

chapter 7: The First Years of Aggiornamento

7.2. three eye-witness accounts of the 1969 general chapter

7.2.1. Dom Armand Veilleux | a turning Point in the order's History

□□The 1969 general chapter was certainly the most important chapter for the his-tory of our order since the 1892 chapter of Union. It created within our order a unity that has continued to hold firm, and it produced a few important texts that continue to influence the life of the order and in which the order set out in ear-nest on the path of post-conciliar reform. to call it a “charismatic” chapter is not to use a trite label.

The Holy spirit's action was in fact clearly felt. It is clearly still too soon to write the history of that period. nonetheless, I would like to give my impressions of that chapter, which I experienced with great intensity. I took part, not as an abbot (I was elected abbot a few months after the chapter), but as an expert from the canadian Region. The general chapter opened in a climate of unease and tension. The official minutes briefly allude to this climate with a great deal of tact and discretion: “Dur-ing several sessions of the first days of the chapter, the discussions had to do with relations between the order and the Holy see, and with the role in these relations of the Very Rev. Fr. abbot general, supreme moderator” (minutes, p. 5). In reality, what stood out in the first days of the chapter were discussions about the possible resignation of the abbot general, Dom Ignace gillet. This latter, un-able to accept in good conscience some of the orientations and decisions taken by the 1967 chapter, which had authorized experiments, had taken measures through the Holy see to prevent certain initiatives from being put into practice, for example, the loi-cadre for the Divine office obtained by the Concilium for the application of conciliar liturgical reform in the Us and canadian Regions. some capitulants, while respecting Dom Ignace's personal convictions, thought that, if his conscience did not allow him to show solidarity with decisions legitimately taken by the general chapter, he ought to resign. Following a few days of public discussion, a compromise solution was negotiated outside of the sessions by the Vicar and moderator of the chapter, Dom ambrose, who acted with great tact and charity. Dom Ignace was to present his resignation at the following chapter. In fact, however, he presented it at the 1974 chapter. I am convinced that the great 12 Dom armand Veilleux has been the abbot of scourmont since 1999, after having been abbot of mistassini (can-ada) from 1969 to 1976, of conyers (USA) from 1984 to 1990, Procurator of the order from 1990 to 1998.

The Changes After Vatican II⁴⁰ charity and honesty with which these discussions were carried out and the great humility with which Dom Ignace gave his consent were major factors in creating the climate of trust and mutual respect that characterized the rest of the chapter. since it was difficult to see how Dom Ignace, in spite of his great qualities, could guide the order in searching for new paths and renewal, the chapter devised the creation of a new function, namely, a “secretary general” of the order, somewhat along the lines of the secretary general of the United Nations, to carry out this role alongside the abbot general. In fact, however, he was given the more modest title of “secretary of the Consilium Generale.” of itself, it was a shaky solution or even a recipe for disaster. but in fact it worked rather well, no doubt, thanks to both the great tact of the person elected to this post, Dom John eudes bamberger, and the great humility of Dom Ignace. When Dom John eudes became abbot of genesee a few years later, he was not replaced, and the post ceased to exist. another potential source of great tensions at the opening of the chapter was the desire of the north american regions to obtain greater autonomy for their houses and greater pluralism in the application of monastic values. This desire for pluralism seemed dangerous to other regions that tended to see uniformity of ob-servance as a guarantee of unity in the order. This point was obviously linked to the burning question of the revision of the constitutions, especially since the draft of a “new charter of charity,” drawn up by a commission established in 1967, had not been well received. a new ordering of topics proposed by Dom augustine Roberts and accepted by the chapter, with a few modifications, made it possible to work around this difficulty. according to the new order of topics, there would first be a discussion on the definition of cistercian life. This was a providential initiative. We first spoke about drawing up a “Descriptive Definition of the order.” but we quickly realized that cistercian life cannot be “defined” as if it were an abstract reality. nor could it be “described.” cistercian life is an empirical reality that has taken on many aspects and forms in the course of history, so it cannot be “de-scribed” without choosing arbitrarily and a priori the elements to be brought into the “description.” We therefore decided to draw up instead a “Declaration” that would be both an act of faith in the vocation we perceive to be ours at this precise moment of the order’s history and with the necessarily limited lights we pos-sess at present, and a commitment to live in accordance with this vocation. Three different commissions of different languages drew up three rather like-minded drafts, which were then revised in each of these commissions to make them more concordant. Finally, the text was finalized by a small commission of five persons and approved by a nearly unanimous vote (68 to 8). The unity built around the drawing up of this beautiful little text affected all the work of the following weeks.