to know that during this jubilee year a number of reminders will highlight this aspect of the Cistercian heritage. The fruitfulness of your charism is not limited to your monastic communities but indeed has become a common treasure for all Christianity. While Europe is being built, I hope that those who are its inspiration may find in the spirit of Cîteaux the elements of a profound spiritual renewal on which to base European society.

7. *The desire for a new life* by following Christ, which has marked Cîteaux since its beginning, remains a most timely insight. Indeed, the Rule offers each person a direct path to Gospel perfection, through a careful balance between the different traditional monastic observances. The monks find in these practices appropriate means for leading them to *puritas cordis* and *unitas spiritus* with God. This was recently stressed by the Synod on consecrated life, which wanted to highlight the prophetic and spiritual dimension of religious life. "In our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God and of eternal life, as evidenced in the *following* and imitation of the chaste, poor and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and to the love of his brethren" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 85).

In returning today to its original inspiration, after nine centuries of a continuous but not always trouble-free history, the Cistercian family is finding itself in the founding grace of the first Fathers. It is also discovering *the legitimate diversity of its traditions*, which are a treasure for everyone and express the vitality of its original charism; in it the Church sees the work of the one Spirit on the basis of the same gift.

In this celebration of Cîteaux's foundation, I warmly encourage the communities that form the great Cistercian family to enter the new millennium together, in true communion, in mutual trust and with

respect for the traditions bequeathed by history. May this anniversary of the "new monastery", which for nine centuries has had such great influence in the Church and in the world, be for all a reminder of their common origins and lineage, as well as a symbol of the unity which must always be accepted and built!

8. The timeliness and vigour of the charism of Cîteaux at the end of this second millennium have been marked by the witness given to the Gospel in a particularly significant way by the many sons and daughters of the Cistercian family. I would like to mention *Fr Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi* whom, during the same days as the celebrations of the ninth centenary of Cîteaux, I will have the joy of beatifying in Nigeria, his native country, where he worked so hard to bring the Gospel to his compatriots.

The sacrifice of the *Trappists of Tibhirine* is still present in our hearts. Martyrs of God's love for all men, they became the artisans of peace by giving their lives. They invite Christ's disciples to keep their gaze fixed on God and to live love to the very end, remembering above all that one cannot follow Christ without renunciation. Remember them as a precious spiritual blessing for the Cistercian family and for the whole Church!

9. In borrowing St Bernard's words: "If Mary protects you, you will have nothing to fear; with her to lead you, you will never know fatigue; with her favour, you will reach your goal" (*De laudibus Virginis Matris*, Hom. 2), I commend you to Our Lady, Queen of Cîteaux, and as I extend a particular greeting to the community of the "new monastery", which is also celebrating the centenary of the monks' return after a long interval, I impart an affectionate Apostolic Blessing to all the members of the Cistercian family.

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IOANNES PAULUS PP. II

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