



Monday, November 29, 2021

Monastery Notre-Dame du Saint Désert

Press Release

Final Declaration of the General Chapter of the Sisters of Bethlehem

The extraordinary General Chapter of the Sisters of Bethlehem, of the Assumption of the Virgin and of Saint Bruno, was held from October 30 to November 23, 2021 at the Monastery of Notre-Dame de la Gloire-Dieu at Montsvoirons (France) and brought together 68 sister members of the assembly (sister prioresses and delegates elected by their monastery) as well as the two apostolic assistants Father Jean Quris and Mother Geneviève Barrière, O.S.B.

This Chapter was notable for the depth and the honesty of the exchanges between the sister members of the assembly. The question of the abuses of authority and of spiritual abuses was at the heart of the interventions, exchanges, and decisions. The intervention by members of the “cell of listening” established in January 2021 allowed further awareness of the serious consequences for individuals of certain dysfunctions, to see the way already covered notably by the work on the new constitutions, and that which remains to be done. As the sister members of the assembly wrote in a final declaration, elaborated and voted upon at the end of the General Chapter: “We are aware that, even if this Chapter is to mark a point of no-return in our labor of reform, a change of mentality, while necessary, will be difficult and will take time and perseverance.”

Through this declaration (available below and on the Internet site <https://www.bethleem.org/annonces.php>), the sister members of the assembly wish to testify, especially to all those persons who have been wounded by the community, of their awareness and of their determination to pursue the path of reforms that is already on the way, with the help of the apostolic assistants since 2017.

In order to further this work, the General Chapter elected Sister Emmanuel as the Prioress General. The General Chapter also elected the new Permanent Council, which consists, in addition to the apostolic assistants Father Jean Quris and Mother Geneviève Barrière, of three outgoing sister counselors (Sr. Paola, Sr. Laure-Marie, and Sr. Mia) and three new sisters (Sr. Gemma, Sr. Christia, and Sr. Liesse-Myriam). The composition of this new Council manifests the intention to have at the same time continuity and a renewal in the government.

Furthermore at this Chapter, the new Constitutions were voted on by the members of the assembly. The Constitutions will be remitted next to the Congregation of Religious in Rome in order to obtain its approval.

In their final declaration, the sister members of the assembly highlighted the priority works on which the new council will need to focus, and in particular the formation of the prioresses and the sisters responsible for formation, as well as future canonical visits that will need to be oriented toward the evaluation of and putting into practice the General Chapter's decisions and the recommendations of the « cell of listening », as well as the implementation of the Constitutions. These visits will be made a priority in the monasteries in which the prioress has reached the end of her mandate, in view of the election of a new prioress. In the final declaration, the sister members of the assembly equally highlighted the importance of calling on « assistance each time that it becomes necessary for outside help, in order to help us to evaluate and to follow through on our work of reform. »

It is animated with a profound recognition with respect to the Church and of a hope rooted in Christ, He who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, that we commit ourselves in this new stage of the life of our Family of the Monastery of Bethlehem.

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Community of the Monastic Sisters of Bethlehem,
of the Assumption of the Virgin, and of Saint Bruno

**Final declaration elaborated and voted upon
at the General Chapter of the Monastic Sisters of Bethlehem**

Monastery of Notre-Dame de la Gloire-Dieu
Les Montsvoirons, November 22, 2021

« I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth. and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant » Ezekiel 16 :60.

The long and fruitful labor of the reforms of our Constitutions, has culminated in the extraordinary general chapter of the Sisters of Bethlehem, of the Assumption of the Virgin, and of Saint Bruno, which took place from October 31st to November 23rd, 2021, at the Monastery of Notre-Dame de la Gloire-Dieu at Montsvoirons, in Haute-Savoie (France). The assembly consisted of 70 participants: the prioresses of all the monasteries of the Community, other members by right and delegates from each monastery, as well as our Apostolic Assistants, Father Jean Quris and Mother Geneviève Barrière.

We are profoundly grateful for this Chapter which was positively characterized by dialogue, alternating times in assembly with small discussion groups, and free exchanges between the members of the Chapter. The assembly was enriched by the complementarity of the different generations and by the number of countries represented.

Prominent from the beginning was the changing toward a governance less centralized and more synodal. Sister Emmanuel gave her report as the Prioress General to the entire assembly, and not only before the Definitory as had been done previously until now. The sister councilors likewise gave their reports and personal testimony of their journey of awareness and conversion. The Assistants recounted their mission and findings since the apostolic visit in 2015. Their firm and benevolent guidance bore much fruit particularly in the journey of the outgoing Permanent Council as well as the entire Family.

In her spiritual introduction for the Chapter, Sister Emmanuel called us to humility and truth in reminding us in light of the prophet Ezekiel how much « we have boasted of what was a pure gift of God. We believed ourselves to be the best, and listened to flatteries with complacency. »

Today, in order to go further in this approach to the truth, one must contribute to a receptive listening and a knowledge of the other, within and outside the community. As Dom Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, the General Abbot of the Cistercians, told us during the retreat that he preached at the opening of this Chapter: « *A person or a community that knows how to listen becomes much more significant than those who want always to impose their own word, their own ideas and opinions, their own sentiments ; the one who listens becomes an authority, because he lets in a mysterious way Jesus Christ, the Word of God, to feed communion.* ».

In order to deepen our awareness, the Prior General of the Brothers of Saint John, Father François Xavier Cazali, came to share with us his experience in the journey of his congregation, which he related in light of the episode of the Exodus, a foundational experience for the Hebrew people.

In order to be able to see with lucidity our serious dysfunctions, in line with the reports of the Assistants, (delivered at the assembly of the prioresses in November 2020 and the Chapter), three members of the « cell for listening » - Dom Étienne Ricaud, Father Abbot Emeritus of Saint Benoît-sur-Loire, Anne Lannegrace, psychologist and psychoanalyst, and Mother Marie Kristen, monastic sister of the Abbey of Jouques – came to share and exchange with the assembly on the recommendations that they had transmitted to us based on the 25 interviews and six written testimonies collected by the « cell for listening » from January 2021 to the present.

As recalled by Dom Etienne Ricaud, the cell's assignment document noted specifically that one of its objectives was to bring to light the abuses « *in particular those that ensued from a system of deviant thoughts or from a deliberate action, including those that arose from an unconscious and badly discerned action, to implement courageous and persevering reforms of deviant practices that were in place in the monasteries of Bethlehem.* » It was for the purpose of addressing this objective that the cell's participation was solicited for the Chapter.

That which we have lived in this Chapter, confronting our experiences shared in true freedom of dialogue, the rereading of our history, led to a search for the truth with a recognition of our mistakes and our deviances. The sorrowful testimonies of several members of the Chapter, themselves wounded, made us enter into their suffering and increased our vulnerability. This allowed us to identify the roots of the system. We have become more aware of the serious consequences of how the lives of certain sisters, either still with us or who have left us, have been experienced, such as that of a destroyed relationship of confidence in God and in the Church, a sense that one's life has been lost, of feeling guilty, or a lack of being listened to and of receptivity of their person, an experience of depression or of the loss of one's identity and self-esteem.

In the course of the Chapter, we have had occasion several times to recognize our faults and to express our repentance through our prayer to the God of Mercy. We desire wholeheartedly to be able to continue our approach of reparative justice, in dialogue with those who have been wounded. We humbly ask forgiveness of all those who have suffered because of us.

This has given us a new impetus in our commitment to the process of « changing the culture. » This is why we write this final declaration, elaborated and voted upon by the members of the Chapter, so as to manifest our commitment in clear and explicit terms.

This declaration is addressed to everyone of those who have testified that they have been seriously wounded by our community ; we, sister members of the Chapter, wish to say to them that we are determined to engage our strength, so that our dysfunctions and our faults can no more be the cause of such sufferings, such destroyed lives.

This declaration is also addressed to each one of our sisters, notably our sisters in positions of authority, so that each sister be one with the common commitment in which we strive to continue our long journey of personal and communitarian conversion. And it is with this intention that this declaration was put to the vote of the members of the assembly.

Following up on our exchanges, we have named those dysfunctions in our way of exercising authority that led to these abuses or spiritual hold:

- An idealized conception and over-centralization of authority.
- The preponderant role of the prioress in an exclusive relationship with the sisters. This could lead to an emotional grip and to a conformity to one-only way of thinking at the expense of one's personal conscience and a healthy circulation of life and of exchanges among the sisters.
- A tendency to maternalism on the part of the prioress and those sisters in positions of authority who believed they had the power to discern and solve all problems. This resulted in sisters being treated as infants without taking into account their freedom and their rightful autonomy. Neither their adult judgment nor their capacity to make a free interior discernment could therefore contribute to their personal growth. They could not develop their own spirit of initiative.
- A climate of excessive expectations, based on an ideal of the monastic life, engendered guilt and fear of being incapable of living this life.
- A certain law of secrecy that could engender lies and a sense that certain things were to be left unspoken.
- An insufficient circulation of information that left sisters and those not in positions of authority in a state of ignorance.
- The lack of openness to the outside closed us in on ourselves in an exclusive reliance on ourselves, without the possibility of questioning things about which we were certain.

It was therefore with recognition that the majority of the sister members of the Chapter welcomed the recommendations of the « cell of listening. » The members of the cell gave us concrete points to accompany our monasteries in the process of reforms. Many among them have already been taken into account through the new Constitutions on which we have worked since 2018. This declaration will be the new reference text for the life of the monasteries and will also be a safeguard. With the help of our Apostolic Assistants and our Canonical Assistants, assigned by Rome, Father François-Xavier Dumortier,

S.J., and Father Philippe Toxé, O.P., these new Constitutions were elaborated, amended in a collegial manner, in a give-and-take between the Permanent Council, the sister editors and the perpetually professed sisters of each community. For the chapters of the Constitutions common to the two branches of the Family, the work was done in collaboration with our brothers. Up to the time of the General Chapter, amendments were proposed and then voted upon by the members of the assembly.

Among the major changes introduced by our new Constitutions and the decisions already taken, we can highlight :

- A vocational discernment more prudent than in the past.

The evangelical retreat of young women who ask to discern their vocation is lived in a manner closer to the daily life of the monastic sisters.

In our Constitutions, we also specify that a young woman cannot be welcomed before she is 22 years of age and she must have a human maturity sufficient to participate in a monastic purpose. If she is in the course of taking studies, we ask her to end her cycle of studies.

- The duration of all initial formation has been defined according to the new canonical norms specified in the document of the Congregation of Religious : Cor Orans.

In the novitiates, a sister responsible for the novice's formation, other than the prioress, is named. In order to better evaluate the monastic journey of the young sister, a council of formation, composed of all the formation sisters and the prioress, is established in these monasteries.

The community is regularly informed and consulted about the different steps of the initial formation.

The « ratio formationis » foresees a formation open to qualified exterior interventions.

The role of spiritual accompaniment was better identified with the distinction between obedience and docility, respect for freedom and the possibility of an accompaniment with someone other than the prioress, and the distinction between the internal forum and the external forum, the vow of obedience concerning only the external forum.

- In instances of collegiality, there is a role of consultation and of decision anticipated in our Constitutions (chapters and councils at the local and general levels) allowing an active participation by each sister as a living stone of the community.

- The duration of the mandates of local prioresses has been limited to 12 years with a possible exception for the community to request a prolongation for three or six years. These limited mandates allow the avoidance of a certain immobilization and for the younger sisters to bring a renewal to the service of the charism.

The mandate of the prioress of Bethlehem is six years, renewable one time.

- In terms of support for sisters who are ill, *«the suffering sister is informed and counseled so that she is able to make clear decisions and to give free consent to therapies and medical actions that are proposed to her. The prioress and the sister infirmarian are watchful to respect the freedom, the dignity, and the privacy of their sick sisters.»* (Constitutions) We will consult professional specialists for questions of health.

- On that which concerns the proper place of the Virgin Mary in our spirituality.

A formation has been initiated and must be followed to repair and correct that which has led to some confusion, such as the identification of the prioress with the Virgin Mary.

« The content of our promise of obedience to the Virgin Mary is based on the freedom of a unique and personal commitment on the part of each one of us with respect to the Mother of God. » (Constitutions). The canonical vow of obedience has been clearly distinguished from the consecration to Jesus through the Virgin Mary which is a matter of the internal forum.

Thus in a journey of common labor with our 30 brother members of the assembly and their assistant Father Cesare Falletti, O.Cist., we have mutually shared so as to delve into our challenges and the charism of our Family, our vocation of solitude and communion, and the right place of speaking in our life of silence.

We are aware that, even if this Chapter is to mark a point of no-return in our labor of reform, a change of mentality, while necessary, will be difficult and will take time and perseverance. We wish to travel this road in a synodal manner, respecting the different rhythm of each sister and each community.

Certain monasteries have already called for outside assistance and on professionals, such as psychologists and anthropologists, to clarify the life of relationships between sisters and to facilitate human and psychological maturation that will allow one to assume the monastic life.

As to such points as the lack of openness and of expression of diversity, of relations polarized by affectivity, an excessive spiritualization that fails to take into account the human dimension of the person, an idealization of our monastic life, being treated as an infant, these will require much more work because they are still anchored in our communitarian culture in a way that is more or less subtle.

To resolutely move forward with the implementation of our reforms, which will drive us to live our vocation and our charism ever more, we, the sister members of the assembly highlight, together with Sister Emmanuel who was elected as the Prioress General and the newly-elected Permanent Council, the priorities that became apparent to us as the outcome of this General Chapter:

- That this declaration be transmitted to the chapters of the communities in addition to a living and complete transmission of the acts of the Chapter.
- That an absolute priority be given to the formation of prioresses and sisters responsible for formation by providing sessions that will prepare for and anticipate the replacement of prioresses.
- That the next canonical visits be oriented particularly toward the evaluation and the putting into practice in our communities of the General Chapter's decisions and the recommendations of the « cell of listening », as well as the implementation of the Constitutions. These visits will be made a priority in the monasteries in which the prioress has reached the end of her mandate, in view of the election of a new prioress.
- That the Permanent Council, in addition to continuing to benefit from the presence of our two Apostolic Assistants, be attentive to call on assistance each time that it becomes necessary for outside help, in order to help us to evaluate and to follow through on our work of reform.

At the conclusion of this General Chapter, we wish once again to express our gratitude to the Church which has accompanied us with solicitude. We recall the words that Pope Francis wrote to Sister Emmanuel in March 2021, on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the founding of our Family: *«I am happy that this event coincides with the revision of your Constitutions, marking a beautiful renewal of charity and communion, in fidelity to the founding charism. 'The newness introduced by the crisis desired by the Spirit is never a newness in opposition to that which is old, but is a newness that germinates from the old and always renders it fruitful.' » (Discourse at the Roman Curia, December 21, 2020). The wish I have for the future is that every monk and every monastic sister, in the silence of his or her contemplation, live an ever more generous gift of his or her life for the Church and for the world, drawn into an encounter with Christ ever more profound and loving.»*

In Hope, we confide our journey to Almighty God, the Virgin Mary and Saint Bruno.