

Solemnity of Saints Robert, Alberic and Stephen, Founders of Citeaux.

A question we always ask on the feast of our founders is, "What was their intention? Why did they leave Molesme and start the 'new monastery'?"

It is almost impossible to arrive at any certain answer to that question. What we can do, though, with more hope for certainty, is to ask, not what they intended to do, but what was the result of what they did? One of the first results was St Bernard. We can be certain that Bernard de Fontaine-lez-Dijon would never have become Bernard of Clairvaux had Robert, Alberic and Stephen not done what they did; but certainly they could never have intended a Bernard of Clairvaux. What the founders did was to create the space in history for Bernard to happen, just as the Sermon on the Mount preached by Jesus created the opportunity for people to become what they never would have been otherwise.

By their fruits you shall know them. We may not know what Robert, Alberic and Stephen had in mind, and ultimately it doesn't matter. We know ourselves as the fruit of what they did, and by judging the quality of this fruit, we can know something of the tree it grows on. How are we?

But even that is a question we can barely answer. We are too close to ourselves and we are blind to what is true. We are now too harsh and now too lenient. We need a mirror to tell us "how we are." The mirror is our brothers; and community, we can say with certitude, was at the heart of the founders' intention, even if we don't know what that intention was. Community provides the space for friendship, and friendship is a mirror. In friendship we see ourselves as another sees us, which is often surprisingly less severe and more generous than we are to ourselves, and also more exact.

At least we can say the founders intended a way of life, a form, where community was central. Community is made up of people, but mostly community makes the people who make it up, and friendship is the way it makes us. We know the huge attraction of Citeaux, the dozens of daughter houses in a decade or two, the hundreds within a century. What attracts is what is seen. What is seen is form, and form is the concretization of beauty. Our founders created a way of life that was and is beautiful. They made sure the beauty stood out by giving it form.

Form is the key to the organization of existence. Stephen Harding lamented, "we have done what we could and we are accused of novelties, and worse, we are accused of causing divisions; and what is more, few are those who come to join us, to whom we can pass on this 'formula,' the 'form' of our way of life."

The form, of course, that soon many would find so attractive, so beautiful, was, on the most obvious level, what our founders called 'observances.' It was the organization of space, and the breakdown of the day, and the agreement about what you did, as a monk, in and with your body. But this form of external observances had something much deeper and hidden in view. St Bernard would speak of the Incarnate Word, the Lord Jesus: "he laid down a 'pattern,' a 'form,' of life that is a pathway back to the fatherland" (S.C. 22.7.6). Clearly this is a reference to the Rule of St Benedict, where Benedict has so many images of the journey to God; and it is a reference to Jesus himself who said, "I am the Way," the Form of life.

"Our order is the Cross," said St Aelred; and, "we make profession in the Cross." Jesus, the one who became a slave and a friend to all -- I wash your feet, I call you friends -- is the form of Cistercian life, the pattern of the monk, his mirror. Bernard calls Jesus *ipsa forma*, the form itself, true Beauty, whom following or just admiring in contemplative love, the Cistercian monk will "regain his original form" by being conformed to him who became poor for oursakes. Jesus, the true form, "is able to reform what was deformed, strengthen what was weak, and make men wise."

The genius of our founders was to create and establish a form of life that we now call "Cistercian." About it, Bernard would write, "Even amid the fluctuating events and inevitable shortcomings of this giddy world you will ensure yourself a life of durable stability, provided you are renewed and reformed according to the glorious and original plan of the eternal God..." Thus, in the Cistercian way, the Cistercian form of life, "Even in the world you will become as he is" (S.C. 20.6).

We have heard the phrase within this past week, "a community with a single orientation." This is exactly what our founders ended up making. What attracts people is something attractive; beauty is recognized by proportion, integrity, and clarity. the single Cistercian word '*simplicitas*' sums it up. A single orientation, simplicity of form. "How good and how pleasant when brothers dwell at one."

Today's feast, recurring annually through the Cistercian centuries, invites us as a Cistercian community to reconsider where we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Does our 'form of life' provide a mirror for me; does it foster friendship; is it attractive? "As for me," says Bernard, "as long as I look at myself, my eye is filled with bitterness." But if I look at divine mercy, the mercy incarnated in my brothers, I will "see my true self, and this will be a step to the knowledge of God...he will become visible to me according as his image is being renewed within me."

This may not be what our fathers intended, but it may be what resulted. I am the fruit of their experiment, and so are you. May you see in me, and I in you, that the tree is good, still.

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