

CONSTITUTIONS AND LINGUISTICS

(Various types of value statements in our Constitutions)

[Enter Viola and Clown with a tabor]

VIOLA: Save thee, friend, and thy music: Dost thou live by thy tabor?

CLOWN: No, sir, I live by the church.

VIOLA: Art thou a churchman?

CLOWN: No such matter, sir; I do live by the church, for I do live at my house, and my house doth stand by the church.

(Twelfth Night, Act 3, Scene 1)

The above dialogue between Shakespeare's fools is perhaps a good illustration of the dialogue that has been going on in the Order this past few years concerning questions like the Unity of the Order and, of course, Collegiality.

The various persons of the Order who have proposed solutions on these matters all share the same fundamental values and the same sincere desire to find an adequate manner of expressing those values in our legislation. The problem is, to a very large extent a problem of language; but not only in the sense that we don't give exactly the same meaning to the same words. It has to do with the nature of the statements we use. The study of philosophy and linguistics during the last half century or so has taught us to discriminate among linguistic forms.

Value statements (and it is mostly what we are dealing with in our Constitutions) can be divided into two kinds: general or consensual statements on the one hand, and specific or substantive statements on the other.

General or consensual statements are the sort of things to which one can hardly take exception. They express general notions like "Seek peace and pursue it", "We must foster by all means the unity of the Order", "We must foster democracy in Central America". Such statements have their place and their importance, but they are useless for

policy-making, because they are too general.

Policies are pragmatic; there are always choices between two or more optional directions, each claiming to fulfil the mandates of the generally accepted wisdom that the consensual statements represent.

A specific or substantive statement is precisely a statement that is concrete enough to lead to the formulation of an actual policy. Examples would be: "In order to pursue peace such and such an ideology must be eradicated"; "The Unity of the Order must be achieved through totally unified structures (or through parallel structures); "To foster democracy in Central America such and such a governments must be toppled".

It is obvious that it is easier to agree on the first type of statements than on the second, for the very good reason that the first ones are, by nature, expressions of consensus while the second express "positions" on disputable matters.

From this I would like to draw a few conclusions: The first one is that, at this point, when we are putting a finishing touch to our Constitutions and a few important questions remain to be settled, it might be useful to divide our statements into two columns. The advantage of doing this will be that we will not be tempted to withdraw an obvious and important consensual statement because we cannot agree on a specific one that tries to give it a concrete expression. It might also help us to keep a good balance of both types of statements. If we choose mostly the consensual statements, no tension will be generated, but we will arrive at no clear policy of our concrete life. On the other hand, if we choose mostly substantive statements, we will get clear guidelines for action but no consensus on enforcing them.

For example, the following statements from our Constitutions all seem to me consensual statements:

- 1 - "The Cistercian way of life is coenobitic." (Cst. 3,1)
- 2 - "Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God." (Cst. 10)
- 3 - "The supreme authority of the Order... is exercised collegially by the superiors, who share a responsibility for all the communities of the Order." (Cst. 4, 2)

On the other hand, the following statements are substantive or specific statements:

1 - "The abbot... may permit a brother to take up an eremitical life."
(Cst 14, 2, A)

2 - "It is the abbot's responsibility... to determine the manner in which each monk participates [the Work of God]." (Cst. 20)

3 - "Matters affecting both monks and nuns together are referred to the pastoral care and authority of the abbots and abbesses gathered in General Chapter either jointly or separately." (Cst. 73, 2 [Nuns])

The next step is what to do with these statements:

What to do about our specific statements: There are some disputed points on which we will probably be able to arrive at some agreement or at least at some reasonable compromise at the Summit Meeting. If we do, all the better. There are other questions on which no solution has, in the present state of things, the qualities required to generate a collective agreement. These questions should be left open or, to use an expression put forward these past few years, they should be left in a state of evolutive status quo. To force those issues could endanger our agreement on the consensual statements and, consequently, our common value stances.

To generate value stances is precisely the main reason for the expression of value statements. As linguists point out, consensual statements do not actually state anything, in the sense of making an assertion that is open to assent or denial. As in liturgy, we are dealing not so much with words of a text as with the experience of those words when they are read or repeated. The repetition of those value statements may never lead to a concrete common policy; but they can generate a common value stance. Let's take an example: When we say that the abbots and abbesses of the Order share a collegial responsibility on the whole Order, we express a general or consensual statement that, if we put it in our Constitutions, and read it periodically, will help maintain and develop a "collegial attitude", whether or not we ever come to an agreement on specific and substantial statements like "the abbots and the abbesses of the Order form a permanent college".

The comparison with liturgy, which I made above, is worth stressing. Therefore I would like to conclude with a quotation from a Jewish liturgist:

"A value stance arises out of the interaction of worshipers with a text, during the act of prayer. Out of their commitment to praying together as a community that embodies certain traditions and attitudes toward the world, there are formulated not value statements, but a

value stance. This arises from the fact that one identifies oneself with a certain ecclesia in the first place... The experience or worship unifies group members by the ritualized presentation of a system of meaning that includes within it a value stance. This value stance is encoded in the network of consensual value statements that members internalize as defining characteristics of their religious community and, thus, of themselves. They may differ on policies, of course, because policies are derived from substantive not consensual value statements."

The original meaning of the word "liturgy" is a public service of the community. Our General Chapter should be, in that sense, a liturgy. We expect it to produce good policies for the Order. We expect it therefore to produce a good number of specific and substantive value statements that can lead to such policies. But even in areas where this is not yet possible, the Chapter should not shy away making general and consensual statements that will, with time, either generate or continue to foster common value stances that can weave a common system of meaning and make of us all one Cistercian family.

Several years ago I advocated a General Chapter that would be "prophetic" rather than "juridical". The next Summit Meeting will be, I hope, prophetic, although it must produce legislation. What I would advocate at this point, in the light of what I just said above, is a liturgical General Chapter.

Conyers, August 19, 1987

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