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Audience with participants in the General Chapter of the Cistercians of the Common Observance

This morning, in the Vatican Apostolic Palace, the Holy Father Francis received in audience the participants in the General Chapter of the Cistercians of the Common Observance.

The following is the address the Pope delivered to them during the audience:

Address of the Holy Father

Dear brothers and sisters, good morning and welcome to you all!

I thank the Abbot General for his words of introduction – with best wishes for his renewed office – and I greet you all who are participating in the General Chapter of the Cistercian Order of the Common Observance.

This adjective “common” makes us think. We know that it is intended to distinguish it from a “special” observance. But *common* also has a richer sense, that means *together*, *communion*. And I would like to start from here, from this fundamental reality that constitutes us as Church, thanks to the gift of God One and Triune, and our being in Christ. Community, common.

Common observance, then, like *walking together* behind the Lord Jesus, to stay with him, to listen to him, to “observe” him... To observe Jesus. Like a child who observes his father, or his best friend. Observing the Lord: his way of doing things, his face, full of love and peace, at times indignant in the face of hypocrisy and closed-mindedness, and also troubled and anguished at the time of the passion. And observing together, not individually, in community. Each one doing so at his own pace, certainly, each one with his own unique and unrepeatable history, but together. Like the Twelve, who were always with Jesus and walked with him. They did not choose themselves, he chose them. It was not always easy to be in agreement: they were different to each other, each one with his own “edges”, and his pride. We are like this too, and also for us it is not easy to advance together in communion. And yet, this gift we have received never ceases to amaze us and bring us joy: to be his community, as we are, not perfect, not uniform, no, not like that, but *convoked*, involved, called upon to stay and

walk together behind him, our Master and Lord.

This, brothers and sisters, is the basis of everything. Thank you for emphasizing this, and I encourage you to rekindle your desire and willingness towards this common observance of Christ.

It involves a constant effort of conversion from a *closed ego* to an *open ego*, from a heart centred on itself to a heart that *comes out of itself and goes towards others*. And this, by analogy, also applies to the *community*: from a *self-referential* community to an *extrovert* community, in the good sense of the word, welcoming and missionary. It is the movement that the Holy Spirit always seeks to impress on the Church, working in every one of its members and in every community and institution. A movement that goes back to Pentecost, the “baptism” of the Church. The Spirit himself then inspired and inspires a great variety of charisms and forms of life, a great “symphony”. There are many forms, very different to each other, but to be part of an ecclesial symphony, they must obey this outward-bound movement. Not a chaotic movement in random order: going together, all in tune with the one heart of the Church which is love, as Saint Teresa of the Child Jesus affirms with such enthusiasm. There is no communion without conversion, and so this is necessarily the fruit of Christ’s Cross and the action of the Spirit, both in individuals and in the community.

Returning to the image – or rather the sound – of the symphony, I propose you embrace the great missionary breadth of the Church also by valorizing the complementarity between *male* and *female*, as well as the *cultural diversity* between Asian, African, Latin American, North American and European members. I encourage you on this path, which is not easy, but which can without doubt be a wealth for the communities and for the Order.

Thank you for the commitment with which you cooperate in the effort the whole Church is making in this regard, in every particular Community: today the experience of the encounter with diversity is a sign of the times. Yours is a valuable contribution, particularly rich because, on account of your contemplative vocation, you do not content yourselves to bring together diversities at a superficial level; you also live them inwardly, in prayer, in spiritual dialogue. And this enriches the “symphony” of deeper and more generative resonances.

Another aspect on which I want to encourage you is your intention of greater poverty, both in spirit and in goods, so as to be more available to the Lord, with all your strengths, with the frailties and the blessings he gives you. Therefore, let us praise God for everything, for old age and youth, for sickness and good health, for the communities in “autumn” and those in “spring”. The essential thing is not to allow the evil one to rob us of hope! The first thing the evil one tries to do is to steal hope, so he snatches it out of our hands, always. Because evangelical poverty is full of hope, based on the beatitude that the Lord announces to his disciples: “Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours” (*Lk 6:20*).

Dear brothers and sisters, thank you for this visit! May the Virgin Mary accompany you and sustain you always on your journey. From my heart I bless you and all your communities. And you, please, do not forget to pray for me. Thank you.
