

PAUL VI
APOSTOLIC LETTER ‘OPTIMAM PARTEM’
(1971)

TO OUR BELOVED SON
ANDRÉ POISSON
MINISTER GENERAL OF THE CARTHUSIAN ORDER

Beloved son, Greetings and Apostolic Blessings.

They are rightly said to have chosen the better portion (see Luke 10:41), who have left the transitory things of the world and serve God by a life entirely consecrated to him in solitude of body and mind. Being thus liberated from the hindrances whereby the spirit of man is kept from the contemplation of divine truths, they more easily attain to that which Saint Theodore the Studite brilliantly declares to be proper to monks: “truly that man is a monk, he says, who only regards God, desires only God, is devoted to God alone, strives to honor only God; and who, being at peace with God, becomes a source of peace for others” (*The Small Catechism*).

This is indeed a unique type of life, in which the heavenly way of living is in some sort anticipated here on earth. To those therefore who are gifted with this solitary vocation, these words of Saint Augustine seem most appropriate, spoken as they were in general to all those leading a religious life : “How much you are to be admired, you who begin to be before death what other men will be after the Resurrection!” (*Sermon 132, 3; PL 38, 736*).

Nonetheless dwellers in solitude should not be thought strangers to the body of the Church and to the world. For, like the Second Vatican Council has asserted: “The contemplative life pertains to the fullness of the Church’s presence” (see *Ad Gentes, 18; Venite Seorsum*)¹. And also, “Those who live such a life move the People of God by their example and also contribute to its development by their hidden mysterious fruitfulness” (*Perfectae Caritatis, 7*).

Through the centuries the Carthusian Order has preserved intact this life hidden from men and united with God which they received from their founders. This is surely for them a strong and favorable recommendation. It is moreover in the best interests of the Church, that this Order continue to prosper, in such a way that its members, desirous of rendering God the honor due to Him, might continually give their whole attention to this effort. By this sincere and undivided cult the same Order not only renders to the faithful of Christ certain and very great services, but also to all men, as it is a source of consolation for all, especially for those who seek the way of life and need divine grace. Thus contemplation and prolonged prayer should be considered as primary functions in life, since they affect the entire world (see *Perfectae Caritatis, 9; Ad Gentes, 40*).

¹ Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes (Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity)*. Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Venite Seorsum (Come Away by Yourselves to a Lonely Place, Mark 6:31)*. Instruction on the contemplative life and on the enclosure of nuns, August 15, 1969

In like manner, and inasmuch as the present human condition allows, this vocation leads directly and without detours to God. Because of this it unites these monks in a special way with the Blessed Virgin Mary, whom they like to call the ‘Particular Mother of Carthusians’.

It is therefore a pleasure for us to express publicly our paternal love and esteem for this religious family. They will soon, as we have been told, convene a special General Chapter, which at the present time and considering the circumstances, will be of great importance, since it intends to deal with approving the rules of the Order. Because of this, we feel it is our duty to put forth in this letter some of the expectations the Church holds in regard to the Carthusian monks. Since these hopes pertain directly to the work of the above mentioned Chapter and its correct orientation, the time is appropriate for expressing them.

Your Order, as everyone knows, is composed of monks who are held to the obligation of choir Office, and converse brothers or donates; all are united with one another in brotherly dependence, mutual reverence, and the common vocation of serving God and living united with Him. In your rules therefore, on which you now focus your attention, it is most fitting that it be clearly expressed that all Carthusians are sharers in the unique spiritual patrimony, since the monastic vocation can reach its full perfection in priests, converse brothers or donates.

Moreover, it is well known that the monks of your Order who are bound by the choral obligation were, almost from the very origins of the Order either priests, or religious who are preparing to receive Sacred Orders. Nevertheless, there are those today who think it wrong that cenobitic or solitary monks, who never practice the ministry, should be ordained to the priesthood. This idea, as we have remarked elsewhere (see *Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1966, vol. 58, p. 1181), is certainly without solid backing. In fact, many saints and many more religious have united profession with the priesthood, because they considered self-evident the harmonious association of the two consecrations: priestly and monastic.

Moreover, solitude, where God is the unique preoccupation, the absolute abnegation of the goods of this world, and the renouncing of self, as they are practiced by those who enclose themselves within the walls of a monastery, prepare in a very special way the soul of a priest to offer lovingly and fervently the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium* 11). And also when one considers that to the priesthood the monk adds that full gift of self whereby he is consecrated to God, it is clear that he is thereby most intimately configured with Christ the priest and the victim.

The Second Vatican Council, treating of the life of priests and their functions, rightly affirmed that the care of God’s people was contained in the exercise of the priestly powers.

But this care is performed by you as you celebrate the Eucharistic sacrifice, which is your daily custom. This action most often takes place in your solitary chapels, that is in loving solitude, where the monk’s soul, attentive to the things of heaven, more richly receives the Spirit of love and light.

Thus the Carthusian vocation, if one adheres faithfully to it, works in such a way that the universal intention present in every Eucharistic sacrifice becomes the proper intention of each monk as he celebrates. Moreover, this plenitude of Eucharistic love was declared by the Vatican Council in memorable words: “Priests,” it says, “fulfill their chief duty in the mystery of the Eucharistic Sacrifice. In it the work of our redemption continues to be carried out. For this reason, priests are strongly urged to celebrate Mass every day, for even if the faithful are unable to be present, it is an act of Christ and the Church” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 13).

Doubtlessly your General Chapter will strive to preserve the sanctity of spirit that animated your founders. Also, with its usual vitality it will continue that effort which with

spiritual intentions you have shown in forming the legislation of your Order through the centuries. With this in mind you esteem that certain texts of your Constitutions should be reworded in order to make them clearer and more easily understandable because of a more direct literary style.

You also feel that because of the progress of time, certain obsolete elements both physical and psychological are to be discarded. At the same time you rightly intend to recall into vigor certain ancient customs, which with the changes they have undergone over the centuries have lost some of their original force or become meaningless. This especially applies to the sacred liturgy you employ. Out of obedience to the directives of the Holy See in this matter you seek to render to the Mass its ancient simplicity, and as for the liturgical cycle you intend to re-establish that balance whereby more emphasis is placed on the temporal cycle. Finally, you are working to enrich your lectionary.

You rightly expect the Holy See to be gracious toward you in this matter though, of course, you are ready to accept obediently its directives. For it is quite evident that solitary monks need a liturgy adapted to their type of life. For them the interior cult and contemplation of the mystery nourished by vivid faith should evidently predominate. The eremitic participation in liturgical celebrations is more by way of spiritual communion, which is also a certain form of active participation, while the exterior element is less emphasized.

For this reason your vocation gradually formed its own liturgy, which you strive to keep because of its harmony with your contemplative and solitary life.

The Church does not discourage a certain pluralism in those things which pertain to the expression and outward manifestation of the religious sense as well as the divine cult. For this is rather commended by the various ways of seeking and worshipping God from which it originates. She therefore favors the solid monastic traditions, which if diligently kept, are a great help to augmenting faith and spiritual vitality.

Such are the things we were affectionately considering and wanted to set down in writing for you, beloved son, and for the entire Carthusian Order. And we constantly beg the Father of all Light, that He graciously assist those who will be present at the Chapter. Also, may this Chapter contribute to the progress of your religious family, and may its decrees be received with zealous observance and peace. These wishes will be confirmed by the Apostolic Blessing which we willingly confer upon you, beloved son, and on all the Carthusians committed to your care.

Given at Rome, from Saint Peter's, the 18th day of April 1971, the 8th year of our Pontificate,

Paulus, PP VI