

Retired Abbots

A brief introduction to the topic by Abbot President Jeremias Schröder OSB

When the secretary told me that I should chair this workshop I thought: great, of course I can do that. When I sat down to write this little introduction I suddenly realized that in my own community we have never had an emeritus actually living in the monastery. So what I have to say is written chiefly from the perspective of an abbot president. And of course from the perspective of one who knows that his own office will come to an end sooner or later. And from the perspective of one who is leaving at close quarters with his successor, the new archabbot of St. Ottilien.

Let me start out with a brief typology. You may recognize some features or you may not – Congregations may well have their specific ways of being who they are. Any resemblance with actual people you think you know is certainly wrong and should be banished from your mind.

The happy grandfather: this is a picture book emeritus. He is humble and wise, unobtrusive and reliable. He accepts any job given to him, and never presume anything out of the ordinary. He has found useful work in the library, and archive or the abbey newsletters. His advice is sought by many in the parlour. The confreres are glad to have him and often confide in him, but he has never shown the slightest sign of illloyalty towards his successors. On the contrary, he knows what it is like to be responsible and is glad that somebody else could be persuaded to carry the can. If St Benedict had written a chapter about retired abbots it would probably describe him very accurately.

The humble giant: He stepped down just at the right moment, after autonomous discernment, without being pushed. He gave up title and insignia, took up his old place of profession, obeyed his successor, and does so to this day. When asked, he gives good advice. When not asked he keeps quiet, with no trace of bitterness. The plan was to be self-effacing, but the perfection of the act is so impressive that it is difficult not to notice him – in spite of all this humility.

The super-abbot: being in charge and being the center of attention has become a habit. He has all the right intentions, but as the successor isn't quite up to the job – we wish him well, of course – one has to step in from time to time. When the chapter is in danger of taking wrong decisions, and impassioned speech may yet turn the mind. And there is also a legacy to protect: not everybody understands why things are the way they are now, and explanations are often needed. The confreres sometimes seem a bit exasperated, but patience is a virtue for them too!

The bitter outcast: the abbacy was not a very happy one, and at the end there was a bloodbath, leaving a sad taste in the mouth of every one. The sabbatical of a few months has turned into a permanent self-chosen exile, being useful to some sisters or a parish. On the surface, the minimum contact is maintained so as not to be rude, but there is little reconciliation, neither with the community, nor with his own wounded self.

The strategist: retirement had been so well planned. A small dependent house or a friendly other community had extended a welcome, and everything could have turned out so nicely. Only, staying for many years turns out to be very different from visiting from time to time, and the honours given to a visiting prelate are not maintained for a permanent boarder. What promised to be originally like a restful place of rest and spiritual renewal turns into confinement, and a sensitive soul will notice that his presence is a bit awkward for the hosting community, too.

Reconciled with failure: the abbacy was not a great success, and the end had to come sooner rather than later. But life goes on. The community has a new leader and the emeritus has returned to his place of seniority, doing all that he is assigned to do, quietly upholding the life of the community, being now, more perhaps than when he was in charge, a real pillar of the community.

Until a few decades ago, emeriti abbots were a rarity, most of them being so old and decrepit that they were preparing to die. Recent advances in medicine and our constitutional developments have changed this. None of us can expect to die in office, and it is a good thing to share what this means. I want to propose three approaches for our reflection: the abbot himself, as a resignaturus; the successor, who has to live and deal with his one or more predecessors, and the abbot president who should also come into this.

A. The future emeritus himself - *Mortem cottidie ante oculos suspectam habere*

This quotation from the Rule was originally intended as a bit of a joke, but I came to see its deeper wisdom. Originally, when I was elected abbot for life at the tender age of 35 I felt that I did not necessarily have to hurry. It took me few years to realize how precious time is, and how limited really.

I think we can prepare for the end of our mandate. The wrong kind of preparation is to worry about rooms and privileges. A really important preparation is to make a mental exercise of emptying oneself. Prepare for a life without car keys, perhaps without credit card or self-administered budget. Prepare for a life when you will not be the focus of attention. Prepare for a life when you will not always get what you think you deserve. The successor will probably not ask for advice, and certainly not as much as you think he should. They will finish projects which you started and forget to invite you.

The great chance is that you can once again become one of the brothers. But even this will not come as easily as you might expect. Some confreres will harbor grudges, and the deeds and wounds of 8 or 12 or 26 years of abbacy may fester deeper than you expect.

That's why I think it is good to go away for at least half a year. Not just a holiday. Look after your health, try to do a decent retreat.

And one thing that I believe helps, from the first day of being abbot: Be more than just the abbot. Try to have a life of the mind and the body that goes beyond what is needed for being a good abbot. Reading, culture, sports, friendships – all these things which help us to grow in our human qualities. Somebody who has been a 150 % abbot, and nothing else, will fall into a deep dark hole when the abbacy is no longer his.

B. The successor – *abbas consideret infirmitates indigentium*

The successor has to keep a delicate balance between generosity and firmness. Generosity, because sometimes the confreres think this is now the time for getting even. He should get a decent break, a time away from the community, and I think the emeritus himself should decide where and how it is spent. On the other hand firmness is also required, because decisions taken in a first moment of sentimentality may be regretted later. Does the emeritus walk in the procession of the community next to the new abbot? I don't think he should. Does he stand in when the abbot is absent, or should that job go very clearly to the prior? Should he really keep responsibilities, not because they are

given to him by the abbot, but because that's what our emeritus always does? Does he wear the cross, use the mitre, come to chapter or not? I think for some of these things clear guidelines are a help, and in the absence of such guidelines the successor himself has to be clear and firm so as to avoid confusion and not to enter into arrangements which he later regrets.

It is very tempting to blame things that don't quite work out on the ancien regime. I have almost certainly done this myself. Eventually the excuse will wear thin. It shows magnanimity to get by without it from the beginning.

And ask him occasionally for advice. This does not come easily to many successors, but if it is done honestly it will greatly please the old man.

The golden rule comes to mind: Treat your predecessor as you would like to be treated yourself.

C. And finally: The abbot president – Multorum servire moribus

The abbot president is more important than many of you may think. He is probably involved in the end of the mandate of the emeritus: by presiding the election, by accepting the resignation, or by conveying the growing conviction that the time has come. Transitions that are badly handled can wound deeply, not just the old and the new abbots, but also the community. There the president really has a very delicate work to do.

In the excitement and also in the turbulence of a leadership change it is often forgotten to thank the outgoing man. This is probably not bad will, but the emeritus will notice. In the course of a transition the president has several opportunities to speak, and he should at one time or other try to give an appreciation of the former superior, just to set the tone.

New abbots are by their nature inexperienced. A few indications on how to deal with the predecessor can go a long way. And if within the limited horizon of one small community no proper place for an emeritus emerges then the wider world of the Congregation might offer a place for peace, for licking the wounds or for using the talents. Our Congregation gave the president the special responsibility to be available if the relationship between the emeritus and his successor turns out to be difficult.

I also think that the president should help to formulate objective norms for how to deal with the emeriti: place in choir and at the table, chapter rights, participation in elections, insignia, the possibility of a sabbatical – all these can be made easier if the Congregation has developed a common set of standards. Our Congregation did so in 2006 and I have found that life has become less stressful.

Dear Confreres, I think we have plenty of things to talk about. And let's not forget: nostra res agitur.