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Audience with the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance

At midday today, in the Clementine Hall of the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Order of the Cistercians of the Strict Observance.

The following is the Pope's address to those present:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters,

I welcome you with joy on the occasion of your General Chapter. I thank each one of you for this visit, starting with the Abbot General who has acted as interpreter for all of you, also illustrating the purpose and objectives of your assembly. Through you I would like to send a cordial greeting to the brothers and sisters of your monasteries throughout various countries. I go with my heart and mind to your silent cloisters, from which the prayer for the Church and for the world continues ceaselessly. And I thank the Lord for the irreplaceable presence of the monastic communities, which represent a spiritual richness and a constant call to seek first of all "the things up above", so as to live earthly realities to the right extent.

In these days of reflection and exchange of experiences, you are called upon to identify goals and paths to live with greater authenticity your vocation and your consecration, taking into account the needs of the present moment, so as to be witnesses of assiduous prayer, of sobriety, of unity in charity.

Your contemplative life is characterized by *assiduous prayer*, an expression of your love for God and reflection of a love that embraces all humanity. Following the example of Saint Benedict, you do not place anything before the *opus Dei*: I urge you to give great importance to meditation on the Word of God, especially the *lectio divina*, which is a source of prayer and school of contemplation. To be contemplative requires a faithful and persevering journey, to become men and women of prayer, ever more pervaded by love for the Lord and transformed into his

friends. They are not “professionals” – in a negative sense – but lovers of prayer, considering fidelity external to the practices and norms that regulate it and mark the moments not as the end, but as a means of progressing in the personal relationship with God. In this way you become teachers and witnesses who offer Him the sacrifice of praise and intercede for the necessities and the salvation of the people. And at the same time your monasteries continue to be privileged places where you can find true peace and genuine happiness that only God, our safe refuge, can give.

From the very beginning, the Cistercians of the Strict Observance have been characterised by a great *sobriety of life*, in their conviction that it was a valid help in concentrating on the essential and in reaching more easily the joy of the spousal encounter with Christ. This element of spiritual and existential simplicity preserves all its worth as testimony in today’s cultural context, which too often leads to the desire for ephemeral goods and illusory artificial paradises.

This lifestyle also favours your interior and exterior relationships with the monastery. You do not live like hermits in a community, but as cenobites in a unique desert. God manifests Himself in your personal solitude, as well as in the solidarity that joins the members of the community. You are alone and separated from the world to advance on the path of divine intimacy; at the same time, you are called to make known and to share this spiritual experience with other brothers and sisters in a constant balance between personal contemplation, union with the liturgy of the Church, and welcome to those who seek moments of silence so as to be introduced into the experience of living with God. Your Order, like every religious institute, is a gift made by God to the Church; therefore, it is necessary that he lives well inserted into the communal dimension of the Church itself. I encourage you to be a qualified witness of the search for God, a school of prayer, and a school of charity for all.

The “Charter of charity”, a document that sets out the ways of your vocation duly authenticated by the Church, establishes the essential features of the General Chapter, called to be a sign of *unity in charity* for the whole Institute. This unity in charity is the paradigm of every religious family called upon to follow Christ more closely in the dimension of community life, and is expressed first in your individual monastic communities in a climate of true and cordial fraternity, according to the words of the Psalm: “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (133,1). In this regard, the invitation of Saint Benedict is always present: “No one is disturbed or saddened in the house of God”.

Unity in charity is also expressed in *fidelity to spiritual heritage*, that is, to the identity of your Order. In this regard, the General Chapter is a propitious occasion for renewing, in a climate of dialogue and mutual listening, the communion of intent in seeking the will of God. I urge you to question yourselves with serenity and truth about the quality of your testimony of life, dynamic fidelity to the charism, on how it has been lived by your monastic communities, as well as by single monks and nuns. The safeguarding of the charism is indeed one of the main responsibilities of the General Chapter and it is a vital experience of the present, situated between grateful memory of the past and the prospects for a future of hope.

Your Order, in the events of its history, has known times of grace and moments of difficulty; however, it has always persevered in faith in following Christ, with the objective of the glory of God and the good of the people. Following in the wake of your spiritual tradition, you are able to read the current state of the Order in its moments of light and darkness, and in the newness of the Spirit, identify with courage new possibilities and opportunities to bear witness to your charism in the Church and in society today.

I hope that this witness will be made even more eloquent by an increasingly organic coordination between the various branches of the Order.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, model of every consecrated life, accompany the works of your Chapter and the path of the Order with her maternal intercession. With such vows, as I ask you to pray for me, I impart to you my apostolic blessing, which I extend to all the monks and nuns of your communities. Thank you.

