



Benedictine Congress – Rome, September 2016

- *brother Richard*

Do not let yourselves be discouraged if members of monastic communities are declining in numbers or getting old; on the contrary, maintain the zeal of your testimony with fidelity and courage, even in countries that today are facing great difficulties. Your service to the Church is precious. And in our time there is need for men and women who put nothing before the love of Christ (RB 4: 21; 72:11), who feed daily on the Word of God, who celebrate worthily the sacred liturgy, and who work joyfully and attentively in harmony with creation.

- Address at an audience with Pope Francis, September 8, 2016

THESE WORDS OF POPE FRANCIS IN THE MIDST OF OUR CONGRESS were a joyful encouragement and note of confidence given to the gathering of Benedictine men and women representing all the monastic communities from every corner of the world today. As a Benedictine Confederation of monasteries we gather together every four years for dialogue and discernment. The meetings were held at Sant'Anselmo, a Benedictine monastery and university located on the Aventine Hill in Rome.

At this Congress we elected Abbot Gregory Polan from Conception Abbey in Missouri to be the Abbot Primate, a symbol of unity among Benedictine communities and representative of the Confederation to the larger Church. He encouraged us to be the living words of God for all to see. Our *lectio* (Reflective, prayerful reading of Scripture) is not just the reading of a book but the encounter with the God who listens with the ear of the heart and calls us to tell the story of this encounter through our personal lives.

During a day at the Congress Pope Francis invited us to meet with him at the Vatican where he addressed us:

... monks and nuns are guardians of a particular gift and of a special responsibility: that of keeping alive the oases of the Spirit where pastors and faithful are able to draw from the wells of divine mercy... You proclaim gospel brother and sisterhood ... by means of that attentive and eloquent silence, which lets God speak in the deafening and distracted life of the world ... Your work, in harmony with prayer, lets you participate in the creative work of God and be united with the poor who cannot live without work. With

your characteristic hospitality, you are able to meet the hearts of those who have most lost their way and are far off, of those who find themselves in conditions of grave human and spiritual poverty.

Abbot Bernardo Bonowitz, a Trappist monk from the monastery of Novo Mundo in Brazil, addressed the Congress urging us to assume the task laid out in the Prologue of the Rule of Benedict: undoing our estrangement from God, from one another and from all creation. Restoring our relationships with each other and with creation restores our relationship with God. Through *lectio* we are engaged with God, ruminating and digesting the Word with God as our dialogue partner.

Brother Alois, Prior of the ecumenical monastic community of Taizé, France, also addressed the Congress, unfolding the Parable of Community. He spoke of monastic asceticism as not aimed at our own personal perfection but to make us available to others; freeing ourselves for beauty and gratuitousness; letting go of self-absorption and material attachments where we construct our own personal “kingdoms.” In this way we can embrace the emerging kingdom/the reign of God among us. Such self-emptying paradoxically leads to deep personal joy. Our simplicity, trust and peace will be signs and tiny seeds of the brotherhood and sisterhood, the communion/community for which the human family yearns together with all creation.

During the days of the Congress I was honored to receive the gracious hospitality of our Dominican brothers at Santa Sabina, the Generalate of the Order of Preachers, just a few doors down from Sant’Anselmo on the Aventine Hill.

The gatherings were a wonderful opportunity to engage and receive the gifts and perspectives of others pursuing a monastic vision for today’s world. An observer at the Congress, an Eastern Orthodox monk, voiced this simply: the life of a monk is never isolated from the world but weeps for it and brings to it the joy of creation. ■