



BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO

Curia dell'Abate Primate

15 December 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica,

Peace, hope, and divine strength to all Benedictine men and women as we move through these days of Advent toward the celebration of Christ's Birth. This season which begins the Liturgical Year carries a unique flavor of waiting this year. Quite literally, the whole world awaits a time of blessing: the annual celebration of the Savior's Birth, the conquest of the pandemic's invisible yet mighty enemy, a plan for rebuilding the earth's diminishing resources, and a movement to the "new normal" that will have to unfold before our very eyes. These days of Advent usher us into a time of hope, a hope that can only be fully grounded in the Lord's love and care, guidance and wisdom, strength, vitality, and promise of Emmanuel, God-with-us. I hope that all Benedictine throughout the world can enter into this holy season with an anticipation that believes that, even though this pandemic has fallen upon the whole world, the Lord will lead us forward. I would like to share some reflections with you about this time. But first, let me give you an update on some matters relating to the Benedictine Order and life at Sant'Anselmo.

My own travels and visits to Benedictine communities has been greatly limited because of restrictions related to the Covid-19 virus. However, there have been a few communities with whom I have had some contact. The first week of August, I preached the annual retreat for the monks of Glenstal Abbey in Ireland. It was only 10 days before the scheduled retreat that plans could be made to fly directly from Rome to Dublin. What a joy it was to spend a week with this fine community of monks. Their welcome was so warm and fraternal; their liturgical celebrations were inspiring and up-lifting. Truly, I didn't want to leave. Then, we had a meeting of the Foundation Benedict in Lucerne. As two of my flights were cancelled, I went by train, spending a few days at the monastery of Rhêmes-Notre-Dame in Valle-D'Aosta, bordering both Switzerland and France. This small community possesses a big heart in its hospitality, and a location in the mountains that is perfect to escape the August heat and humidity of Rome. But more importantly, I was made to feel very much at home, sharing in the life and liturgy of the community. While there, there was the opportunity to visit, celebrate Mass and preach at the monastery of *Regina Pacis* in St.-Oyen, a foundation of the Benedictine Nuns of Isola San Giulio. How beautiful it was to see how this community works its plot of land and engages in a variety of different cottage industries to support themselves, serving those who come among them for retreats and the celebration of the liturgy.

At the Foundation Benedict meeting in Lucerne, in addition to our meetings, we also celebrated the 80th birthday of Abbot Primate-emeritus Notker Wolf. As Archabbot of St. Ottilien, Abbot-President of the St. Ottilien Congregation, and then Abbot Primate, there were many accolades to recall his involvements to strengthen, build, and foster Benedictine life throughout

the world. Then in early September, I was in Einsiedeln by the invitation of Archabbot Urban Federer to preside and preach for their annual celebration of the dedication of their Abbey Church, a place of pilgrimage for many people. The celebration is called *Engelweihe*, a very popular celebration of pilgrimage to Einsiedeln. The crowds who come flood their Abbey Basilica with participants, its piazza, and nearby shops. The whole area around the abbey is filled with beautiful lights and images of angels – truly beautiful and inspiring. Even with the pandemic restrictions for celebration, the Church was as full as possible, with many people making the pilgrimage for this special annual event. It was a happy occasion to enjoy the fraternal hospitality of monks who have been at Sant’Anselmo in recent years: Father Mauritius Honegger, Father Patrick Weisser (one of our philosophy professors at Sant’Anselmo), and Brother Meinrad Hötzel. While at Einsiedeln, I had the blessing of visiting the two communities of Benedictine women in nearby monasteries. Father Mauritius Honegger and I celebrated Mass with the Nuns of Au, and also had the opportunity for a visit with the whole community. Later in the day we visited the Nuns of Fahr where we joined them for the Day Office, a delicious meal, and a tour of their monastery, which shares a long association with the monks of Einsiedeln dating back to the 12th century. In all these communities it is a blessing to see their association of Oblates who keep close ties with their communities.

From 24 – 28 September, I conducted the canonical visit at Norcia with Abbot Christopher Zielinski, of Lendinara. As many know, the community of monks, following the earthquake there in 2017, have moved to a hill about 3 kilometers outside the city. It is wonderful to see how the community there continues to grow with new European vocations. The construction of a monastic building for their living quarters, a chapel, library and chapter room has worked well for them. Their work on the reconstruction of the old Capuchin Friary Church has made good progress, and they hope to celebrate Christmas there. While in Norcia, there was also the opportunity to spend an afternoon with the Benedictine Nuns who have moved back to Norcia; they are presently living in pre-fab buildings. Despite the trials of the earthquake, relocation for a time, and now settled in humble quarters, their spirit remains strong and vibrant. It was a joy to spend some time with them. The town of Norcia only slowly makes renovations possible, so devastating were the earthquakes they suffered back in October-November 2016.

Recently, I was able to travel to Amsterdam for two meetings: a visit to the Abbey of Vaals of the Solesmes Congregation, and the second was to serve on a panel for the Nexus Institute. Fortunately, the Netherlands have had fewer cases of the contagion, which enabled travel by air to that country. While at Vaals I had a visit with Father Dirk Hanssens of the Abbey of Keizerberg in Leuven and Brother Thomas Quartier of Saint Willibord Abbey, who teaches both at Leuven and, during the summers, at Sant’Anselmo. Their ministry to the students at Leuven, and especially to Benedictine women at the university, is an impressive endeavor of genuine Benedictine hospitality, providing opportunities for studies and cultural events.

Here at Sant’Anselmo, I am pleased to say that we are well, living safely, striving to live at peace, observing the regulations of the government, the health officials, and the Church leaders. There were a good number of monks who wanted to begin or continue their studies here at Sant’Anselmo. But unfortunately because of travel restrictions, Visa problems, and unexpected situations, they were not able to enter Italy. Numbers can be challenging to describe this year for those considered residents at Sant’Anselmo. In total, we are 111 living in Sant’Anselmo, 90 of whom are residents in the strict sense of that word (Benedictines and diocesan priests) and 21 from the *Theologisches Studienjahr* from Dormition Abbey. The students in the program of biblical studies at Dormition could not enter Israel because of the pandemic. Because of the program of

studies at Dormition Abbey works in association with Sant'Anselmo, they asked to come here, to Rome, for their program of study, and we have happily received them. Professor Johanna Erzberger serves as their dean, and Father Nikodemus Schnabel (Dormition Abbey) coordinates their spiritual activities. Several of us have offered classes to these students; they have been a welcome addition to our monastery and house of study. The new Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Archbishop Pierbattista Pizzabella, OFM, visited the group, made a presentation on the current situation of Christians in the Middle East, and entertained questions with a lively discussion. Most recently both the ambassadors of Israel and of Germany to the Holy See came to Sant'Anselmo and visited this group, each sharing several hours with them.

At the present moment, because of the pandemic situation, our guest facilities are closed to outside visitors. However, we are taking this time to begin the renovation of our guest facilities, with the hope of having one floor completed by the beginning of the New Year. Father Markus Muff of Engelberg Abbey, our European Director of Development, has been over-seeing the successful completion of this important endeavor. With our important charism of hospitality, it is essential that we have a welcoming and comfortable guest facility at Sant'Anselmo. The next project of the agenda is to renovate the first floor of the guest facilities in the coming months, which will bring that whole project to a successful completion. We continue to search for funds for a completion to this important endeavor.

Our Prior, Father Mauritius, has faithfully and carefully overseen the emergency situation of the Covid situation for the *collegio* at Sant'Anselmo. Here in Italy, the measures of care and protection have been strict, and fortunately, as of the writing of this letter, we have had no one register positive with the virus. Despite the *pandemic fatigue* which many feel, there remain a good and cooperative spirit in the house. Keeping the rules of the pandemic restrictions, we were able to host the Roman Rectors of Colleges here at Sant'Anselmo for their biannual meeting. Other than this group, our visitors have been few. The meeting of the Synod of Abbot Presidents which was to take place at Subiaco on 19-21 November 2020 had to be postponed a second time because of the travel restrictions due to the pandemic. The meeting of the Executive Committee of AIM met by Zoom on 23-24 November 2020, under the leadership of Father Jean-Pierre Longeat of Ligugé and Sister Christine Conrath of the Abbey of Jouarre. With the present limitations on travel and meetings, we do what is possible, and look forward to better times, when we can meet face to face.

As all other academic institutions in Italy, our Ateneo had to continue to respond appropriately to the pandemic. During the summer all of our classrooms were turned into construction sites: It was necessary to get a new internet connection in all classrooms, provide new cable systems and install technical equipment, including cameras and loudspeakers to transmit classes to students who are not able to be present in Rome or cannot come to Sant'Anselmo. The costly new devices were sponsored by a generous gift from the Jurt Foundation with which the Rector Fr. Bernhard Eckerstorfer OSB and I have been in contact. Fr. Markus Muff OSB continued to raise the funds to supply the classrooms with the basic renovations necessary for the technical equipment with the Porticus Foundation. The new educational platform of the Ateneo with its own website and the possibility to include students from the outside has turned out to be very useful thus far. Classes are not only registered and then made available to students who cannot be present, but the whole system makes it also possible that outsiders interact with those present in the classrooms. Besides, a lecture in one classroom can be transmitted into another one. The new technical system serves us well since we had to reduce classes because of a governmental decree after the 26 October to diminish the presence of students at our institution

and to be able to continue to teach if a student or professor has to go into quarantine. Fortunately, the expected sharp drop in the number of new students did not occur. We have to face a decline of new students on the level for the licentiates, but we can be pleased with the overall development of the student body. One example of innovation is the course on the revision of the Italian Missal, which has gone into effect on the First Sunday of Advent, that our Liturgical Faculty offers; this is a wonderful service of Sant'Anselmo for the clergy and laity throughout Italy.

Father Jordi Piqué of the Abbey of Montserrat was re-elected to another term as President of the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy. He holds the support of the faculty as he continues to provide good leadership of this essential part of the Ateneo. The Pontifical Institute of Liturgy has recently held a symposium on the Roman Missal, closely connected with the new renewal of the Missal in Italy. Of course, it was done on line. Yet how impressive it was to have over 160 participants in the sessions. The presentations were recorded and are available on-line for those who would wish to hear these presentations, made in several different languages. The speakers drew on their various levels of experience coming from a variety of different Episcopal Conferences.

The Benedictine women continue to keep close ties both through their Administrative Council and among the monasteries within their different Regions. Sister Lynn McKenzie of Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama, serves as Moderator of the *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* and President of the Congregation of Saint Scholastica in the United States. She notes that despite not having had an in-person Conference of Delegates meeting in September 2020, as had been hoped and planned, life moves forward in women's monasteries around the world and they manage to stay in touch via email. A new CIB newsletter will be sent out to the Delegates during Advent (to coincide with the circular letter of the men's Confederation). Each of the 19 regions of CIB have been asked to write a brief report about the impact of the pandemic on the monasteries in their regions. Many monasteries have had the coronavirus invade their houses, causing a change in the way life is lived in the monasteries, and causing suffering and some deaths of members. Yet, Sister Lynn writes, "Hope and faith and a life of prayer remains alive in all of the monasteries of women around the world. All of these CIB region reports will be included in the soon to be published CIB newsletter." That newsletter will also become available on the CIB website, should any of the men be interested in reading it. Here is the website link where the newsletter will be posted: <https://www.benedictines-cib.org/meetings/meetings-2019-present/>.

The CIB has a new executive secretary in the person of Sister Mary Luke Jones of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana, USA. She has some previous CIB experience, having served as coordinator of the 2014 CIB Symposium. And she has rich experience in her own monastery as long-time development director. The CIB Council has cancelled their planned in-person meeting which was to have been held in Belgium in January 2021. Instead they will have an extended online meeting via Zoom. There they will make plans for their next CIB Conference of Delegates meeting which is scheduled to be held in Assisi in September 2021, just before the Congress of Abbots Congress at Sant' Anselmo in Rome, in the hope that the Congress will be able to proceed as planned.

How important it is to acknowledge the suffering and deaths that have occurred in the Benedictine Order as a result of the present pandemic. The monasteries of both men and women have incurred a number of positive cases of Covid-19, bringing some to hospitals, others to remain in their monasteries, and still others to pass into the gracious embrace of God in death. The sense of loss is felt everywhere and encouraging all of us to remain vigilant in the fight against this invisible enemy. We also mention for those who have been here in the summers, the unexpected

and sad passing of one of our volunteers, Mr. Alois Mühleisen, who fell to his death while hiking in the mountains near his family home. May all our members and friends who have passed to eternity rest in the peace of God's eternal splendor.

During the weeks leading up to the season of Advent, my *lectio divina* focused on the Book of Revelation. The pandemic has made many people look to the end times, to a season of suffering, a time of uncertainty about the future, and to the ways in which our world, our governments, our Church, and our Benedictine Order will move forward. One thing about the Book of Revelation is that it takes into account two things: a time of endurance and perseverance in troubled times, and also a genuine hope of God's action in the midst of all of this. At the Liturgy of the Hours, there are several Canticles which break out in thanksgiving and praise to God for the divine presence which possesses a power more potent than the human situation of suffering. "We give you thanks, O Lord, Almighty God, you who are and who were. For you have assumed your great power and have begun your reign" (Rev 11:17). God's rule continues, despite human folly or natural disaster. In the end, God's goodness will manifest itself, showing a rule that is just and a command that is geared toward renewal and restoration.

In coming to the final chapters of the Book of Revelation there is an expression that we have heard many times, yet may now see it in a new way. The author writes, "I saw a new heaven and a new earth. The former heaven and the former earth had passed away' ... Then I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, God's dwelling is with the human race. He will dwell with them and they will be his people, and God himself will always be with them as their God' ... Then the One who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new'" (Rev 21:1, 3, 5). In pondering these verses from the Book of Revelation, the question came to me, "Is God taking this natural disaster and creating something new, good, and even wonderful for us? Will we come to see this *new earth* that the Scriptures are speaking of? Will we see a new earth, in which God will take the chaos of our present situation, and as the All Holy One did at the beginning of time, give us a new creation, a new earth, a world remade in the harmony, order, and goodness of God?"

We can find examples of this in the Scriptures, where something unfortunate, even bad, by the grace of God takes on a new life, a new direction, a new focus. For example, in Genesis 45, we read the story of the patriarch Joseph, who was sold in slavery by his own brothers, jealous of him. But then comes the moment when, faced with his brothers in the court of Pharaoh, he tells that God has taken their betrayal of him, and turned it into something good: for the service of a people in need. Joseph saw, with eyes of spiritual wisdom, that God had taken something malicious and sinful, and brought it to a positive and blessed end. We can also think of the creation story in Genesis 1, where a mass of chaos is turned into a world of harmony, beauty, and order and given it to human family to be the stewards of this great gift (Gen 1:28-31). Where there had been nothing but disarray, God brought order through a spoken word, "Let there be ... and there was" (Gen 1:3, 6-7, 9, 11). And then there is the ultimate act of where jealousy, hatred, fear, betrayal, and wickedness is redeemed by the saving death of Jesus Christ on the cross, bringing about the forgiveness and reconciliation of the world, and promising us nothing less than eternal life. Because of all this, we need to be a people of hope.

At a recent meeting of the Union of Superior Generals, the question was asked, "What will our Order look like after the Pandemic? What will our communities be like in comparison with the way they lived before, and the way they lived during the pandemic?" That is difficult to answer because this pandemic has not yet fully run its course. As I hear from communities of men and women Benedictines from around the world, there are parts of their lives that have changed

radically, and other parts of their lives that have not changed. The things that have not changed are the rhythm of prayer which is marked by the daily celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours, and for many communities, the daily celebration of the Eucharist. At the same time, these celebrations have had to be altered to meet government, health and Church regulations. Yet there have had to be creative ways of meeting these demands. What has been positive about this experience is that it has forced us to go deeper into the words of the Psalms and to listen more attentively to the proclamation of the Scriptures. While hospitality has changed, it has not stopped. There are the live-streaming of Mass and the Liturgy of the Hours, which has been much appreciated by many of our Oblates and friends. Spiritual accompaniment which cannot be done face-to-face is now done through a variety of mediums: Zoom, telephone, and Skype. As Pope Francis has so strongly encouraged a sense of genuine care, friendship, and concern in his encyclical, *Fratelli tutti*, I think Benedictines, who have already had this spirit alive in their communities, have now found new and creative ways to be of loving service to one another.

One of the great challenges that face many communities are the apostolic endeavors which have often defined their rhythm of life: schools under the guidance of Benedictine values, industries that have engaged monks and nearby lay men and women, growth in community membership without the finances to meet daily needs, small cottage industries upon which a community has depended for their livelihood, and programs of service to others (the poor, homeless, immigrants) which depend on either government support or part of the livelihood of the community. Add to the challenges mentioned, there is the *pandemic fatigue* which results from having to live with regularly changing restrictions, getting used to wearing of uncomfortable masks, the paralyzing effect that comes with an inability to do what is expected of us, and the waiting for everything that comes from reorganized appointments to travel plans to meetings. In the midst of these challenges, we look for blessings, signs of hope, and possible ways forward.

Pope Francis reminded us of something essential on that remarkable evening which drew the whole family together as he gave the world his *Urbi et Orbi* blessing. Drawing from the Gospel according to Mark 4, he used the image of the apostles together in a boat, frightened on a tempestuous and dark sea, and wondering how Jesus could be asleep at this moment of their need. The Pope reminded us of our worldwide and common experience, and how closely we are connected through this experience, stripped of our self-sufficiency, and knowing that our only way forward is through a dependence upon God's power which cannot be controlled by human forces. As we are moving forward with the promise of vaccines that will be coming in the next six-to-eight months, we are also beginning to see the *new earth* that God is creating. It is an earth that keeps us keenly aware of our interdependence upon one another, the fragility of human life, the need to be obedient to regulations that affect the lives of others, the need to be generous and careful with what has been given us, a readiness to share what we have with others, to seek the harmony and order in which the world was first created, and the absolute need for silence and prayer to listen to God's voice that we might respond in faith.

My dear brothers and sisters, our Benedictine life will not change in its substance in the future; our traditions of 1,500 years have gone through times of upheaval, war, plague, pestilence, suppression and most importantly, revival, renewal and new growth. It has been out of times of crisis that new life has come forth within Benedictine life. Think of the times of suppression and war that have almost depleted our communities. Yet God's grace has been extended to others to renew and revitalize the richness of our values and traditions. What the Benedictine Order will be in the time following this pandemic remains to be seen. With the Holy Spirit as our guide, we will work to form the gift of our lives to the glory of God and service of our neighbor. What is

important upon which to reflect is what we are doing now in response to God's voice, how our prayer is leading us forward in new and creative ways, to remember the call to service of others, to remember the significant witness of our community life to a world that kicks and fights to manifest independence instead of interdependence, and finding the face of Christ in all who come among us.

In these days of Advent, we are celebrating a period of time which is really a sacrament of daily life: waiting, seeking and finding the Christ who comes among us each and every day, especially in our own communities. The more that young men and women see our love for one another, the more they will see the force and beauty of our common life together, for there is no greater potency than simple and genuine love that touches and moves the human heart to an understanding of the deepest meaning of life. "This I command you: love one another" (Jn 15:17). "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is of God; everyone who love is begotten by God and knows God" (1 Jn 4:7). The more that the young can experience, truly experience, our care, concern, and service of one another, the more that they will want to be an active part of our communities. There is a beautiful passage in the prophet Zechariah which expresses this profoundly. It reads, "Thus says the LORD of hosts: In those days, people from nations of every language will take hold, yes, will take hold of the cloak of every Judahite and say, 'Let us go with you, for we have heard that God is with you'" (Zech 8:23). We are each of those Judahites when we seek to follow God's will through our charism of Benedictine hospitality, beginning with ourselves, and extending out to others who come among us seeking a place of prayer, peace, and welcome.

This letter will conclude with a few questions that I pose to Benedictine communities for your group and community discussions. When we realize that we are beginning to form our future, a new normal, and remaining true to our calling, how do we distinguish it from the past? What are the positive signs of God's Spirit among us during these difficult times? In these difficult times, what are we doing for the service of one another, and our neighbor? What has your community established, sometimes without even talking about it, as a priority in living your Benedictine values? What are ways in which we have seen compassion shown to others in need? What have we come to see as a new potential of vibrancy in our monastic vocation? How have we built an authentic spirit of community with the imposed measures of frugality that have come to us on various levels? In what ways have our hearts had to go deeper in our expression of prayer, true communion with God? What have we learned that we wish to take with us into the future?

Brothers and sisters, despite the pain and suffering of this pandemic, God has been with us in ways we cannot always see. God's grace rarely comes in the ways we expect. Being attentive to the signs of the times, we will see our way forward into the future with hope and trust in the ways that God is leading us forward. May these final days of Advent lead us to a glorious celebration of the Lord's Birth, because we have hoped, and yes, we have seen God's guiding and loving hand among us.

In Christ, Saint Benedict, and Saint Scholastica,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abbot Pimate Gregory". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first letters of "Abbot", "Pimate", and "Gregory" being capitalized and prominent.

Abbot Pimate Gregory Polan, O.S.B.