

Making a Pilgrimage

Sister Laura Bufano, CSJ

*Called to Mystery: Called to More
Honesty and integrity*

*Began with sharing an observation
Fear and trust*

Intimacy and transparency

Laughter and lightness of heart and spirit


Creativity, collaboration

Finding creative solutions when we encountered obstacles

The creative process – curiosity, constructive criticism, not clinging

Holding it all lightly

Truly a labor of love and indeed a pilgrimage of the heart

 Over two years ago I was asked by Sister Mary Rose Noonan, Director of Communications for the Albany Province of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet, to consider writing about the experience of working with the brothers at Weston Priory on the recording, "Pilgrimage of the Heart." At the time my response was... "let's wait awhile and see what happens." I waited a long while and what follows is the fruit of that waiting and my reflection.

On Labor Day weekend 2004, in a conversation with Brother Richard, I shared my perception of what I saw and heard in the new way the brothers were approaching their sung prayer. What had been the responsibility of only a few brothers serving as cantor(s) had changed. Six or seven brothers were sharing the task in groupings of three or four. It was marvelous to observe the difference. Seeing the inclusion, an added inter-generational dimension and drawing on the gifts of the community in a new way, caught my attention. What I observed was an audible and visible reflection of their monastic life. The blend of voices was marvelous and the benefits seemed apparent to me. In the conversation I wondered aloud about whether or not the community had considered the possibility of making a new recording. What a treasure it would be to capture the sound and spirit of what was happening. I said I would be willing to help and support the effort in any way that I could. I simply planted a seed.



Sister Laura Bufano with the brothers during a recording session.

During my visit to the priory after Christmas in 2004, I was invited to meet with Brothers Michael and Philip. The seed planted in September had germinated and was sprouting. In the months that had intervened, the brothers had considered the concept of doing a new recording and asked whether or not I was still willing and available to assist them. When I asked what it would entail, they responded by saying it would involve rehearsing the music in preparation and directing the music for the recording sessions. I agreed to give it a try only if we would be honest with one another about whether or not it was a "good fit." I felt very strongly that the brothers needed to be comfortable with me and I be comfortable with them in this new capacity, as this would be a shift in our relationship. Subsequently, in a conversation with Brother Richard, I shared my thoughts on this and he agreed it would be important.

A few months later, in preparation for the first rehearsal, I met with Brothers Philip and Michael to talk about the music and learn the routine we would follow. It was familiar to the brothers and new to me. I must admit that on the night before the first rehearsal I was nervous and could hardly sleep. I had to say to myself: "This is not the Mormon Tabernacle Choir or the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. These are my brothers, my friends. I have nothing to fear."

And so we began. I was honest with the whole group, shared my nervousness and told them about how important it would be for us to be honest

with one another about whether or not it was a “good fit,” assuring them I would not take it personally if it did not work out. The rehearsal started. I was very much myself and the brothers were very much themselves. There was laughter and lots of affirmation for what was done well. I made suggestions and we worked together on basic principles of vocal technique, breath control and phrasing, diction and dynamics. Before the end of that day we concluded that it was indeed a “good fit” and scheduled another rehearsal for the next morning. At the end of the second rehearsal I met again with Brothers Michael and Philip and offered to send notes and a summary of what we had focused on in rehearsal. I thought it might be helpful for them as they rehearsed in the intervening time.

As I returned home I reflected on the experience and all that had transpired during our meetings and rehearsals. I was keenly aware that something significant was happening. It was difficult to find words to describe it. I was seeing the brothers in a new way and they were seeing me in a new way. I realized that it was about mutuality and the deep reverence we had for one another – it was really about intimacy and transparency. Music and sung prayer is important to me and to the brothers at Weston. It is an integral part of our lives and spirituality. At Weston, their music flows from and is an intimate expression of their life together as they live the gospel. That is where the transparency became most evident to me. It was a joy and a privilege for me to enter more deeply into the meaning of that reality.

You can imagine my surprise when I returned to the priory and discovered that a copy of the “rehearsal notes” I sent to Brothers Michael and Philip had been given to each brother. The discovery delighted me and so subsequent summaries of rehearsal notes took on a different flavor and became a helpful tool and a reference point for all of us.

There was a wonderful rapport among us at rehearsal and during recording sessions. A spirit of adventure prevailed, with a willingness on the part of the brothers to try new techniques while growing in their awareness of what was happening vocally. We could say what worked well and what didn't work and valued the honesty and integrity that was part of the process. Brothers could consult with me if they wished and if there were particular questions or concerns regarding the music they were free to express them. This added a unique dimension to the process. In some respects I was a “cheerleader” of sorts, a vocal “coach” who affirmed the good things that were happening and worked with the brothers to find ways to make the good qualities even better. We were energized by the experience, carried by one another's enthusiasm and spirit. We laughed together and rejoiced at the miracle of making music together, listening, blending and drawing out the depth of what was in our hearts.

We approached the creative process in a manner that was truly collaborative. I have served on several teams, co-chaired committees and been part of many “so-called” collaborative projects. Working with the brothers surpassed them all in terms of the meaning of “collaboration.” Suggestions were offered freely and constructive criticism was not taken personally. We learned the importance of not clinging to an idea, a word, or even a single note or rhythmic pattern. Curiosity helped us to grow in our mutual understanding of what was underneath a word or a melody, giving greater freedom to experiment with sound and phrasing. Texts that were already richly nuanced became richer, depths were plumbed for fuller meaning, and we were sometimes surprised by grace in the final outcome. It was truly a blessing, one for which I will always be grateful.

We held it all lightly and at one point thought we might have to abandon the project altogether or begin anew. We knew and agreed that no matter what, it was worth every bit of the time and effort that went into it. In one of the later stages of the recording during the summer of 2006 I was present for the overdubbing of the oboe and the flute. It was pure gift to hear the music and how sensitively the instrumentalists, Sue and Joy, had written and interpreted their respective parts. Observing the response of the brothers to the work of the instrumentalists was an added delight. For all who participated in the project, it truly was a “pilgrimage of the heart” and a “labor of love”. Throughout the process we often spoke of “simple elegance,” desiring that the finished product would convey the elegant simplicity of prayer at the priory. I believe we accomplished the simple elegance we hoped to achieve.

The CD, “Pilgrimage of the Heart” was released on St. Benedict’s Day in July 2007. The brothers sent it to me in St. Paul, Minnesota where I was participating in our Congregational Chapter. Receiving it there was both gift and blessing for me - symbolic and synchronistic - in the midst of our discernment and the election of congregational leadership. What more can I say? The theme of our chapter was *Called to Mystery: Called to More*. “Co-incidence?” I think not!

We had embarked together on a pilgrimage, not knowing where it would lead. Throughout the process we were open to possibilities and called each other to ever-deepening levels of trust. The result was a profound awareness of the Sacred Mystery in which we live. Undaunted by the geographic distance of my recent move to St. Louis we are able to continue our collaborative efforts. Words cannot express the gratitude in my heart when I consider the awesome privilege it is for me to be part of the song at Weston Priory. ☒