



Abbot Primate Notker Wolf and brother Richard

One Among Many: Rome 2012

- *brother Richard*

IN SEPTEMBER OF THIS YEAR I HAD THE PRIVILEGE TO represent our monastic community at the Congress of the Benedictine Confederation of Monasteries that is convened every four years at Sant'Anselmo in Rome. Over 300 Abbots and Conventual Priors came together for the ten-day exchange. Present were also representatives of the International *Communio* of Benedictine Women, of Anglican Benedictines, and delegates of Eastern Orthodox monastic life.

Global monasticism was evident. Participants came from many countries and diverse cultures: from Africa, Latin America, Europe, the United States and Canada, Australia, India, the Philippines, Korea, China, Vietnam, and several other countries of Asia. They come from monastic communities guided by the Rule of St. Benedict in response to the Gospel call in the world today. Amidst the commonality of our Benedictine identity, there is a rich diversity in our monastic practice. Amidst the autonomy of each monastery, there is a chosen interdependence that provides inspiration and support to one another as members of the Confederation.

In this article I will highlight some of my experiences and personal reflections from the Congress. The Congress provides a springboard for an appreciation of our own monastic life here at Weston Priory especially



on the occasion of the sixtieth anniversary of our founding. Our monastic practice was birthed in the years of ferment in the church and monastic life leading up to and during Vatican Council II.

When I arrived at Sant'Anselmo in Rome, a group of us were invited to visit the Benedictine monastic community at the Basilica of St. Paul Outside-the-Walls. A monastic community has lived for centuries at the site of this Basilica where tradition says St. Paul was buried. The ongoing excavations under the Basilica have unearthed the remnants of a monastery and the signs of monastic life from the very early centuries of the church in Rome, even prior to the time of Saint Benedict.

Significantly it was in the chapter-room of the present-day monastery, on the feast of Saint Paul, January 25, 1959, that Pope John XXIII first announced his desire to convoke the Ecumenical Council of Vatican II. Like Saint Paul, Pope John was inspired as he listened to the movement of the Holy Spirit in his own life and in his vision for the church. He likewise was attentive to the diversity of gifts that each part of the Body of Christ, the church, contributed in the proclamation of the Good News of God's mercy and love to all creation.

The visit to Saint Paul's initiated an unexpected basis for further reflection during the days ahead. During the Congress there were two major presentations: one by the Trappist Monk, Michael Casey, on the ancient tradition of "Autonomy" in monastic life over the centuries to the present day; and the other presentation by Michael Hochschild, a sociologist from the University of Paris who has done research at eight monasteries of Central Europe concerning "Continuity and Change in Benedictine Monastic Life."



l to r, Abbot André Laberge from Saint-Benoît-du-Lac, Québec;
Abbot Peter Novecosky from St. Peter's Abbey, Saskatchewan;
and brother Richard from Weston Priory

The address of Michael Casey, O.C.S.O., highlighted for me the importance of autonomy as expressed in the particular, local Christian and monastic community, reflecting the universal communion with the whole body of the church. This insight, quite evident in the first millennium of the church's life, was given prominence in the discussions and documents of Vatican II. Michael Casey accented that "conversation, communion, and cooperation" among diverse communal experiences remains a resilient signpost in the Benedictine monastic tradition.

Michael Hochschild's presentation evoked the challenges and the need for attention to the present-day reality, particularly the creeping individualism so prevalent in Western culture. Individualism can be fostered through new emerging forms of technology and through an approach to work that isolates rather than supports and encourages creative interpersonal communication in service to one another. The day-to-day choices for in-depth conversation and personal interaction in life and work are vital to the evolution of human growth and maturation in today's world.

Abbot Primate Notker reflected that this witness is our monastic contribution to evangelization today: we are to be signs of joy – a community of faith and love in the midst of the church and world, not through power-over but through love, communion and service to one another!

A very hope-filled moment at the Congress emerged in an address and subsequent exchange with Cardinal João Braz de Aviz, the recently appointed Brazilian Prefect of the Congregation for Religious Men and Women in the Church (CICLSAL).¹ He spoke of the important witness of

¹ CICLSAL is an acronym for: Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life

Benedictine monastic life through the ages and in the present history of the church. He reiterated the equal importance that scripture gives to the charismatic aspects of the church's role in monastic and religious life that complements the hierarchic and magisterial dimension of the church.

Cardinal João underscored the emphasis in the Documents of Vatican II, especially *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), that the basis of our Christian life is our common baptism into Christ Jesus and not the call to orders that some have received. He said: I may be called to serve as a cardinal, but, first of all, I am a baptized person like every other Christian. I am no holier than a mother birthing and caring for a child or a Religious woman in the church today. My service to the church is but to listen fraternally to others so that I can learn from them and we can faithfully dialogue together as we search for a Gospel response.

AMEN. That is truly a word of hope!

Two additional signs of life and hope at the Congress were reports about the interreligious dialogue Benedictine monks have begun with Shi'a Muslim scholars from Iran that was continued through further exchange in Iran during the days following the Congress.

The other sign of growth is a new direction for AIM (Alliance for International Monasticism) which also is celebrating its 50th year of development. AIM was inaugurated to assist the foundation of monasteries in emerging parts of the world, for example, in Africa, Asia and Latin America. While exchange and assistance will continue, it has become more and more evident that the younger emerging monasteries have a mutual gift to offer to the older and more established areas of monastic life and church. The growth in friendship and dialogue among monastics of different cultures and tongues is indispensable in our globalized and highly individualized world.

The Benedictine Sisters/Nuns have an International Conference called the *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* (CIB) that meets once a year. They gather in one of the different regions of the world where their Sisters are located, and every other year in Rome. Such meetings enable the Sisters to experience Benedictine life, its liturgy and prayer, in its grassroots diversity and inculturated expression. It is a witness to "unity amidst diversity" in a globalized church and world. It is a perspective and gift that the monastic women bring to us all.

To conclude with a personal note: I always enjoy visiting Italy since my familial roots come from an area of the country south of Rome. My flesh and bones resound in the culture and food! But even more, the days at the Congress brought me to a deeper appreciation and gratitude for our life as a monastic community at Weston. From this particularity and local identity we have opened to a catholicity and universality that enriches our monastic search for God, flourishing among the great diversity of peoples, cultures, tongues and faith expressions and in the beauty of all creation. ■