

SERVICE IN LOVE

Some remarks to the Visitation 2016 - 2017¹

I Introduction

On our preparation way to the next General Chapter 2018 in Rolduc in all houses of the Order has to be hold the canonical Visitations. Every six years this has to be done. So I want to add some thoughts about this coming event for each house.

In the rule of St. Benedict we can read an interesting remark: “If a guest monk expresses in humility and love a well-founded critic or he calls the attention to something, the abbot should wisely consider if the Lord has not send this monk especially for that” (RB 61,4). This can be the starter point when we speak about visitation. The monk from outside maybe can see better, objective and unprejudiced, what is wrong and weak in a community. But each form of *correctio fraterna*, of critic, of monition should be done *rationabiliter cum humilitate*, not arrogant and know-all, but in love.² Visitationers are not guest monks, but official sent out from the General Chapter. During the visitation they are temporary superiors and are responsible for the wellbeing of a community and his future. It is a great responsibility, more a burden than a harmless visit. In the beginning of the Cistercian movement the visitation was – besides the general chapter each year - one instrument to form a new Order. In the ‘*Carta Caritatis*’, which was also for our Order in the beginning important and guiding, is said, that the visitation along the filiation system should not be an “instrument of power”, but moreover a “service in love, to control the condition and situation daughter abbeys in regard and respect to the *salus animarum*”, to guarantee the uniformity in law, customs and liturgy and so on, to animate the confreres on their way and to scrutinize the progress and success of their efforts.³ Here we will not emphasize the idea of uniformity and control, but rather this “service in love” for a good development of our houses.

II Constitutions

In our own Constitutions we can find two references to visitation:

- *De Visitatione et Visitoribus*, the visitation and the visitors: Const. Nr. 227-236
- *Ordo Visitationis*, the order of Visitation Const. Appendix IV

In n. 227 we see that the primary object of the visitation is “the increase of fidelity to ‘communio’” and the first purpose is “to confirm a dynamic spiritual life, strengthen legitimate local customs and to see to the carrying out of the decrees of the General chapter”. The following numbers deal with statutes regarding the implementation (“*Ausführungsbestimmungen*”) and the procedure of the visitation, the technical aspects of the protocol or special reports, the duties of the visitors (strict secrecy, prudence, review of the chapter reports).

Some guidelines are fixed:

- visitation all six years
- two visitors, one with knowledge of the language and customs
- no mutual visitation
- talk with the prelate, the council and the house chapter before the final report is given

¹ Some sources for this introduction: Martin Felhofer, “Vorbereitung auf die Visitation 2010/2011”, Prelate’s meeting 2009; Thomas Handgrättinger, “Evaluation der Visitationsberichte GC2006” (M2); Thomas Handgrättinger, „*Caritas Fervor*“ Report to the Visitation Report for the GC2012.

² Michaela Puzicha, Kommentar zur Benediktusregel. St. Ottilien 2001, S. 517s.

³ Gert Melville, Die Welt der mittelalterlichen Klöster. München 2012, S. 134.s.

For the abbot general:

- he has the right at any time for a regular visitation in any house
- he has the right and the duty to see that the visitation reports are put into effect
- he must organize a list with names of potential visitors, which has to be approved by the General chapter. At the last CG2012 we have asked for and approved this list.

In the *Ordo Visitationis* the prime object and first purpose of the visitation are again mentioned under the nr. 2.2, the purpose of visitation. Also underlined there is the spiritual aspect of this visitation for each canonry:

“to reflect on and examine its own proper Gospel inspiration and response to the inspiration of the holy Spirit give to it, from the perspective of the sanctity of its vocation, its charism and the tradition of the order and its mission in the church” (2.1 The spiritual meaning of visitation). Here it speaks about “*participatio actuosa*”, “the active participation of all confreres” as a condition for a fruitful and successful visitation, so that “the mutual charity and communion will be promoted” (2.1).

For the visitors are formulated some (ideal typical) expectations and conditions (3.1):

- two visitors, one a prelate, one at least familiar with language, custom and conditions of the canonry
- no mutual visitations, no blood relative to the prelate
- familiar with the government of a community
- knowledge of financial [*and administrative*] matters
- adequate knowledge of the theology, theology of the religious life, spirituality
- the virtue of discretion and secrecy
- in the time of visitation the visitors are *superiors* “*by the authority of the General Chapter*” according the faculties of the Constitutions (3.3 a., duties and faculties of the visitors).

By the last meeting of the Definitory we spoke about the problems of finding visitors in small Circaries, that it would be good and desirable that one visitors should come from outside the circary to avoid an “incest”-situation. However, the problem of language remains.

Next week the Definitory will establish a preliminary list of visitors and will send out this list together with the protocol. If there serious objections (“*causae grave*”) against any visitors we will examine other possibilities.

By the last General Chapter 2012 in De Pere, after the report on the visitations, “*Caritas fervor*”, the topic “*Visitation*” was not explicitly discussed.⁴ Therefore, the Definitory has proposed that at this prelates meeting we discuss our experiences with the last visitations:

- From our own experiences, what are the critics, recommendations, proposals for change?
- How we can make the visitations more effective?
- How can we re-work, revise the *Ordo Visitationis* (Appendix IV)?
- Which good experiences did you have with the evaluation and implementation of the visitation recommendations?

III *Procedere*

⁴ Conf. Protocol for 2012 general chapter. De Pere 2012.

3.1 Preparation of the visitation

After receiving the nomination letter about the abbot general, the visitators must contact the prelate and the community to find an appropriate time for the visitation.

All members of the canonry should receive the *Ordo Visitationis*; all members should be invited in a timely manner;

In separation, each house should undertake a “self-evaluation”, to re-read, for example, the “report on the visitation reports, “*caritatis fervor*”, from the CG2012⁵ (obligatory reading for the prelates), to re-read the report of the visitation of the canonry (obligatory reading for each confrere) and to examine what the community has done in terms of revival, renewal, renovation, deepening their religious life, improvement and rectifications. What have we done? Where we are now? What still has to be done? Has there been any progress or correction in the last 6 years? In addition to this convent’s self-evaluation, in the OV is written: “The prelate together with his council is to assess the state of the canonry. A copy of this review is to be given to the visitators” (3.6). These evaluation reports should help form the basis of the visitators’ awareness of the present state of a canonry.

3.2 Visitation

The visitation starts with an official opening, the Eucharist, or prayer celebration. The visitators can give a short introduction and present the method that the visitation will follow (3.12). Each confrere should have the opportunity to speak with the visitators. The visitators can also call a confrere:

“each and every member is bound to present himself to the visitators if they call him” (3.13). There is also a time foreseen for talks with the council, the financial council (if existing), for other various groups; sometimes it would be good to contact the local bishop about the visitation. The following list of documents is to be given to the visitators:

- + minutes of the council meeting,
- + book of customs,
- + financial report (seen and proved by those competent in financial matters, like an audit report),
- + minutes of the Canonry chapter and house chapters,
- + the protocol of the last visitation ,
- + the report about the self-evaluation of the community.

The *Ordo Visitationis* presents us some crucial points to which the visitators should give attention: “goals of the canonry life, book of Customs, common life, liturgy, private prayer and spirituality, formation and continuing formation, relationship between the confreres, apostolate and vocation recruitment” (3.6).

In this list is no expressed mention of the “*TEMPORALIA*”. But in nr. 3.19 we find concrete questions this matter. In the last General Chapter we have spoken about the necessity of a transparent and proved annual account, an annual balance sheet in which the development of the financial affairs can be seen. “Transparence and control audits” are the two key aspects here. It is impossible to go through all 74 questions and proposals for possible questions and inquiries (3.14-3.21). But this multitude of questions can help to open up the horizon, to go deeper during the discussion with each confrere, rather than only carry on same nice ‘small talk’; each confrere should have the chance to speak about himself and his confreres, “his fears and hopes, also his joy and unhappiness”.

⁵ Thomas Handgrätinger, „*Caritatis fervor*“ – report to the visitation reports to the GC 2012, in: Protocol for 2012 General Chapter, De Pere 2012, S. 123-142,

3.3 Completion of the visitation

After all the talks with the confreres and the groups (council, those responsible for finances, formation ...) the visitators should have time to write their report. This report should be presented to the abbot and his council. Maybe some corrections and additions have to be done. Then this final report is to be presented to the canonry chapter without comment or discussion. The visitation could be finished with a final prayer or closing celebration (midday prayer, vespers ..)⁶. After the visitation each confrere should receive this report, especially the outside living confreres.

The visitation of all houses has to be finished at the end of 2017 (**31.12.2017**), by which time all the reports should be sent to the abbot general. He (or a definitors) will prepare a final report about the 45 visitation reports for the General Chapter 2018. This report can be the base for discussion and exchange concerning the main problems in the Order. It is desirable to send this report in time to the delegates of the CG2018.

IV Conclusion

When we are speaking about visitation, we will think spontaneously about the visitation of Mary by her cousin Elisabeth (Lc 1:39-56). I mentioned this in my report to the GC 2012. Both women were bearing new life in her womb, both women were fulfilled with the Holy Spirit, both women could express their joy and their respect for one another in a deep sensitivity and female intuition. We see in this personal meeting between two human beings, that the Lord is at work, that the Lord is present before they came together and saw one another. With this respect and love we can begin our visitation of the communities, in which the Lord is at work and is indeed at the center. Each community is in our tradition, a "church", the visible body of Christ in his three-fold ministry that comes from what it means "to be church", the ministry of hearing and announcing the Word of God (the prophetic ministry), the ministry of celebrating liturgy and consecrating the temporal order (the priestly ministry) and the ministry of building the community in charity (the kingly ministry) ... these three ministries, which make up the apostolate of our communities and of our Order, unite all men into the one community [the one church] for which Christ gave His life (conf. Jo 11:52)."⁷

For our personal reflection in preparation to the coming visitation I recall the words of St. Paul: *"Therefore, from the day we heard this, we do not cease praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding to live in a manner worthy of the Lord, so as to be fully pleasing in every good work bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of God, strengthened with every power, in accord with his glorious might, for all endurance and patience"* (Col 1:9-11).

The best preparation for the visitation is prayer for the house and the confreres, who will be visited, so that the visitation may be a deep spiritual meeting, and so that it can help to discern *"the will of the Lord"*, to strengthen the confreres so that they *"can live in a manner worthy of the Lord"*, so that they may *"bearing fruit and growing in the knowledge of the Lord"*.

The Lord is calling us, the Lord is challenging us, the Lord is urging us to ongoing conversion and continual striving. The Lord alone can give us the necessary power, endurance, patience and *"joy"* (v12) and bless our visitations.

+ Thomas Handgrättinger *OPRAEM*
Abate Generale

⁶ conf. The Order of Visitation Appendix IV, 5 B „A rite of celebrating a prayer office at the end of the visitation”.

⁷ Constitutions nr. 52.

List of the Visitors (GC 2012)

Steven Albero, Daylesford
Milo Ambros, Itinga
Richard Antonucci, Daylesford
Bernhard Ardura, Curia
Pius Balogh, Gödöllő
Thomas Benzes, Jamtara
Jendřich Charouz, Želiv
Andrew Ciferni, Daylesford
Ivo Cleiren, Tongerlo
Xavier Colavechio, De Pere
Andre Cribben, De Pere
Jeroen De Cuyper, Tongerlo
Albert Dölken, Hamborn
Bruno Dumoulin, Leffe
Erik De Sutter, Grimbergen
Lukas Dikany, Schlägl
Martin Fazakas, Csorna
Martin Felhofer, Schlägl
Benedikt Felsinger, Geras
Marc Fierens, Averbode
Klaas Fongers, Berne Heeswijk
Toninho Antonio Galvão, Montes Claros
Nicolaas Gorts, Postel
Johann Goosens, Grimbergen
Thomas Handgrätiger, Roma
Eugen Hayes, Orange
Rudolf Heim, Hamborn
Denis Hendrickx, Berne/Tilburg
Thomas Höger, Želiv
Martin Holnapy, Gödöllő
Joël Houque, Mondaye
Ludger Horstkötter, Hamborn
Lohelius Klindara, Strahov
David Komatz, De Pere/Chicago
Marian Kosik, Nová Říše
August Kováčik, Teplá
Bronislav Kramár, Želiv
Hermann Josef Kugler, Windberg
Severin Lederhilger, Schlägl
Ulrich Leinsle, Schlägl
Filip Lobkowicz, Tepla
Paul McMahan, Storrington
Christophe Monsieur, Averbode
Conrad Müller, Geras
Gary Neville, De Pere
Hermenegild Noyens
Oswaldo Paulino, Jaú
Michael Pojezdny, Strahov
Michael Proházka, Geras
Michael Proulx, Saint Constant
Augustin Puchner, Orange
Ronald Rossi, Daylesford
Simeon Rupprecht, Windberg
Mohan Sahwney, Grimbergen
Bernhard Schelpe, Itinga
Florian Schomers, Wilten
Raimund Schreier, Wilten
Thomas Secuianu, Frigolet
Erik Seghers, Averbode
Josef Serano, Daylesford
Ambroz Štrbák, Jasov
Frédéric Testaert, Postel
Sérgio Van der Heyden, Jaú
Bonaventura Van der Veken, Postel
Jan Vankeirsbilck, Averbode
Reginald Větrovec, Teplá
Oswaldo Gn. Vieira, Montes Claros
Norbert Wood, Orange
Jos Wouters, Averbode
Adrián Zemek, Strahov