



BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO
Curia dell'Abate Primate

29 July 2020

The Friends of Jesus: Mary, Martha, and Lazarus

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

We continue to move forward in faith, confidence, and mutual charity in this moment of a crisis that has had an impact on every person on the face of the earth. By understanding that this has been a time of darkness for all of us, there have also been rich and powerful experiences of light that have been given us. The opening of the Gospel according to Saint John expresses this so profoundly in speaking of the coming of Christ into our world, bringing us life in abundance. “The light shines on in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:5). The grace of Christ’s resurrection continues to unfold for us, even amid the natural disasters that befall us. This tremendous grace of Christ’s resurrection, of which Saint Paul speaks in his letter to the Ephesians, fills the whole world, and in its own time brings healing and renewal to our hearts. “God, who is rich in mercy, because of the love he has had for us, raised us up with [Christ] [...], and seated us with him in the heavens” (Eph 2:4, 6). This remains the hope that encourages and strengthens us in the midst of our present uncertainties, mysteries, and misfortunes; we are God’s handiwork, united with Christ in glory, and his care and grace accompany us. I would like to develop this thought further, yet for a minute we have some information about the situation here in Rome at Sant’Anselmo as we move into the coming months.

Like many of our Benedictine schools throughout the world, the Ateneo Sant’Anselmo continued and completed a successful year, primarily through on-line learning. The Ateneo under the new rector Fr. Bernhard A. Eckerstorfer of Kremsmünster Abbey in Austria extended much effort to meet the challenges due to the coronavirus. On 5 March, all civil and Pontifical Italian universities stopped classroom activities and changed to distant learning. To accomplish this, it was necessary to create new institutional e-mail accounts for all students and professors. Arrangements were made for the use of the library in ways that met with the standards set by both the government and in accordance with other Pontifical Universities. For the coming academic year our Benedictine university needs to prepare both courses at Sant’Anselmo and lectures on-line for those who cannot return to Rome or for new students unable to come to Italy. While we expect an inevitable decline in students, through the investment of new technology we can offer lectures to students that are unable to attend classes and can assist them in continuing their studies with Sant’Anselmo. The new rector would have introduced himself at the Abbot’s Congress, but will instead communicate with the Benedictine superiors at the beginning of the new academic year and share his vision for the growth and well-being of our Ateneo.

The Pontifical Institute of Liturgy has experienced a full and energetic year amid all the challenges. At year’s end, there were 15 successful doctoral defenses, 51 licentiate theses well

defended, and 11 theses in the specialized programs of Art and Architecture, and also in Liturgical Music. The serious study of both students and faculty is well attested by such fruitful work of so many projects completed well and successfully. On 2 December 2020, in honor of the 57th anniversary of the promulgation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* of the Second Vatican Council, the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy will convene a special session on the topic of liturgical translations, adaptations, and challenges in our present liturgical contexts. Then in request from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, there will be a second session of the program for training translators of Latin liturgical texts in the spring semester. The success of this program last year has brought the request for more sessions. Finally, on 5-7 May 2021, there will be a Twelfth International Liturgical Congress at Sant'Anselmo on a topic most pertinent at this moment – The Celebration of Virtual Liturgies: Challenges, Present and Future. With all the challenges of the present pandemic, Father Jordi-A. Piqué, President of the Liturgical Institute has worked diligently for this program's move into the future. He will finish his second mandate in November, having served as President of the PIL for eight years.

The Faculty of Theology continues its good work in the Benedictine spirit of sapiential learning, a focus on the search for what wisdom is to be found in theological reflection and speculation. The Ateneo Sant'Anselmo was founded to be a school for Benedictines, with its distinctive thrust in the way of learning theology. In addition to this, there is much to be gained by studying and living in Rome – in the life of the Church and its history. The joint learning between Benedictines and Cistercians at Sant'Anselmo, especially in the Monastic Institute, provides a wonderful background to the monastic tradition that is both theological and practical for future leaders in monastic communities. On 8-11 June 2021, there will be a seminar in English through the Monastic Institute on the topic of *Monastic Life and Formation*, and further information about this can be found on the Ateneo's web-site.

The Licentiate and Doctoral programs in Philosophy offer special scholarships for Benedictines. I want to encourage our monasteries to make use of our program of Philosophy, which is under-utilized at the present time. The training of careful thinkers is important in our Benedictine life for a variety of reasons – for future teachers, formators, leaders, spiritual directors, administrators and development directors. There is no better way forward in future planning than to have careful and thoughtful minds to examine the direction for progress and growth in our monastic communities.

In looking at the life of the *collegio* for this past year, the most important thing to note is that, with careful planning, all the residents remained free of the Covid-19 virus. The Prior and his committee worked carefully with me, and the cooperation of the community was excellent. At the end of the academic year, 29 residents finished their studies and returned to their home monasteries. We have prepared well for the beginning of the new academic year in the Fall with all the necessary means of security to protect us from the virus: social distancing in the basilica at the liturgy, in the refectory, and in the classrooms and the wearing of the mask when leaving the property. The number of new Covid-19 infections in Rome and in most of Italy is very low at the moment. We are hopeful that this will continue, and that we will see effective vaccines to end this debilitating pandemic.

The first part of the renovation of our guest facilities has resumed work, and is making good progress; the hope is to be finished by December. The Synod of Abbot Presidents, which had to be postponed, will take place in November at Sant'Anselmo. The *Monastic Formators' Program*

which was planned for the Spring of 2021 has had to be postponed because of the uncertainty of the pandemic, which has an effect on obtaining Visas in a reasonable amount of time. It is our hope that it will resume in 2022. With hope and confidence, we are looking to next summer, so that we can resume of *Leadership and the Rule of Saint Benedict* program for 25 July to 6 August. Registration is already available on the Sant'Anselmo website.

As you can imagine, my travels have been quite limited since the pandemic began. However, I have had an opportunity to visit a few communities since some of the restrictions have been lifted. On Sunday, 14 June, the solemnity of Corpus Christi, the Abbey of San Giovanni Battista here in Rome (Monte Mario) celebrated three jubilees in one great feast: 75 years since their monastery was established in Rome after being bombed out Subiaco during the Second World War; this community has a long and consistent tradition of Benedictine life, dating back to 1579; then 50 years for the consecration of their new abbey Church; and 50 years of monastic profession of Abbess Ildefonsa Paluzzi. During the course of its history, this community has made several foundations in Italy and Africa. Then on 11 July, the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing celebrated 50 years of the establishment of their Generalate in Rome. With a number of their young Sisters from around the world who came to Rome in preparation for the final vows, and then were stranded here during the pandemic, the celebration was filled with youthful, joyous, and faith-filled thanksgiving. Then a last-minute change in the government regulations for travel to Ireland from Europe allows me to keep my commitment of preaching the annual retreat to the monks of the Abbey of Saints Joseph and Columba/Glenstal. Knowing several of the monks from their time here at Sant'Anselmo, I look forward to this first visit to a community about which I have heard many good things.

Let's shift our thoughts from information to reflections on our present situation. Many have posed an interesting question: What do you think, Abbot Primate, life will be like in the future, when we have passed through this period of the pandemic? As I have prayed and thought about this critical question, there has been a passage in the Gospel according to Mark that has come to mind several times. It is found in Mark 8:23-26. A first reading of the text suggests it is an interesting story, but seen in its context, it has a deep spiritual message that is worth our pondering. In this story, there is a blind man at Bethsaida, whom the disciples of Jesus bring to him asking him to merely touch him, that is, to restore his sight. At first, Jesus takes the blind man to a secluded place outside the city; there he puts his spittle on the blind man's eyes, and asks if he is yet able to see anything. The blind man looks about but unable to see clearly, he comments that people look like trees moving about. Jesus then places his hands on the eyes of the blind man, and he was able to see clearly. Jesus tells him that he is not to go back into the village, so as to make this restoration of sight known to others.

It is in the next story that we come to understand the previously story better. Jesus poses the question to his disciples, "Who do people say I am?" They list Elijah, John the Baptist, or one of the prophets. Jesus then makes the question very personal: "But now, who do you say that I am?" Peter boldly and rightly proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah. Yet then Jesus tells them that he will suffer greatly, experience rejection by the elders and leaders of the people, be put to death, and rise after three days. Peter rebukes Jesus boldly, only to be rebuked by Jesus referring to him as Satan, and being told his thinking is skewed.

Peter has become like the blind man of Bethsaida, who at first saw only partially. Peter rightly called Jesus Messiah, but that was not the whole picture of who Jesus was. Peter was half-

blind himself – blind to the manner in which Jesus would reveal himself and also the unfolding plan of God. Jesus was not only to be a glorious Messiah, but rather a suffering Messiah who, through his grief and agony, would accomplish the will and the mysterious yet loving plan of God – our deliverance from sin and death. Living of the paschal mystery fully, he became our Redeemer and Savior. As is true of the disciples of Jesus throughout the Gospels, they are slow to understand, slow to believe, slow to appreciate what Jesus is teaching, showing, and witnessing for them. The unfolding plan allowed them to see in a way that was proper to their level of faith. It is only with time, prayerful reflection, and deeper insight into the wondrous ways of God that the disciples come to believe and understand. Think of the disciples on the Road to Emmaus.

So to the question, “What do you think life will be like in the future, when we have passed through this period of the pandemic?” I honestly think that we are like that blind man of Bethsaida and the apostle Peter. As we stand in the midst of our present situation of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is too much for us to understand fully, to appreciate with spiritual wisdom, and to know the implications of all that is still happening and will continue to unfold into the future months. But, at the same time, as we are in the midst of it, we can see that life will be different on many levels. We can see this with a certain clarity and rationality. And I would also suggest that, at this time, we are constructing now what life will be like in the future; we are already living it in the choices we have had to make. Our prayer and our reflection on life in this new context have enabled us to keep our Benedictine vocation alive; in addition to this, we have seen how we can be of service to others. Our prayer in common has made adjustments for the safety of others; this has called for creativity, not only for ourselves but also for those who usually worship with us. We have opened our chapels, churches, and basilicas with live-streaming for our Oblates and friends; and they have told us of their deep appreciation for the ways our Benedictine life has been opened to them. Our hospitality, while limited in being able to welcome guests, has continued through a variety of ways of communication – phone calls, letter writings, emails and Zoom; we’ve seen that there are various ways in which we “welcome our friends and guests as Christ,” and offer them comfort, consolation, and peace of heart. As finances have become tight, we have turned to Mother Earth to help us provide for the community by the labor of our hands with plentiful gardens with vegetables and fruits. It has been encouraging to hear stories of how monastic communities are also providing for others by sharing the produce that comes from their gardens and farms. When we are able to offer others the fruits of our hands, we fulfill the Gospel teaching of Jesus in Matthew 25, when he teaches the parable of the final judgment. “When I was hungry, you gave me something to eat. When you did this for one of my least brothers or sisters, you did it for me.” Our own poverty and diminishment of finances in our monasteries places us in close proximity with others all over the globe. Only with time will we see what life will be like as we move out of this pandemic into a “new normal.”

Who could forget those stunning scenes of Pope Francis’ *Urbi et Orbi* blessing during the early stages of the pandemic? Set in a context of darkness, his white figure walking up the steps of Saint Peter’s Basilica in the rain, became a powerful contrast of light. In a world that was shrouded in the darkness of an invisible yet powerful enemy, Pope Francis spoke to us of the light that comes from hope: Hope in God’s love and care for us, hope in God amid the fragility and vulnerability of our lives. How often in the liturgy – in the prayers of the Mass, in the Psalms of the Liturgy of the Hours – do we hear the word *hope*? Hope takes us beyond human optimism, and places us on a path forward with God as our Guide, Shepherd, and Strength. Amid the Christian symbols, hope is exhibited as an anchor, as found in the Epistle to the Hebrews (6:18-20). That text reads, “We who have taken refuge [in God] might be strongly encouraged to hold fast to the

hope that lies before us. This we have as an anchor of the soul, firm and sure, which reaches into the interior, beyond the veil, where Jesus has entered on our behalf as our forerunner.” The sacred author here tells us that our hope needs to be certain, faithful, constant, devoted and sure. We see beyond the moment, as challenging as that is, with the expectation that God walks with us toward the light of God’s unfolding revelation of love for us. In these challenging times, God is drawing us ever closer to himself, enabling our hope to take a tangible and distinct expression in the way we pray, think and act.

There is a dramatic scene in the Book of Isaiah, which is truly the high point of the whole Isaian prophecy, in Chapter 60, which we read each year on the solemnity of the Epiphany. The scene is set with Daughter Jerusalem lying prostrate on the ground, shrouded in deep darkness, alone and abandoned. And the text reads, “Arise, and shine forth for your *light* has come! And the glory of the LORD has dawned upon you. Though darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds the peoples [...] Nations shall walk by your *light*, rulers by the radiance of your dawning” (Isa 60:1-3). It had been the darkest of moments for Israel: exiled, re-patriated, yet left alone to rebuild a nation that had been decimated by foreign enemies. Jerusalem felt so very small, fragile and weak, and yet this vision of hope which God gave through the prophet showed how, in the darkness, the light shone on Jerusalem, drawing the nations to her, and coming with gifts to renew and build-up the land and its people. Many of the dark images of this passage speak to our present situation and its challenges. This word of God calls us to hope, trusting that ours is a “living God,” One who intends to breathe new life into his people. We have to be open to what that new life will mean for us. We cannot count on a return to a past time and see it revived. Rather, we wait in hope to see how God will act in drawing us to himself, and we can respond to this divine insight into the divine will that will always be for our good. God is never far from us, but we must respond actively with a living hope, faith, and love to the divine invitation to new and abundant life.

Think of those passages in the Scriptures that keep calling us to keep our vision focused on the light, which was the first of God’s creatures as found in the Book of Genesis: “God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. And God separated the light from the darkness” (1:3-4). The Psalmist affirms our trust in God’s providence in writing, “The LORD is my *light* and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD is the stronghold of my life; whom should I dread? (Ps 27:1). Again the Psalmist affirms our gaze on God’s goodness as we struggle to move forward: “In you is the fountain of life, and in your *light* we see *light*” (Ps 36:10). At some of the holiest moments of the liturgical year, we are drawn again to the image of light as a sign of the divine presence among us. At Mass during the Night, we hear from Isaiah, “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great *light*; upon those in a land of gloom, a *light* has shown” (Isa 9:1). As the Church has seen this prophecy as pointing to the coming of Christ, then at the Paschal Vigil, as we enter into the darkened Church, we cry out “*Light* of Christ! Thanks be to God.” As Jesus entered the darkness of the earth and death itself, he broke the bonds of darkness, chaos and sin, and ushered us into the *light* of new life, assuring us that God’s final word is not darkness and death, but light, life and immortality.

The examples from the Scriptures and the prayers of the liturgy go on and on; these examples only serve to draw our awareness to this image, its meaning in our rich Christian tradition, and to probe its significance and importance for us, as communities and as individuals. Let it be known that Benedictine men and women are people of light, of hope, of confidence in God’s providential care for us. And let us “wait in joyful hope” (Titus 2:13) for God’s revelation of what our present suffering in this pandemic means, and how it will be redemptive for us, if we can

accept its consequences as a means of teaching us and guiding us in faith. Together, we are on a blessed pilgrimage through the pathways of life. In the end, we will see what God has taught us through this natural disaster that has befallen us. Out of darkness, we will see the light of God's love, and we will understand it to be a path to everlasting glory. "Let [us] prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life" (*RB 72:11-12*).

In Christ, our Light and our Hope,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Abbot Gregory". The ink is black and the handwriting is fluid and elegant.

Abbot Primate Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.