
THE HISTORY OF THE CARTHUSIAN ORDER

THE BEGINNINGS

Twenty-four Carthusian communities today nurture a sacred lineage founded in the Medieval world of 11th-century France. St. Bruno, a highly respected and much loved Dean of the cathedral school at Rheims, France, grew inflamed by a call to the monastic life. He eventually withdrew from university life and, in 1084, settled along with six companions in a wild uninhabited region in the mountains outside the city of Grenoble, France. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, they gradually developed a semi-eremitic form of monastic life, which became known as Carthusian. *Carthusian* and *Charterhouse* evolve from the Latin name of the mountain range, *Cartusia*, where this small band of monks settled. The French name is *Chartreuse*.

Gradually similar groups appeared in the same region. Drawn to the spirituality of St. Bruno and his monks, these early followers repeatedly requested a written account of this manner of life. Eventually, Guigo the fifth Prior of the Grande Chartreuse (as the first community became known) wrote *The Customs*, which the other groups adopted as their rule of life.

For many years, the leaders of these groups sought to strengthen their relationship with the community of the Grande Chartreuse, and finally persuaded the Prior to hold a common chapter in his house. At this first General Chapter in 1141, all the Priors united with the Grande Chartreuse in promising obedience for themselves and their monks. Coincidentally, a community of nuns in Prebayon, France, spontaneously embraced the Carthusian life.

Looking back on this humble beginning, Pope Pius XI observed that God chose Bruno, a man of eminent sanctity, to bring the contemplative life back to the glory of its original integrity. “To that intent, Bruno founded the Carthusian Order, imbued it thoroughly with his own spirit and provided it with those laws which

*“I am living in the wilderness
of Calabria, far removed from
all human habitation. There
are some brethren here with
me, some of whom are very
well educated, and they are
keeping assiduous watch for
their Lord, so as to open to
Him at once when He knocks.”*

St. Bruno's Letter to Raoul Le Verd

might efficaciously induce its members to advance speedily along the way of inward sanctity and of the most rigorous penance...[and] also impel them to persevere with steadfast hearts in the same austere and hard life.” (Pope Pius XI, Apostolic Constitution, “Umbratilem,” #7, July 8, 1924)

THE ORDER’S DEVELOPMENT

The General Chapters of the Carthusian Order have continued ever since this earliest beginning to guarantee its continuing authenticity and distinctive charism. Like any living organism, the Carthusian way of life has evolved with vitality and integrity. Yet its basic structure has retained its original form for over 900 years. The Order has managed to escape the evils of two extremes: rigid atrophy and loss of identity. “The Carthusians have so well retained the spirit of their founder, father and lawgiver,” Pope Pius XI commended, “that unlike other religious bodies, their Order has never...needed any amendment, or, as they say, ‘reform’.” (Pope Pius XI, Apostolic Constitution, “Umbratilem,” #7)

The Second Vatican Council invited the Carthusians to re-examine their unique lifestyle in a changing contemporary world. The Church advanced guidelines that the Carthusians used to perpetuate the essence of St. Bruno’s teachings. As an example, whereas before the brothers and the fathers had separate places during the Liturgy,

the brothers may now join the fathers at Mass and in the chanting of the Office.

In the Vatican Council’s renewal, the Holy See acknowledged that Carthusian monastic life allowed little room for revisions. “Nevertheless, we observe with pleasure the praiseworthy effort made by the Chapter to conform, with wisdom and prudence, your



Statutes to the conciliar and post-conciliar objectives for the updating of the religious life.” The Holy See also expressed satisfaction in “the jealous faithfulness with which...the (General) Chapter has known how to conserve that which from its origins has characterized your Order...your special eremitic vocation to prayer, thanks to a life dedicated to God in contemplation and solitude, without which the Order would lose its reason to exist.” (Letter of Cardinal Ildebrando Antoniutti, Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes 1963-73)



THE CARTHUSIAN ORDER IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

For over nine centuries, the Popes have nurtured the enduring vitality of the Carthusian Order and have encouraged its members to remain the “Poor of Christ” or “*Pauperes Christi*” as the early Carthusians were known. “They who have left the transitory things of the world and serve God by a life entirely consecrated to Him... have chosen the better portion...liberated from the hindrances whereby the spirit of man is kept from the contemplation of divine truths.” (Pope Paul VI, Letter to the Carthusian Family, April 18, 1971) Today, the Carthusian continues to symbolize a beggar standing before the presence of God emptied of all but his constant striving for complete availability to Him.

The Order includes monks from every continent on the globe. The community has spread from La Grande Chartreuse, the Motherhouse in France, to seven other countries in Europe (Spain, Italy, Portugal, Germany, Switzerland, England and Slovenia) and two in the Americas (United States and Brazil). There are currently 24 Carthusian monasteries (including six houses of nuns). Already in the new millennium, foundations have been established in Korea and Argentina. The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration alone has monks from Canada, Ethiopia, France, Korea, the Netherlands, Norway, the Philippines and the United States.

The Charterhouse of the Transfiguration was established as the first Carthusian Monastery in the western hemisphere. In November 1950, the Reverend Father sent two monks to explore founding a monastery in the United States. For ten years, a small group of fathers and brothers lived on donated property near Whitingham, Vermont. In 1960, the Foundation transferred to a secluded area in Arlington, Vermont, also donated.

This beautiful property provides an ideal setting for monastic life in the “desert” of a quiet mountain valley lost in deep woods. The monastery encompasses over



11 square miles on a mountain-side near a small rural town in southwest Vermont. The Charterhouse nestles in a deep ravine surrounded by a huge natural buffer zone accessed by a single long private gravel road.

The main building is encased in rough-hewn granite trucked up the mountain from a Vermont quarry. Its ingenious construction incorporates huge monolithic blocks that suggest the Carthusian ideals of permanence, solidity and simplicity. The natural beauty of the unpolished stone evokes the Order’s lifestyle of steadfast endurance. The rough surface still carries the marks of drill rods inserted by the nameless workmen who pried free the 3-ton slabs, a visible human touch on a building dedicated to a life of intrinsic anonymity.

In the silence of his individual hermitage, the monk aspires to that glance that wounds God’s Heart, and that purity of love that allows God to be seen. In fidelity to solitude and silence, he fulfills his part in manifesting the fruit of redemption in the Church and in the world. Seeking a gradual reformation of the soul, he sits at the Lord Jesus’ feet, meditates on the Word of God, and aspires to a perfection of charity in union with God.

The monk journeys through the desert of silence, and thus no visitors are allowed in the monastery. The Charterhouse only admits those called to consider a Carthusian vocation, and only after a careful process of discernment and fulfillment of certain requirements.

At the heart of its solitude, the Charterhouse of the Transfiguration sustains a broad international culture of monks from all over the world. This multi-ethnicity is significant for a world so often torn apart by ethnic rivalries and excessive nationalism. Bonded together by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, the monks affirm the supremacy of God and contribute to a harmonious family of humanity in search of their loving Creator.

The spiritual life lived from within the Mystical Body of Christ transcends all ethnic cultural conditionings and nationalities. Following in the footsteps of St. Bruno, the Charterhouse provides an opportunity to explore how brothers in Christ can live in peace: “Behold how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity.” (Psalms 133:1) As St. Paul reminds us, “In Christ we are a new creation.” (2 Corinthians 5:17)

“Through the centuries, the Carthusian Order has preserved intact this life hidden from men and united with God,” observed Pope Paul VI. “It is moreover in the best interests of the Church that this Order continues 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...It is therefore a pleasure for us to express publicly our paternal love and esteem for this religious family.” (Pope Paul VI, Letter to the Carthusian Family, April 18, 1971)

