

***Carta Caritatis* (Charter of Charity) - Foundational Document of the Cistercian Order**

The *Carta Caritatis* was the principal document of governance of the Cistercian Order that governed every aspect of monastic life. It became canon law of the Catholic Church when it was approved by a papal bull of Pope Calixtus II in 1119. The basis of the *Carta* is 'Uniformity of Observance and Unity in Charity' which states that all avowed in the Order, 'are all servants of one King and Lord. He has in His love dispersed the members of the Order in many different places, there to live under one *Rule*.' This equality under God meant that no abbot could impose material exactions on another house of the Order. However, the Abbot of Citeaux, as the Father Immediate of the Order, retained care for the souls of all members of the Order out of charity. The Abbot of Citeaux, with the abbots attending General Chapter, therefore, strove to prevent any monastery of the Order from wavering in its purpose or deviating from the rule.

Foremost of the provisions of the *Carta* are:

The Abbot of Citeaux, as the Father Immediate of the whole Order, had the right to visit all monasteries of the Order. When so visited, the local Abbot of the visited monastery was to yield his place to the Father Immediate in affirmation of Citeaux as the Mother of all the houses of the Order. The Father Immediate would replace the local Abbot in all matters except two; he would eat in the refectory of the visited abbey with the brethren, rather than with visitors in the guest house and would not receive the profession from the brethren of the monastery.

Similarly, the Abbot of a mother-house, as the Father Immediate of his filiation, was to visit all the daughter-houses of his filiation at least once each year. When so visiting he would take precedence over the local Abbot of that monastery and would eat in the refectory, not in the guest house, to show that he is the father of a family and not a visitor. However, the Father Immediate can do nothing against the will of the local Abbot except what is good for the soul, such as the correction of irregularities. The visitation of Father Immediate on Citeaux was to be done by the Abbots of the four primary daughter-houses of Citeaux, collectively, once each year.

The General Chapter of the Order met once each year at Citeaux under the presidency of the Abbot of Citeaux for the purpose that all abbots of the Order could meet on another. The purpose of the Chapter was to: repair the *ordo* and to confirm the peace and charity; and correct errors, proclaim faults and help one another materially if need be. Irregular abbots were to be charitably proclaimed, by abbots only, and were obliged to do the penance imposed; the Abbots of the four primary daughter-houses of Citeaux were to, collectively, advise and correct the Abbot of Citeaux. The Chapter had the definitive right to decide all cases, and judge and punish all faults (of a regular nature) brought to its attention. An abbot could only absent himself from the General Chapter for two reasons - sickness and solemn profession; in which case, their prior was to attend as their vicar.

All new monastery foundations were to be dedicated to St Mary in Her honour, and no monastery was to be founded in cities, towns or villages. A new foundation was to be made with twelve brothers (choir monks) and a superior (abbot), and a prescribed set of books that would enable the same interpretation of the Rule and the same observance of customs as all other monasteries of the Order. The following places were to be constructed in the first instance; oratory, refectory, dormitory, guest house and gate house, and no dwellings were to be placed outside of the precinct enclosure. Choir monks were to get their living from manual labour, farming and stock-raising, but were not to live away from the monastery. Monasteries were to

have granges as necessary that were manned by lay-brethren; it was forbidden for choir monks to live in the granges.

Finally, the *Carta Caritatis* was revised in 1124 as the *Summa Cartae Caritatis* and again in 1152 as the *Carta Caritatis Posterior*. Neither of these revisions altered the fundamental basis or tenor of the *Carta*.

Referenced Documents

Melville, G. 2016. *The World of Medieval Monasticism: Its History and Forms of Life*. Translated from German by James D. Mixson. Athens, Ohio: Cistercian Publications (Originally published 2012).

Merton, T. 2015. *Charter, Customs, and Constitutions of the Cistercians: Initiation into the Monastic Tradition 7*. Athens, Ohio: Liturgical Press.