



**BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO**  
Curia dell'Abate Primate

5 October 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica,

Greetings of peace and hope from Sant'Anselmo on the Aventine Hill in Rome. These have been busy and productive days here in Rome with our recent meeting of the Synod of Abbot Presidents of the Benedictine Confederation and the beginning of the new Academic Year for our Ateneo with its Pontifical Institute of Liturgy, the faculties of Theology and Philosophy, and our Monastic Institute. Sandwiched in between these two events, I had the blessing of participating in a meeting in Madrid of the Abbesses of Spain. In accord with the Holy See's document, *Cor Orans*, these Abbesses have formed the Congregation of Saint Hildegard. In our time together there were conferences followed by lively and open discussion of the blessings and challenges that go into forming a Congregation within the Benedictine Order. And as you would expect, the hospitality of the Spanish Abbesses was warm, gracious, and welcoming.

It had been two years since the Synod of Abbot Presidents had met in 2019 because of the restrictions imposed by the present Covid-19 pandemic. Very happy to meet in person, there was a joyful and fraternal spirit that animated our meetings. Of the 19 Congregations, 14 were able to be present: Abbots Jeremias Schröder (St. Ottilien Congregation), Giuseppe Casetta (Vallombrosian Congregation), Guillermo Arboleda (Subiaco-Cassinese Congregation), Maksymilian Nawara (Annunciation Congregation), Christopher Jamison (English Benedictine Congregation), Abbot Vigeli Monn (Swiss Congregation), Johannes Perkmann (Austrian Congregation), Barnabas Bögle (Bavarian Congregation), Philippe Dupont (Solesmes Congregation), John Klassen (American Cassinese Congregation), Albert Schmidt (Beuronese Congregation) Vincent Bataille, (Swiss-American Congregation), and Diego Rosa (Olivetian Congregation). Others were unable to enter Italy, or were elected only in recent days.

One of the most important questions that led the group into discussion was the date of the next Congress of Abbots. Should we hope to be able to have a Congress in 2022, considering that we are an international Order, or should we wait until the date of the Congress which would naturally have come in 2024? Knowing the situations of their communities on an international level, there was a strong affirmation for waiting until 2024. In a forthcoming meeting of the Permanent Council of the Synod of Abbot Presidents, the exact dates of the next Congress will be decided and published in a reasonable amount of time. One of the other important topics were the election of the members of my council, known as the Permanent Council of the Synod of Abbot Presidents. Abbot Jeremias Schröder of the St. Ottilien Congregation serves as my Vicar, and the other two members are Abbot Maksymilian Nawara of the Annunciation Congregation (and originally a member of the Abbey of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Lublin, Poland)

and Abbot Antony Chacko Puthenpurackal of the Sylvestrine Congregation (originally a member of the monastery of St. Joseph, Makkiyad).

Reports were given by the Abbot Primate on the state of the Confederation during these past two years, the Prior of the *Collegio*, Father Mauritius Wilde (of the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach), the Rector of the *Ateneo*, Father Bernhard Eckerstorfer (of Kremsmünster Abbey), and the Treasurer of the Confederation, Abbey and University, Father Geraldo González y Lima (of the Abbey of São Paulo and São Geraldo, São Paulo, Brazil). Despite the challenges of the past year, these officials are to be congratulated for their good work in keeping the community safe, healthy, growing in number, solvent and at peace. It is especially encouraging to see that our financial situation remains firm and within the budget. As is usual at these Synods, each of the Abbot Presidents made reports of the situations of growth and challenge within the communities of their Congregations.

For a moment, let us turn our attention to developments in the Ateneo/University at Sant'Anselmo. Student enrollment at our Benedictine university has been good also this year despite the fact that most come from outside of Italy, many of them from the developing world. The reason for this good news is that we offer, under the current circumstances, all of our courses also online. Extra online-courses were offered in the last few months by the Monastic Institute in English, Spanish and Italian; these have been received very well in the monastic world. Our theology program leading to a Baccalaureate starts this academic year with a new curriculum. Due to a collaboration with the Theological Faculty of the Servite Order (with their theology faculty of the Marianum), we will have twice as many students on this level as before and are thus able to establish an annually taught year of introductory courses and a two-year cycle of the major subjects (whereas until last year we offered courses only every three years). This will bring more courses and a greater variety of professors to our theology program, rendering it also more attractive for students that spend only one year in Rome to choose courses that will then be recognized at their university at home. The new Baccalaureate in Liturgy, that had been established *ad experimentum* for the past three years, will also include many courses of the new curriculum in theology but have its own program that enables its graduates to continue with a licentiate and doctorate in Sacred Liturgy without the full load of philosophical and theological studies. Our Liturgical Institute will hold at Sant'Anselmo an International Congress, entitled "Virtual Liturgy?" 22-24 October that can also be attended online; information about this and many other recent developments can be found at our new university website. At the inauguration ceremony of this academic year, the new Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, Archbishop Arthur Roche, delivered the commencement address. At the opening of last year, the eminent theologian Cardinal Walter Kasper gave a talk on recent developments in Christology that was subsequently published in the German edition of *Communio* and will be carried in Italian in the upcoming issue of our journal *Ecclesia Orans*.

In the *Collegio* this year, Father Mauritius, the Prior, reports the new school year will bring 90 residents to Sant'Anselmo, 24 of them will be new to Sant'Anselmo. They will come from the monasteries of Ndanda, Ampitiya, Cuernavaca, Luján, Subiaco (USA), Mount Angel, Cairo, Montevergine, St. Ottilien, Saint-Wandrille, Valle des los Caidos, and Glenstal. Because of our ecumenical interests as Benedictines, we are blessed to have a young Orthodox lay man living with us, who is studying at *Musica Sacra*; we are delighted to have him among us. Much work has been done in recent weeks to bring us a strong and more stable Wi-Fi. A major endeavor has been the renovation of one floor of our guest facilities. By a major gift of Conception Abbey and its daughter house at Benet Lake, this endeavor has been brought to a nearly finished conclusion in time for the Synod of Abbot Presidents.

The report of the treasurer Father Geraldo, brought good news. Though there were a considerable amount of figures and information, some quick information about Sant'Anselmo's financial situation in the year 2020-21 is essential for us to know. The *Collegio Sant'Anselmo* remained stable thanks to several factors: the practically regular and punctual contribution of the various Congregations for the Subsidiary and Solidarity Fund. This past year, the faithful contributions of the Congregations were remarkable; the presence of the Jerusalem Group in our midst throughout the year practically compensated for the closing of our Guesthouse and the cancellation of all Congresses (Abbots and Oblates) and events; the reopening of the Church for pastoral activities provided a record of Marriages; and the best news, whose economic repercussions will be for the year 2021-22, was the end of the bankruptcy process of the Restaurant that rented our property in Piazza dell'Emporio (down below on the Marmorata) and a new lease agreement with another Restaurant starting in October 2021. This will enable us to receive past credits that were due from the failed Restaurant and a regular rent from the new Restaurant. Concerning Pontificio Ateneo Sant'Anselmo, we highlight the remarkable success of online and streaming courses with a significant increase in Academic Fees; a considerable reduction in costs with the rationalization of offered courses, the number of professors and travel costs; and the direct donation received from Foundation Jurt for the modernization of our entire computer system. In a nutshell: despite the uncertain and complex year, we do not have debts, we have not had to resort to bank loans, nor have we had to dip into our reserves; both the Collegio and the Pontificio Ateneo Sant'Anselmo are sound and financially stable. As you can imagine, Father Geraldo had a broad smile on his face as he relayed this information to the members of the Synod, and he was given a strong round of applause for all his good efforts.

We now turn to the other presentations during the Synod. Father Patrick Carter of Our Lady of Clear Creek Abbey (in Hulbert, Oklahoma, USA) made a presentation of a digital *Catalogus* of the Confederation that he and Brother Simon Stubbs of St. Joseph Abbey (in Saint Benedict, Louisiana, USA) have been working on. As a result of the digital text now, there are many opportunities to be able to see a variety of elements that make up the Confederation: These would include subjects and topics such as, the percentage of monks on the various continents, the age levels of monks worldwide and according to continents, numbers of communities in the Northern Hemisphere and those in the Southern Hemisphere, ordained and non-ordained monks, percentage of monks in various countries, growth in the number of Benedictine monasteries, the average age in both monasteries and congregations, and short reports on each Congregation. For example, we can see how the Southern Hemisphere continues to grow significantly, while the Northern Hemisphere grows only incrementally. We could also see that while the number of monks is decreasing, the number of monasteries is growing; thus we will probably see smaller communities in the future. Also, it was interesting to note that the number of monks “in formation” throughout the Confederation remains stable; though some parts of the world have fewer vocations, other parts of the world make up for the decrease by their growth. His presentation was interesting, entertaining, thought-provoking, and quite useful when thinking of different aspects of the Confederation.

One of the other matters that came up for discussion was the Benedictine Liturgical Calendar. Abbot Philippe Dupont, President of the Solesmes Congregation, gave a report on the chronicle and development of the Benedictine Liturgical Calendar. Following some discussion, the Synod requested that the Abbot Primate ask the Congregation for Divine Worship how to proceed so that we might have a proper and updated Benedictine Liturgical Calendar.

Abbot Jeremias Schröder, President of the St. Ottilien Congregation, led the discussion on the request that was recently made for a “Papal Privilege” allowing non-ordained members to serve as superiors of communities. Seven Major Superiors of large Orders or Congregations met personally with the Holy Father to discuss this matter on Thursday, 24 June 2021. This included the three branches of Franciscans (Friars Minor, Friars Minor Conventuals, and Capuchins), the Carmelites, Augustinians, Redemptorists, and Benedictines. Each Order or Congregation gave its own request, explaining their situation and the reasons why the request was being made. Pope Francis said that he would speak in favor of this to the Congregation for Consecrated Life, but in the end, it would be their decision. We hope the word of the Holy Father will move this matter forward, which has been considered since the Abbots’ Congress in 2000.

Then Abbot Christopher Jamison, President of the English Benedictine Congregation (of Worth Abbey) and the Abbot Primate Gregory gave information relating to the processes of the Synod and the forthcoming Synod of Bishops set for 2023. The Abbot Primate has been selected to serve on the Committee for Spirituality for the 2023 Synod of Bishops. Meetings of this committee have already begun and are moving forward. It is clear that Pope Francis and Cardinal Mario Grech intend that the work of the Synod will have an impact on the life of the Church in teaching all its members the manner in which decisions are made, problems are resolved, and a future is created. Among a select group of men and women Superior Generals, the Abbot Primate gave a talk entitled “Synodality in the Rule of Saint Benedict,” in which he discussed Chapter 3 of the Rule of Saint Benedict, “Calling the members of the community together for Counsel.” It is also interesting to note that the early document on the forthcoming Synod quoted the Rule of Saint Benedict as a source for the topic of synodality.

Though it is difficult to set “plans in stone” at this time of the pandemic, we are hoping to hold next year’s Synod at the Abbey of Saints Peter and Paul in Tyniec, Poland in 2022. Then in 2023, as has been the custom to hold a Synod at the home abbey of the Abbot Primate, the hope is to have the Synod in 2023 at Conception Abbey in Conception, Missouri in the United States. 2024 is designated as the year for the next Congress of Abbots.

In recent years, a part of our meeting of the Synod of Abbot Presidents is the opportunity to meet with the Benedictine women who are organized as the *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum*, commonly known by the acronym CIB. Unfortunately, this was not able to happen this year because of limitations caused by the pandemic. However, they had their meeting on line, which you can imagine called for creativity and sacrifice, realizing that time zones that were involved in gathering these Sisters. They had their first ever online meeting of the CIB Conference of Delegates on 4-7 September, with approximately 35 members gathered from five continents. During the meeting, while they were scattered around the globe in their various monasteries, Sister Lynn McKenzie (of Sacred Heart Monastery in Cullman, Alabama, USA), moderator of CIB, writes, “we were united in mind and heart online. At the meeting we discussed the current structure of the CIB and talked about the possibility of re-imagining how the CIB operates and whether a re-organization could be more beneficial for Benedictine women. This is not something to be quickly decided, but rather a topic to be pondered and studied, and to be discussed at some length. We had a very good exchange online and had speakers to help us imagine some other ways to think about the best organization to be a more effective instrument in service to Benedictine women around the world.”

By the end of the meeting, those gathered agreed that yes, they needed to explore possible changes. And, so, they plan to have another online meeting in the coming months,

inviting their CIB canonist/historian, Sister Scholastika Häring, a nun of St. Scholastika Abbey in Dinklage, Germany, to speak with them. Sister Scholastika will help them understand different possibilities for their structures and organization as worldwide Benedictine women. Sister Lynn commented, “We want to be creative and thoughtful in this process. We hope to be gathered in person in September 2022 for a meeting of the CIB Conference of Delegates (though not our regular quadrennial Symposium), when it will be time for election of the CIB Moderator and Administrative Council.”

To conclude this Circular Letter, I would like to feed back to you some of the thoughts you shared with me in response to my questions last spring, and add a few of my own. One of the striking and positive things that came from this time of the pandemic was the growing intensity for reflecting on the Word of God. Because there was more time to ponder, monks and sisters heard parts of the Scriptures in a way they had never heard before. These texts of Scripture were well known, but now in this context, this historical moment, this time of quiet, and this enlarged block of forced solitude, God spoke in new and challenging ways. The Scriptures took on an intimacy for many that they had not known before. Despite the fact that they had practiced *lectio divina* for years, now the *meditatio* spoke to the moment, and the *oratio* came from deep within the human heart. We can think of St. Augustine’s reflection on the mystery of God when he exclaims, “O Beauty so ancient, so new.” What was old and beautiful in the Word of God, was now even more striking and inviting. And it was the voice of God that was heard, and God showed the divine nearness to us.

Thinking about the Psalms that are such a part of the daily spiritual food of the Benedictine, the words and images of its poetry drew us deeper into the mystery of a God who wishes to reveal the divine self in our suffering world. God does not stand aloof from the pain, uncertainty, mystery, loss and torment of living with an invisible enemy. Yet the suffering opens a path to become more vulnerable to the life around us. The Psalms tell us this in verse after verse. Sometimes the struggle expressed by the Psalmist strikes a chord in our own heart; it may be someone we know, something we read in a book, or even someone we knew in the community. The Psalms are a kind of “school of prayer,” that are really a springboard for us to enter into communion with God through the words that speak to our hearts and transform our thinking. The words and images paint scenes of both joy and pain, blessing and fear, healing and anguish. To reflect on these words draws us into the inner life of God, a place no one knows for sure; yet when it touches our senses and our lives, we know that God has been present, and we long for more.

The pandemic is not over, and we wait for a new day when something else will attract our attention. But for now, let us believe that God’s presence and wisdom can be found in these days when we turn to the texts of Scripture for grace and insight. God is there; we have only to be silent, to reflect, to believe, and “humbly welcome the word that has been planted in [us] and is able to save [our] souls” (James 1:21). You are all in my prayer each day, as I ask a remembrance in yours.

In Christ, our Hope and our Strength,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abbot Primate Gregory". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, O.S.B.