

The Cistercians' "Constitution" written by St. Stephen Harding and approved in 1119

## **Charta Caritatis**

### **Index**

- Preface Already before the Cistercian abbeys had begun to spread ...
- Chap.1 Because we are all servants unprofitable indeed ...
- Chap.2 We wish henceforward and command them to observe the rule ...
- Chap.3 When the abbot of the New Monastery shall ... for the purpose of visitation ...
- Chap.4 The abbot of a mother-house shall visit annually ...
- Chap.5 When any abbot shall come to the New Monastery ...
- Chap.6 Whenever, by the mercy of God, any of our houses shall so increase ...
- Chap.7 If any of our monasteries shall become extremely indigent ...
- Chap.8 If any monastery of our Order be without an abbot ...
- Chap.9 When Citeaux ... is without an abbot ...
- Chap.10 If any abbot ... shall ask permission ... to be released ...
- Chap.11 If any abbot shall be known to despise the rule ...
- Chap.12 If it happen ... that the abbot of Citeaux becomes cold in the practice of his duties

...

### **Preface**

Already before the Cistercian abbeys had begun to spread Father Stephen and his brethren, with a view to avoid all difficulties between the bishop and the monks, ordained that no abbey should by any means be founded in any diocese before the bishop should approve and confirm the decree passed between the abbey of Citeaux and its filiations. In this decree the aforesaid brethren, in the intention of obviating rupture of mutual concord explained and ordered and transmitted to those to come after, the bond and manner, or rather the charity whereby their monks divided in the body in abbeys in different parts of the world, should be indissolubly banded together in spirit. They also considered this decree should be called Charter of Charity because putting aside the burden of any money contribution it pursued only charity and the utility of souls in things human and divine.

### **Chap.1**

Because we are all servants unprofitable indeed, of the one true King, Lord and Master, therefore we demand no exaction of temporal profit or earthly goods from the abbots and brethren whom the goodness of God has been pleased through our unworthy instrumentality, to bring together in divers places, in the observance of regular discipline. For, desiring only to be of service to them and to the children of Holy Church, we will do nothing toward them that can be either a burden to them or a subtraction of their temporal substance, lest striving to be made wealthy from their poverty, we may incur the guilt of vice and avarice, which the Apostle terms the "serving of idols". It is, however, our intention, for the sake of charity, to watch with care over their souls; so that if they should at any time decline from their good resolution and the observance of their holy rule, which misfortune may God in his mercy avert, we may be able by our constant solicitude to bring them back to the religious life.

## **Chap.2**

We wish henceforward and command them to observe the rule of St. Benedict in everything as it is observed in the New Monastery, and to understand it in no other sense than that which our pious forefathers of Citeaux have given to it and maintained, and which we ourselves now understand and hold after their example. And because we receive all monks coming from other monasteries into ours, and they in like manner receive ours; it seems proper to us, that all our monasteries should have the same usage in chanting, and the same books for divine office day and night and the celebration of the holy sacrifice of the Mass, as we have in the New Monastery; that there may be no discord in our daily actions, but that we may all live together in the bond of charity under one rule, and in the practice of the same observances. Let no monastery or person of our Order dare to ask for any privilege from anyone, or if already obtained, to make use of such privilege which is opposed to the established constitutions of the Order, in whatsoever way it may have been obtained.

## **Chap.3**

When the abbot of the New Monastery shall go to any other monastery for the purpose of visitation, the abbot of the monastery so visited shall acknowledge the abbot of the New Monastery and the monastery of Citeaux to be the mother-house, and shall yield precedency to its abbot in every part of his monastery; so that the abbot of the New Monastery shall take and hold the place of this abbot as long as he remains in that monastery. However, he shall not eat in the guest apartments, but in the refectory with the community to maintain discipline, unless there should be no proper abbot at that time in the monastery. The same rule shall be observed, when several abbots shall come to any monastery. If the abbot of the monastery at the time is absent then the one who is oldest in the abbatial dignity shall eat at the stranger's table. The abbot, however in his own monastery will always, even in the presence of an abbot of superior dignity, profess his own novices at the end of their year noviceship. Let the abbot of the New Monastery be careful not to touch anything, to ordain anything, or to dispose of anything, with reference to the possessions of the monastery which he visits, without the consent of the abbot and his brethren. If he shall perceive that any of the precepts of the rule or the institutions of the Order are violated in the monastery which he is visiting, let him, with the advice and in the presence of the abbot, charitably endeavour to correct the brethren. But if the abbot of the monastery be not present, he shall, nevertheless, correct what he finds amiss.

## **Chap.4**

The abbot of a mother-house shall visit annually, either in person or by one of his co-abbots, all the filiations of his own monastery. And if he should visit the brethren more frequently than this, let it be to them a subject of joy. The four abbots of La Ferté, Pontigny, Clairvaux and Morimond, shall visit in person unless prevented by sickness, once in the year, and on the day which they shall appoint, the monastery of Citeaux, besides their attendance at the General Chapter, unless one of them is prevented by grave illness.

## **Chap.5**

When any abbot shall come to the New Monastery, due respect shall be paid him. If the abbot be absent, he shall occupy his stall and eat in the guest apartments. But he shall not do these things if the abbot is present. The prior, in the abbots absence, manages the business of the house. Let the following be the rule of abbeys that do not stand in the relationship of filiations or mother-houses. Every abbot shall yield precedency to an abbot paying him a visit, that this admonition of the Scripture may be fulfilled, "in honour preventing one another." If two or more pay a visit at the same time, he who is the senior in the abbatial dignity shall hold the first place. All of them shall take their food in the refectory, as we have said above, except the abbot of the monastery. But when they meet together, they shall take precedence according to the antiquity of their abbeys; so that the abbot of the most ancient house shall occupy the first place. And they shall all mutually pay each other the deference of a profound inclination when they take their seats.

## **Chap.6**

Whenever, by the mercy of God, any of our houses shall so increase as to be able to erect another foundation, let both the mother and the daughter follow the rule of charity which we adopt among our brethren; with this exception, that they shall not hold for themselves an annual chapter. But all the abbots of our Order shall meet each year in General Chapter, without excuse, except they are prevented by serious sickness; and then they shall depute a proper representative. An exception is made also in the case of those who live in too distant countries, which shall be decided by the Chapter. If any abbot from any other cause shall presume upon leave of absence from the General Chapter, he shall ask pardon of the Chapter for his fault the following year,, and receive a severe reprimand. In the General Chapter, the abbots shall consult upon matters that appertain to the salvation of souls, and shall ordain what is to be corrected, or what carried out in the observance of the rule and the institutions of the Order. They shall likewise mutually conform each other in the bond of peace and charity. If any abbot be less zealous about the rule than he ought, or be too much intent upon secular business or be worthy of censure in any way, he shall be charitably reprimanded in the General Chapter; and when reprimanded, he shall ask pardon, and perform the penance imposed for his fault. No one but an abbot shall make this proclamation. If any controversy shall arise among the abbots, or a fault so grievous shall be charged against any of them that he thereby deserves suspension or deposition, whatever is decreed by the General Chapter in this matter shall be observed. If through diversity of opinion there is engendered discord upon any subject, let that which the abbot of Citeaux, with the more prudent and the more sagacious in council, shall decide with reference to the dispute be faithfully maintained. Neither of the interested parties shall be present during the discussion.

## **Chap.7**

If any of our monasteries shall become extremely indigent, the abbot shall give notice to the General Chapter; then all the abbots assembled, animated by a lively charity, shall contribute to its relief, according to the means with which God may have blessed them.

## **Chap.8**

If any monastery of our Order be without an abbot, the abbot of its mother-house shall take the charge of it until the election of a new abbot. If it is itself a mother-house, the abbots of the several filiations and the monks of that house, being assembled on the day appointed, shall proceed by the advice and desire of the presiding abbot, to choose the new abbot.

## **Chap.9**

When Citeaux, the mother-house of all the monasteries of the Order, is without an abbot, the abbots of La Ferté, Pontigny, Clairvaux and Morimond, shall provide for the election of a new abbot. And they shall have the charge of that house until such abbot has been duly elected and confirmed. Fifteen days' notice at least shall be given previous to the election of the Abbot of Citeaux. Then all the abbots whose monasteries are filiations of Citeaux, and such others as the above-mentioned four abbots of the greater houses and the brethren of Citeaux shall judge proper, being together assembled in the name of the Lord, shall elect the new abbot. It is lawful for any mother-house to choose an abbot not only from the monks belonging to its filiations, but likewise from any of the abbots of the said filiations, if this be necessary. But no person of another Order shall ever be chosen abbot for one of our houses; nor shall any of our members be permitted to become an abbot, in a monastery of another Order.

## **Chap.10**

If any abbot, in consideration either of his extreme helplessness or extreme timidity, shall ask permission from the superior of a mother-house to be released from the burden of his abbatial office, let not the superior easily and without a just and necessary cause give his consent. But if the reason alleged be judged sufficient, then let him not do anything of himself; but having called together some other abbots of the Order and asked their advice, let him do what they think ought to be done.

## **Chap.11**

If any abbot shall be known to despise the rule and prevaricate against the Order, or shall knowingly connive at the faults of his brethren, the abbot of the mother-house, as soon as convenient, shall either by himself or by his prior, exhort the delinquent, even to the fourth time, to an amendment of conduct. But if, in spite of these admonitions, he will neither correct his fault nor spontaneously abdicate, an assembly of abbots, though not numerous, of our institute shall remove the transgressor of the holy rule from his office; and another worthy of the dignity shall be forthwith elected by the chapter of the mother-house and by the abbots of the filiations, if any belong to it, and by the brethren of the monastery, in the manner above described. When an abbot who is deposed, and his religious become contumacious and rebellious (which may God forbid), so as not to acquiesce in the sentence which has been pronounced upon him, let them be excommunicated by the abbot of the mother-house and his co-abbots, and afterward the abbot of the mother-house shall take the means apt and available to make them do duty. But if any of these disobedient members shall

be sorry for his offence and wish to return to his mother, let him be received as a repentant son. Except in this case, no abbot of our Order shall retain the subject of another abbot without his consent. In like manner no abbot shall send members of his own community into the monastery of another without permission.

## **Chap.12**

If it happen (which may Heaven forbid) that the abbots of our Order learn that the abbot of Citeaux becomes cold in the practice of his duties and departs from the observance of the holy rule and constitutions, the four abbots of La Ferté, Potigny, Clairvaux and Morimond, shall, in the name of all the other abbots, admonish him to the fourth time, that he may correct himself and others. But if he prove incorrigible, then they must diligently carry out the instructions which we have given concerning the deposition of abbots, with this proviso: if he does not abdicate of his own accord, they can neither depose him, nor pronounce against him anathema unless in General Chapter. But if it would be too long to wait for that, they must proceed with their censures in an assembly of abbots who have been taken from the filiations of Citeaux, with others summoned for the occasion. And when this unworthy superior has been deposed, they together with the brethren of Citeaux shall choose a person with suitable qualifications to fill this vacancy. But if both the abbot and the brethren of Citeaux conjointly prove contumacious, let them be solemnly excommunicated. If later any of these prevaricators repenting of his fault and desirous of saving his soul, shall seek refuge in one of these four houses, La Ferté, Potigny, Clairvaux, or Morimond, let him be received after due satisfaction, as one of the members of the house, as justice demands. During this time the General Chapter shall not be held at Citeaux, but where the four abbots above-mentioned shall determine.