



THE JOY OF BEING A CARTHUSIAN MONK

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago, the movie "The Great Silence", made an enormous impact in audiences in general. It uncovered some aspects of the life of Carthusian monks; but just a little bit, because the total lack of explanations in the film left unanswered many questions in the minds of spectators. Who are these monks dressed in rough white habits? What is the sense of their retired, silent life, so different from the life of priests, and of members of religious Orders dedicated to pastoral work, teaching, missions, within the secular world?

Carthusians firmly protect their silence and their retreat from the world in order to live their own and specific charisma. This is why they avoid publicity and rarely grant interviews to the press. So, as it could be expected, they are very little known.

Nevertheless, the solitary life of Carthusians has always attracted men who are thirsty of infinite, who wish to lead a life that is hidden from the eyes of the world, devoting their existence wholly to God in the silence and solitude of a hermitage. Saints like Ignatius of Loyola, John of the Cross, and others, felt the desire to enter the Carthusian Order. And the Order goes on awakening the interest of not a few of the faithful who feel attracted to a life of simple faith centred in that which is essential, substantial.

We present here the questions that Jesuit Fr. Rosendo Roig put forward, some years ago, to the Carthusian monks of Miraflores (Burgos, Spain). We have added some other questions that aspirants put sometimes to us in their letters and vocational retreats. We hope that these simple dialogs might be useful for young people interested in knowing better the charisma and daily life of Carthusians.



1. The vocation

- When a young man wishes to enter the Carthusian Order, he writes....

- To whom?

- Usually to Fr. Prior.

- Who answers him?

- Father Master of Novices sends him a letter together with a booklet that will give him a general idea of the observances and prerequisites of the Carthusian calling. Nowadays, most aspirants contact us by e-mail.

- And then.. ?

- If he answers and persists in his project, once we have received the favorable report of some priest that knows him, we invite him to a stay of some days in the charterhouse.

- And what kind of life does he lead there?

- To make his stay more fruitful the aspirant lives in a cloister cell and follows the Community's time-schedule.

- Does the stay usually turn out to be illuminating?

- After some days, the aspirant develops a rather accurate idea of the life he wishes to adopt.

- Who takes care of the aspirant during these days?

- Father Master of novices visits him frequently; the aspirant talks with him in a friendly way about his vocation and about everything that has to do with it.

- Which is exactly the goal of these dialogues?

- To go deeper in Carthusian spirituality in order to help the aspirant to discern his vocation.

- Which motives are not valid for becoming a Carthusian?

- Disillusionments of life, ... the wish for a quiet existence, with no problems..., and, in general any selfish motives. In fact, the only valid motive is the search for everlasting values, the search of God, if not clearly defined, known at least by a sort of intuition. We try to



analyse vocations with the outmost prudence and patience.

- In practice, which are the age limits to enter the Charterhouse.
- We increasingly tend to dissuade entering before being twenty-one years of age.
- From twenty-one up to what age?
- Without a special permission given by the General Chapter or by the Reverend Father (that is to say, the Prior General of our Order), nobody can be admitted who is older than forty five.
- And is this permission usually granted?
- If the age is not much above 45 years, permission can possibly be granted, but only after a three or four months special trial, before being accepted as an aspirant.
- Why this trial?
- Because adaptation to the observances of the Charterhouse turns to be more problematic at that age, and before the candidate can be admitted as an aspirant, it has to be clearly ascertained if he will be able to carry out that adaptation,
- Which are your requirements with respect to health?
- Previous to admission, our Statutes advise us to "consult experienced doctors, who are familiar with our way of life". Little problems of psychic unbalance that would go almost unnoticed somewhere else, undergo some sort of resonance in the solitude of the charterhouse that incapacitates the candidate for our daily living. Nowadays, medical examinations are considered necessary before the Noviciate and Profession.
- Regarding will power what are your requirements?
- A vocation to solitude requires a strong will and a balanced judgment.
- Does this mean that quiet characters have a better chance than tense ones?
- In general, yes, but it is not always so. Nervous temperaments can adapt themselves well to the Charterhouse.
- Being more precise, which is the essential quality that is required to enter?
- Since Carthusian life is a life of prayer, it wouldn't make much sense to admit someone who doesn't feel an attraction to retiredness



and prayer. In contemplative life no quality, no matter how excellent, can replace the spirit of piety.

- Which, in concrete terms, is the mission of Father Master of Novices.

- To guide the novices in their formation, help them in their difficulties and in the " the temptations which are wont to beset the followers of Christ in the desert ".

- Is any special method of prayer favoured in the Charterhouse?

- Usually, the cathusian novice starts his training through the ways of "Lectio divina". This method of prayer, traditionally used in monasteries, was synthesized by Guigues II the Carthusian, and consists in reading slowly a passage of the Holy Scriptures, and meditating it leisurely. Then you silently take the sentiments and feelings of gratitude, praise, repentance that this passage generates within you and convert them in a prayer to the Lord. When that text no longer says anything to you or distraction supervenes, you turn to read another little fragment of the Holy Scripture and let it sink in the heart. This method of prayer is very simple and reduces distractions considerably. Everything in the ambient of the Charterhouse prepares the monk to let himself be overcome by prayer.

- Do you consider a training in the life of prayer to be very important?

- It couldn't be otherwise. It is important that the novice's prayer will move towards simplification, becoming a simple and loving gaze to the Lord. Even if it might be just in the early grades of a simple gaze or, stillness, it is convenient for the novice to achieve a taste of contemplative prayer. The Novice Master must, very prudently, train the novice in contemplation, aware that this is the prayer's goal.

- Isn't this too demanding for a simple novice?

-Generally, if God grants the novice the grace of a contemplative experience, no matter how simple and brief it might be, he will be already prepared to overcome the moments of discouragement, dryness and crisis that aren't usually scarce, especially during the time of noviciate. Living habitually in the presence of the Lord, in a friendly and praying intercourse with the Word of God, be it in the



Divine Office, during the praying of the Hours, or in the moments dedicated to "Lectio Divina", erodes the "old man" that slumbers in the deep zones of everyone.

The young monk progressively frees himself from the tyranny of senses and passions, from the strong call of the world of the senses that he cast away when entering the charterhouse but are still there hiding inside him. So he goes on overcoming the dissipation of the senses, the superficiality, the flightiness, and so his whole life gradually and almost imperceptibly becomes imbued with the nearness of God. Now in the stillness, in the interior silence that invade his spirit, sentiments of adoration, gratitude and joy become almost connatural to his soul. Should this pillar of contemplative prayer be lacking, the vocation would be permanently exposed to discouragement, to the unsteadiness of moody feelings, to the weariness, dryness and lack of enthusiasm for things of the spirit, that usually are in the roots of most desertions of monastic life.

2. THE STAGES IN THE WAY : CLOISTER MONKS

A. The postulancy

- Let us assume that the Superior of the Charterhouse considers that an aspirant to become a cloister monk has given signals of a true vocation. What then?
- He is admitted as a postulant.
- What is the Postulancy?
- The trial period that prepares for access to the Noviciate.
- How long does it last?
- Between six months and one year.
- What kind of life does the postulant lead?
- A very similar one to the monks' life.
- Is it exactly the same one?
- The postulant is granted certain mitigations so that his



adaptation to the new life might be achieved gradually.

- What kind of clothes does he wear?

- Secular clothes, but at the community gatherings he wears a black cloak.

- How does the postulant spend his time?

- He dedicates the free time he has left after saying his prayers, to foster in himself the spirit of the Charterhouse. He learns the liturgical ceremonies. And he studies Latin.

- Latin?

- Yes, Latin.

- Does it take long to learn Latin?

- Usually, after some months of effort, the postulant manages to get a modest knowledge that allows him to understand the liturgy books.

B. The noviciate

- Let us assume that, after finishing the months as a postulant, the candidate's behaviour is considered to be the adequate one.

- If the Community gives him a favourable vote, he is admitted to the Noviciate.

- How long does the Noviciate last?

- Two years.

- What does the novice do during the first year?

- He works to increase his knowledge of spiritual life with special emphasis in the study of liturgy and Carthusian observances.

- And during the second year?

- He starts the studies that will prepare him for the Priesthood: two years and a half of Philosophy and three and a half of Theology.

- And where do these studies take place?

- Due to the requirements of the eremitic vocation of the Charterhouse, these studies are carried out in the solitude of the cell.



- But how?

- Twice per week, students go to the cell of a Carthusian monk proficient in the subject being studied. There they show him their progress and ask for the clarifications they might need. The Carthusian professor solves the students' difficulties. It is also frequent to resort to professors from outside the charterhouse to ensure a solid formation for the students.

- How do novices dress?

- They dress the same habit wore by the professed ones, but the cowl is short and with no bands.

- What is a band?

- A band of cloth that bounds together the two parts of the cowl. They wear also a large black cloak when they are with the Community.

C. Temporary profession

- Two years have gone by, the Community has given a favourable vote, what's next for the novice?

The novice accedes to temporary profession.

- Why "temporary"?

- Because the votes of stability, obedience and conversion of life are made for three years only.

- What are the effects of temporary Profession?

- The young profess remains definitively bound to the charterhouse where he made his votes. The years of antiquity within the Order are counted from the moment of this first profession.

- And once the Noviciate is finished?

- The young profess stays within the Noviciate as just another novice. Father Master keeps in charge of his spiritual formation. But during the following three years he continues the ecclesiastic studies and goes more deeply into the spiritual formation that he started in the Noviciate.

- And ... after these three years have passed?

- The young profess renews his votes for two more years. The



difference is that during these two years he will live among the solemn professes, so that he is able to experience more fully how is the life he plans to embrace for the rest of his existence.

- Does he go on with his studies?
- He interrupts his studies during the last year to devote himself more fully to prayer and solitude in his cell.

D. Solemn profession

- Seven years have passed and the much desired moment of his definitive consecration comes at last.

- Is it an important day for a Carthusian?
- It is the greatest event in a Carthusian's life together with Priesthood.

- What are the commitments undertaken?
- The commitment to live exclusively for God's praise. Solemn Profession is the end result of a long chain of graces to which he has corresponded generously with a daily fidelity.

- What happens after solemn profession?
- In a certain way it is the beginning. The Carthusian has consecrated himself to God in a sublime act. Now he has to live that consecration day by day. Priesthood, which will be granted to him after he finishes his studies, will round off his Profession.

- What feelings fill the soul of the Carthusian on the day of his solemn Profession?

- I think that the same ones that with lyric accents, expressed our Father Saint Bruno in his letter to the Brothers of Chartreuse: *«Rejoice my dear brothers over your happy state and over the abundant graces that the hand of the Lord has poured on you, Rejoice over having evaded the many dangers and shipwrecks of the stormy sea of the world. Rejoice over having reached the quiet and safe refuge of the most sheltered port. How many did desire it, how many fought for it and yet did not obtained it! Many others after having obtained it were excluded from it because none of them had been granted this grace from above.*

Be certain, my brothers, that anyone who has finally lost this coveted



benefit after having tasted it, will lament it all his lifetime".

3. The Carthusian Brothers

- Were there Brothers in the Charterhouse always?

- When Saint Bruno retired to the Chatreuse desert, two of his companions were secular ones: Andrew and Guerin. They were the Order's first Brothers. There always have been Brothers in the Charterhouse. With some slight variations, the number of Brothers in the Order has remained the same for centuries, as it is now: seven or eight Brothers for every ten Fathers.

Cloister Monks and Brothers are two different ways of living the same vocation. Cloister monks and Brothers share, under complementary forms, the responsibility of the mission that concerns Carthusian Communities: to make possible the existence of a family of solitaires. within the Church's bosom.

- Could you explain it further?

- Cloister monks live in their cells as eremites during most of the day.

- And the Brothers...

- Although they share the same vocation as the Fathers, they fulfil it in a different way.

- How?

- Brothers devote some time to manual work outside their cells. taking care of the monastery's material tasks.

-Let's talk about the Brothers ...

- Since the beginning of the Order to present times, Carthusian Brothers have had an outstanding level of stability and spiritual fervour. They have perfectly well defined place of their own in the Charterhouse.

- And which is the reason for that?

- It is due to the vigilance of General Chapters, to the nearness of the Prior and the Procurator (Procurator is the monk in charge of the monastery's material affairs), and above all to the spiritual climate of silence and solitude that Fathers and Brothers share



equally although in different ways.

- What is the training of a Carthusian Brother?

- They follow a way similar to the one of cloister monks.

- Let's see....

- The length of the Postulancy varies and depends largely on the spiritual formation of the candidate. It lasts between six months and one year.

If the candidate's behaviour gives sign of a sure vocation, after the Community's vote, he is admitted to the Converses' Noviciate. Its length is two years.

- Who is the Father Master of Carthusian Brothers?

-Traditionally the Procurator was also Fr. Master, but lately it is frequent that it is the F. Master for the Fathers who performs the task. Father Master guides their formation and helps them to overcome the trials and difficulties they will meet on the way.

- And once the Noviciate has been satisfactorily finished?

- The Brother makes his first Profession for three years. Since that moment, the Brother becomes a member of the Order. At the end of these three years, the Converse renews his compromise for two more years. During all this time he continues under the tutelage of the Father Master.

- So a seven years formation is needed to become a Carthusian Brother.

- Exactly. After that seven years formation, the moment arrives, so keenly desired, for a definitive consecration to God by means of solemn Vows. The ceremony of the profession takes place during the conventual Mass. The Brother reads the formula of the Profession and then deposits it on the altar as a symbol of the gift of himself to God.

- Do Brothers receive a special formation?

- Their formation is a solid one adapted to their situation. The Order has arranged for them what we would call today a permanent formation. That is to say, during the first seven years of their Carthusian life, and under the guidance of Father Master, they give some time every day to the study of the Bible, Theology, Liturgy, Spirituality..... These studies are adapted to the possibilities of each Brother. They can continue their studies all along their lives.



- What do Brothers read?
 - The Brothers have the Library of the House at their disposal. The sections of Spirituality and Lives of Saints are the ones they visit more often.
 - How many hours does a Brother work each day?
 - Usually five hours distributed over morning and afternoon, but working time is reduced during the formation period for them to dedicate more time to studies.
 - What is the work in the Charterhouse?
 - It must be emphasized that the Brothers' work is above all monastic. They are not employees whose main reason was to make the monastery run. When we say that their work is monastic we mean that it is mainly a religious action that helps them to improve the practice of virtues and gets them closer to God.
 - How do they manage to keep the spirit of prayer and solitude in the middle of their work?
 - The Statutes of the Order recommend the frequent use of ejaculatory prayers, and even to interrupt work with briefs moment of prayer.
 - Do Carthusians work in teams?
 - Whenever possible the endeavoured goal is that each one works individually in the obedience that has been committed to him.
 - Is silence important?
 - Yes. It is very important to labour in silence during work time. Our Statutes state that: Only self-recollection during work will make a contemplative out of a Brother..
 - So much spiritual concentration doesn't go against the work's efficacy?
 - No. Usually not. In his area of work the Brother benefits from liberty and initiative. And dedication and interest in their work usually results in Carthusian Brothers becoming true specialists.
 - And how is adjusted for Carthusian Brothers what we could call the "official prayer", choir prayer?
 - Just the same as the one of cloister monks for praying the canonical Hours although a little bit more reduced.



floor he goes on presenting the Church and the world's needs in the presence of the Lord. Nobody is left out from the intentions of this prayer: from the Pope to the last sinner in the night in which men, his brothers rest.

4. The most characteristic aspect of Carthusian spirituality:

A. Only God

- Unlike religious men who lead a pastoral life, you do not engage in preaching, teaching, or the care of sick people, etc. What do you actually do?

- Our place in the Church is what is traditionally referred to as "contemplative life".

- What is then the contemplative life of Carthusians?

- A mystery akin to the mystery of God, in whose greatness and incompressibility they participate somehow. Beyond the care of worldly things; beyond even all human ideals and beyond their own perfection, Carthusians search for God, live only for God, their bodies and souls devoted to praise God. This is the secret of a purely contemplative life: to live for God only, to have no other desire but God, know nothing but God and possess nothing but God. He who feels God as the supreme value will easily understand this life of a radical consecration that actually is the life of Carthusians.

- A beautiful ideal

- But this beautiful ideal requires an adequate climate to develop.

- And which is that adequate climate

- This climate is formed by our Carthusian uses and observances that find their true meaning this way. Considered separately with no relationship to their goal, those uses and observances would be impossible to understand and would be nothing but a collection of odd practices.

- Let's see....



B. Solitude and silence

- Which is the word that is more frequently repeated in Carthusian life?

- If somebody undertook the task of looking for the most frequently used words in the pages of our Statutes, we think that those words would be "solitude" and "silence".

- Has your spirituality any slogan?

- Carthusian spirituality is the spirituality of the desert.

- Is it a tradition?

- Our Statutes seem to think so when they tell us:

« The founding Fathers of our type of monastic life were followers of a star from the East, the example, namely, of those early Eastern monks, who, with the memory of the Blood shed by the Lord not long before still burning within them, thronged to the deserts to lead lives of solitude and poverty of spirit. ».

- Is it a personalistic spirituality or has it some foundations?

- The Holy Scripture and the Tradition of the Church offer grounds to place solitary life above any other vocation.

- Even if only as a mean, you tribute a real cult to solitude, Why?

- Because, as very rightly our Statutes, say quoting Dom Guigues, fourth successor of Saint Bruno in the hermitage of Chartreuse, solitude is the most apt mean for union with God: *"for tasting the spiritual savor of psalmody;; for penetrating the message of the written page; for kindling the fire of fervent prayer; for engaging in profound meditation; for losing oneself in mystic contemplation; for obtaining the heavenly dew of purifying tears – nothing is more helpful than solitude"*.

- Then, has this importance that the Charterhouse gives to solitude, any repercussion on the Order's juridical structure?

- The whole Charterhouse legislation tends to keep and promote this solitude and silence that are the most outstanding notes of the spirituality of the desert and of Carthusian spirituality.

- Can you point some features of your Statuts on Carthusian life of solitude.?

- For instance, our Statutes forbid Carthusians to preach, to hear



confessions, or to give spiritual counselling, excellent things in themselves, but which are not in the line of our contemplative vocation.

- So much rigidity couldn't possibly frighten the contemporary Catholic Church?

- On the contrary, this is precisely what the Church asks from Carthusians today.

Vatican Council II has stated clearly that the duty of contemplatives is: "to devote themselves exclusively to God in solitude and silence... no matter how pressing the needs for active apostolate might be" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 7) Silence might very well be the preaching that today's world needs most.

- You Carthusians protect your contemplative vocation with solitude, but... how do you manage to escape the invasion of social communication means?

- To avoid this danger, there is no radio in the Charterhouse, nor television and our Statutes advise us to be very prudent about secular readings.

- So, you live alien from today's world?

- Our Statutes speak of the need to "*live alien from all worldly news*" as something crucial in our solitary life. In any case, Father Prior takes care to give the monks that news that wouldn't be right for them to ignore so that the Community may present the needs of mankind to the Lord.

- Couldn't this hard and sharp observance become a danger and materialize the life of the Charterhouse?

- Our whole legislation on silence and solitude is just the literal side of our observances. The monk sees in them the favourable climate for his eremitic vocation but he knows very well that this is neither everything nor even the main thing.

- Please resume in one word all that is necessary for Carthusians.

- His falling in love with solitude for living it in the intercourse and intimacy with the Lord..

- Would any Carthusian who was faithful to these principles, be happy?

- Every monk who is perfectly faithful to his vocation will feel that God calls him to increasingly deeper solitudes and silences.



C. Spiritual quietness

- ... Increasingly deeper solitudes and silences?
- Yes, exterior solitude creates the propitious atmosphere for a more perfect solitude to be developed, the interior solitude.
- What is this interior solitude?
- It is a spiritual process through which memory, intellect and will progressively die to every interest and complacency for things. God begins, instead, to be felt as the only one who can satisfy the deep realms of the spirit. It is only when the Carthusian discovers, bathed in admiration, that only God satisfies him that he begins to really be a true contemplative. Feeling that only God can satisfy him produces such a feeling of interior freedom and joy that it is difficult to express it in words.
- It seems to me that you are speaking about your own experience.
- I wish I was!
- Is this contemplative experience something typical of the Charterhouse and restricted to it?
- It is a spiritual process that we find already described in the spirituality of the Fathers of the Desert, such as Evagrio and, in general, in the Christian mystics of all ages.
- How do you Carthusians resume it?
- I think that this whole process could be summed up in a word that was well beloved by Saint Bruno and by the first Carthusians: "quies", that is to say, stillness or spiritual peacefulness.
- If I have understood you correctly, you mean that all this Carthusian atmosphere leads to ...
- The ambience of solitude, the absence of any disturbing noise and of worldly desires and images, the quiet and calm attention of the mind to God, helped by prayer and leisurely reading, flow into that "quies" or "rest" of the soul in God. A simple and joyful rest, full of God, that leads the monk to feel, in some way, the beauty of eternal life.
- Which degree of contemplation would this be?



- Let's say that "quies" or "quietude" is the coveted goal of Carthusians.

D. Fidelity to the Cross

- You have the reputation of being mortified and penitent.

- On this topic as on many others there are the strangest ideas. For us penitences are just simple means *to be freed from the tendencies of our lower nature and enabled to follow the Lord more readily and cheerfully.*

- But as you know, personal penitence is not considered an infallible mean nowadays.... we live in times of understanding and dialogue.

- Penitences and in general everything that involves sacrifice and self-denial has a bad press today and are talked about with remarkable inconsistency. Nevertheless, everybody approves sportsmen depriving themselves of many licit things and submitting their bodies to painful trainings.

- Carthusians wish to live as the new men that Holy Scriptures demand. Could you specify which are the basic penitences?

- Yes. Removal from the world, absence of news and pastimes. Very possibly, these are the hardest self-denials and the ones novices consider being the hardest ones. The partition of sleep in two parts, the roughness of clothes....

- What do you eat?

- There is a meal at noon, which consists of legumes, fish or eggs and dessert.

- When you do not fast what do you have for supper?

- On the days that we don't fast we have two eggs for supper, or its equivalent in fish, and some fruit.

- When do you fast?

- Fasting starts on September 15th, that is, on the next day of the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. They go on until Easter, that is, about seven months later.

- What does fast entail?

- Fast means having a single meal at noon. In the evening we



have a collation with a bit of bread and something to drink.

- Is there anything special on Fridays?

- We have a day of abstinence every week. This means that we have just bread and water. We do it usually on Fridays in memory of the Passion of the Lord; but when a feast takes place in a week, the abstinence is done on the eve of that feast.

- Do you eat meat?

- Traditionally since the time of Saint Bruno, we never eat meat nor is served to anybody in the Houses of the Order.

- Aspirants and novices are also compelled to fast?

- Adaptation to our kind of life requires time and prudence. This is why aspirants and novices become initiated to our uses and practices little by little under the surveillance and counsel of Father Master of Novices.

- And the sick ones?

- Our Statutes say that: *« if, in a particular case, or with the passage of time, someone finds that any of the aforesaid observances is beyond his strength, and that he is hindered rather than helped in the following of Christ, let him in a filial spirit arrange some suitable measure of relaxation with the Prior, at least for a time ».*

- Is smoking allowed?

- Tobacco is forbidden for "reasons of self-denial and poverty" .

- In brief...

- These are the most important aspects of Carthusian asceticism. Our Order considers them sufficient and with a great sense of prudence, formally commands that *« No one is to indulge in penitential practices over and above those prescribed by the Statutes without the knowledge and approval of the Prior ».* The Charterhouse has inherited from Saint Bruno his moderation and equilibrium. In his letter to his friend Raoul the Saint describes with enthusiasm the beauty of Calabria's landscapes and in case his friend might be surprised by these not so spiritual commentaries, he explains: *«... It is true, though that our rather feeble nature is renewed and finds new life in such perspectives, wearied by its spiritual pursuits and austere mode of life. It is like a bow, which soon wears out and runs the risk of becoming useless, if it is kept continually taut.»*



- To conclude this topic, which are the main traits of the Carthusian spirit?

- Solitude, silence, the Carthusian "quies", simplicity of practices, and an austere life define the most outstanding traits of the Carthusian spirit, which are coincident with the master features of the spirituality of the desert.

5. PECULIARITIES OF THE CHARTERHOUSE

A. The Carthusian, an eremite incorporated in a monastic family.

- After all we have already talked, it seems to me that the most characteristic feature in Carthusian life is living in solitude and silence. I have read somewhere that, among all the monastic Orders, at least in the West, you are the one that underlines eremitism in a more prominent way.

- Probably. As I have already said, cartushians are mainly eremites who spends almost the whole day in their cells or hermitages. This is our clearest identity mark and our specific charisma.

- But then, won't this solitude charisma of the Charterhouse banish to the shadows such important and evangelic things as the love and service to our neighbours? I think it was Saint Agustin who said: "How could I wash my neighbour's feet if I live enclosed in an hermitage? "

- It was Saint Basilio, father of oriental monarchism who said that. We should not forget that, as Saint Paul said, not all the members have the same function in the Church. "The Carthusians' life is devoted to the praise of God and to prayer of intercession in favour of all men"

- Then?

- Although our specific charisma is not taking care of the sick, preaching, nor educating youth, the charterhouse isn't a purely



eremitic institution; solitary life is balanced with an important share of communitarian life that is also an essential part of our charisma.

- Is that so?

- It is and it has been so since the very beginnings of the Order. In spite of our Father Saint Bruno's strong fondness of the desert, the fact is that he was not a solitary in the traditional style, such as eremites Paul, Anthony or Benedict who started living totally alone in the desert. Saint Bruno is never seen alone, but accompanied always by a group of friends who share his same ideals.

- That is a very interesting point...

- It is important for us to live as eremites in our cells, but forming at the same time a close family in the bosom of the monastery. In past centuries the word 'family' was the one used when referring to Carthusian communities. Our present Statutes also use it.

- And how do you actually live this 'family' aspect?

- I'll give you an example: We take care personally of our sick and our old ones helping them in everything, being with them whenever necessary, even if that means going out of our cells. And we do it with affection and love because we are certain that fraternal love is above any other consideration or spiritual value.

I begin to understand... and I can guess too that your recreations and communitarian walks have also something to do with that aspect of 'family' life.

- You are quite right! The Sunday recreations and weekly walks give a familiar, human and evangelic touch to Carthusian, eremitic life, and help us to preserve a healthy equilibrium.

B. The cells

- You have used repeatedly the word "cell" as if it was the living lodgings of Carthusian monks. How is really the Carthusian cell?

- Of all the monastery quarters, the big cloister cells are the most characteristic ones in the Charterhouse.

Basically the cells of all charterhouses have the same elements even if their distribution may sometimes vary between them.

- Could you describe cells briefly?

- Cells are located in the great cloister which is a long corridor in



a quadrilateral shape usually.

The word "cell" used by Carthusians since the origin of the Order, may induce inevitably to error, because it suggests the idea of a small room. The Carthusian cell is really a small house with two floors in whose premises there is room for a study hall, an oratory, a small carpenter's shop and even a garden or orchard. The reason of its relative spaciousness is due to the Order's highly eremitical type of life: Carthusians spend the larger part of their life in their cells. Our Statutes graphically say that cell is for a Carthusian what water is for fishes or cattle-shed for sheep.

A letter of the alphabet clipped in wood and glued to each door sets apart each cell from the others. The first room in the cell is a rather spacious entrance hall presided by a cross and a painting or image of Our Lady. Every time they enter their cell, Carthusians pray an Ave Maria. This is why this room is called "Ave Maria". Near the door there is a cupboard-table with the necessary utensils for meals.

On one side of the thick wall you can see a small window; the steward Brother puts there the food that the monk will remove in due time to have his meal. Carthusians eat inside their cells. It is only on Sundays and festivities that they eat in the conventual refectory with the rest of the community.

From the "Ave Maria" we go to a well lighted gallery that is employed as a carpenter's shop. There is a spinning-wheel for working with wood that is made to function with a lever, a carpenter bench and the usual tools. At one of the ends of the gallery, a door lead us to the cell's garden or orchard that each Carthusian cultivates according to his preferences. The care of the garden is used both for physical exercise and for spiritual relief.

Coming back to the "Ave Maria", we ascend through a stair to the main room; this room is about six meters long and five meters wide. A great window that opens to the garden provides lighting. The furniture consists of a table, a wooden chair and a book-case. At the rear end of the room, presiding over it, there is a small altar, a prie-dieu for praying and a bookcase. There is a simple bed on one side and close to the entrance door another door that leads to the bathroom. This is the Carthusian's cell; here he spends his days and his years in silence, alone with the Lord.



- Is the cell a heaven or a purgatory?

- For he who has received this luxurious vocation that is living only for God, I would say that it is the former. In fact, monks from all ages have experienced and praised the beauty of solitary life in the cell where they spend their days in an intimate intercourse with the Lord. Our Statutes join this long monastic tradition that considers the cell as the ante-chamber of heaven" *«This is holy ground, a place where, as a man with his friend, the Lord and his servant often speak together; there is the faithful soul frequently united with the Word of God; there is the bride made one with her spouse; there is earth joined to heaven, the divine to the human».*

-Nevertheless, considering the ambience of noise, images, and distractions that is characteristic of our culture, isn't it difficult for young people to adapt to such a strict a life of silence and solitude as the one lived in the Charterhouse?

- The cell generally requires from the novice a more or less long adaptation process -we could call it de-intoxication- to be able to make silence inside him, to quiet his fantasies, his affections, his senses, until he manages to calm the spirit, to become centred on the substantive, on transcendental values, that are the only ones that can in fact satisfy the deepest yearnings of the soul.

- What would you advice to a young man that arrives from the world and begins to live in the eremitic cell his new life so different from the life he has lead until now?

- Father Master of novices will make him follow a precise and very prudent time-schedule so that the young novice can devote himself, in an orderly and profitable way, to reading, psalmody, prayer, meditation, contemplation and work. He will also teach him to fight against discouragement temptations and to get gradually used to the peaceful listening of the heart and to let God enter in his interior.

Above all he will advice the novice to trust the Lord who has given him this predilection vocation and will also grant him the necessary grace to carry it to a happy end.



C. The Charterhouse time schedules.

Matins and Lauds

- The Charterhouse time schedules are a bit odd, aren't they?
- A bit peculiar perhaps.
- ¿At what time do you go to bed?
- At half past seven or eight p.m.. The sun is still on the horizon in the summer.
- In bed at seven thirty or eight at what time do you get up?
- At half past eleven p.m. At that time the tower bell summons Carthusians to prayer.
- So the day starts at half past eleven for Carthusians.
- Yes.
- And what do Carthusians do at these hours?
- They begin their task of praise praying Matins of the Office of the Virgin.
- Right, so the day begins.....
- The tower bell tolls again at midnight fifteen.
- What for?
- The whole Community, Fathers and Brothers go to the church through the empty cloisters, barely lighted.
- And once they are in church....
- Once in church, with the books set on the lecterns, lights are turn out and there is a profound silence. At a signal from Father Prior chanting of Matins starts.
- What are Matins?
- Matins have two parts called nocturnes, with six psalms each. On festivities a third nocturne with three canticles is added. Psalmody is grave, almost slow. At the end of each nocturne there are reading from the Holy Scripture or from the Holy Fathers, and each of the readings is followed by the singing of a responsory. On Sundays and on some other important days, there are twelve



readings with its responsories; on ferial days there is only a reading (in the summer) or three (in winter). The Te Deum and the reading of the day's Gospel put an end to the Twelve readings Matins. On the rest of days, Matins end with some beautiful preces for the needs of the Church and of the world. After Matins there are some minutes of prayer and silence and then the Office of Lauds is chanted.

- Once back at their cells, the Fathers pray Lauds of the Virgin's Office. And then they go to bed with no further delay.

- What time is it then?

- The time for going to bed varies according to the length of Offices. The clock often shows it is three in the morning.

- And why all this?

- Because Carthusians have predilection for these hour of nocturnal praise, when the night silence invites them to a more fervent prayer.

The day's morning

- All right... and at what time do they get up again?

- Fathers at quarter to seven. Brothers who have not been at the Lauds Office get up one hour earlier.

- And ...

- Fathers pray the Prima Hour at seven and then they have an interval of meditation.

- And how about Mass?

- At eight we get together in church to celebrate conventual Mass. This is always a chanted Mass. On Sundays and festivities the Mass is preceded by the Hour of Terce prayer. On festive days Mass is usually concelebrated.

-Once the conventual Mass is over?

- Brothers do thanksgiving in their cells for fifteen minutes and then prepare for work until the Hour of Sexte. Fathers say their private Mass in the chapels appointed for it. Back to their cells the pray the Hour of Terce and do quite a bit of spiritual reading.



- But then, don't you have any breakfast? What do you do until lunch time?

- Students prepare their studies and carry out some manual work in their cells, such as carpentry, bookbinding, painting, or take care of their cell's little garden or orchard.

- When do you eat?

- At eleven thirty or noon after the Hour of Sexte prayer, there is lunch that each one eats alone in the cell, except on Sundays and festivities. Usually the angelus prayer precedes the meal.

- And after lunch, do you have any siesta?

- After lunch, Carthusians spend some time in their garden until one p.m., doing a bit of work, or walking...

- And after that?

- Fathers pray the Hour of None and devote the time left until Vespers to manual work, reading, study and prayer.

Brothers go back to their work in the Charterhouse's various "obediences" or workshops: kitchen, tailor shop, pantry, carpenter's shop, work in the fields, masonry...

- And isn't there any possible variation in this time schedule...?

- On Sundays and festivities the Hour of None is sung in the church and right after it monks get together in the Chapter room and listen there to a reading from the Gospel or from the Statutes. From the Chapter they go out to the orchard -or to the cloister if the weather does not allow it- and have a fraternal gathering there.

The day's evening

- And what do you do in the evening?

- Every day at about 4:00 p.m. Vespers are chanted in the church. The Vespers Office usually takes about half an hour and comprises an hymn, four psalms with their antiphons, a responsory, the Magnificat and it ends with some beautiful preces and the singing of a Salve whose lyrics and melody differ slightly from the Roman rite Salve.

The time after Vespers is devoted to spiritual exercises.



- At what time do you have supper?
 - Supper, or a light repast of bread and wine on fast days, takes place at quarter to six.
 - What do you do after supper?
 - After supper there is an interval for rest or for entertaining oneself either in the garden or walking in the cell.
 - How and when does the Carthusians' day end?
 - At seven p.m. the bell tolls for praying the evening angelus. Monks may prolong their prayer or spiritual reading for one more hour although they are advised not to delay going to bed. The day ends with the angelus followed by Complines through which they thank to God for all the day's benefits and beg his protection for the night.
- So, the Carthusian day ends between seven thirty and eight p.m.,

A time schedule presided by liturgical life.

- I guess your time schedules are ruled largely by liturgy, are they not?
- Right. Midnight Matins, the conventual Mass celebrated early in the morning and the Vespers Office at the end of the afternoon are the strong moments of the day for which monks abandon their cells and go to the church.
- What place holds liturgy in the Carthusians' life?
- Since our vocation consists in giving praise, with Christ and in Christ, to the Father through our ministry of praise and intercession, the Eucharist celebrated and sung by the Community every morning with its Gregorian melodies is "the centre ad summit of our life".
- And the Divine Office?
 - Although Carthusians pray a large part of the Divine Office alone in their cells, they know that theirs is not an individual, solitary voice lost in the immensity of the world, but Christ's prayer itself and the prayer of the whole Church too, because in the liturgy, Christ as our Head prays within us



in a way that allows us to recognise our voices in Him and His voice in us.

6. The origins of the Carthusian Order.

- Well, let me put to you an elementary question: What is the Charterhouse?

- A monastic Order that was born towards the end of the XI century, an Evangelic path that has been going on for more than nine centuries

- Its founder was?

- Rather than founder, I would say that the "initiator" of this way of life was Saint Bruno, born in Cologne, Germany, circa 1030. Student and later Canon and Rector of the famous Cathedral School of Reims, France, he retreated together with six companions to a solitary and hidden spot in the Alps of the Dauphiné, called Chartreuse, at about thirty kilometres from Grenoble. There still stand the headquarters House of the Order

- How do you mean when you say that Saint Bruno was not the founder but just the "initiator" of the Charterhouse?

- I mean that Saint Bruno did not write any monastic Rule. He didn't even reside long in the hermitage of Chartreuse. Pope Urbano II, who had been his disciple at Reims called him and he had to go to Rome and accompany the Pope in his travels through southern Italy. Urbano II sensitive to Saint Bruno's eremitic charisma, allowed him to retire again to a secluded place in Calabria, Saint Mary of the Tower, where together with other companions he started another hermitage similar to the one in Chartreuse. Saint Bruno died at Saint Mary of the Tower in 1101. It is there where his bones lie, but it was his first foundation in Chartreuse the one that did keep his spirit and would become many years later the monastic Order of the Charterhouse.