

# Opening to a New Springtime

**Brother Richard**

As summer moved into early autumn, and as the garden was almost completely harvested, I began to see the earth entering its time of slumber. I was reminded of the time of Jubilee, to which chapter 25 of the book of Leviticus calls us: "let the land lie fallow." The land lies fallow so that its gleanings can be harvested and shared by those unable to reap from the land. The land lies fallow in order to enable the cycle of springtime to emerge, filled with new life and discovery.

During this time, I had the opportunity to travel to Rome for the Congress of Benedictine Abbots and Priors, which is held every four years at the Benedictine College of Sant' Anselmo on the Aventine Hill. This has been a Jubilee Year for Christians. Yet, for me, more than all the tourism and visiting of basilicas, the most important experience was the gathering together of monastic brothers and sisters from so many cultures, races and lands: Asia, Africa, Europe, the Americas, and so many places in between these large continents.

The time in Rome began with the recognition of the holiness and wholeness of the lives and legacy (the beatification) of John XXIII, a pope, and Columba Marmion, a Benedictine monk and abbot, along with several other persons who lived and died in the last century.

What impressed me was the call to Jubilee that the lives of these persons presented: John XXIII, calling the church to a new springtime, opening the windows to the fresh breezes of the Spirit, enabling us to respond to the signs of the times; and Columba Marmion, a monk who, from the legacy of the Rule and spirituality of St. Benedict, invited us to "be very attentive to the promptings (the whispers) of the Holy Spirit."

The Benedictine meetings began with the resignation of the Abbot Primate and the election of a new Abbot Primate, Notker Wolf, who, until then, had been the abbot president of the St. Ottilien Congregation, a Benedictine missionary congregation. He certainly brings many years of experience to his new ministry. A man of deep sensitivity, he is especially encouraging of the new forms of Benedictine monastic life which have emerged over the last fifty years, especially in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Apart from much of the practical business of the Congress, it was heartening to meet so many monastic men and women from all over the world, and to experience our common search for God. They are trying to implant Benedictine monastic life in the soil of their local native cultures and ancient religious traditions, developing musical expressions and forms of prayer consonant with these rich identities. They are rediscovering that the values inherent in the monastic way are deeply consistent with, and present in, the strong tradition of African tribal and communal family life; in the profound Confucian, Hindu, and Buddhist traditions of Asia; in the all-embracing hospitality and openness-to-the-world of Latin America. These emerging Benedictine communities herald a new springtime for monastic life, mirroring the Gospel image of the visitation of Mary to Elizabeth, the new meeting the older, embracing, and finding the gift in each other.

One of the abbots from Viet Nam spoke of the struggle for religious freedom and acceptance of the value of monastic life in the present social and political climate of his country. An example of this struggle is the proposal of the local government of Huê to confiscate property from Thien An Abbey in order to build a recreation and amusement park. Over the past sixty years the monastic community has developed this land as an orange grove, a farm, and cattle grazing area. These are the source of sustenance and income for the community. All this would be lost should the government proceed with this project.

Our Weston community has tried to reach out in fraternal love and concern through our contacts with persons in the U.S. church and government, who could put diplomatic pressure on the Vietnamese government. Some leverage is possible, as our own country makes initiatives to establish normal diplomatic relations with Viet Nam at this time. It is a very delicate process which needs to be pursued sensitively -- so as not to interfere in an interventionist mode with another government's policy; and not to further jeopardize the relationship of the monastic community to their own country.

Another area of hope has been the growing mutuality in the relationship of Benedictine women and men. Over the past thirty years, Benedictine women have made remarkable strides in bringing their vision of monastic life together, bridging the separation between nuns and sisters. Initially observers at the Congress of Abbots and Priors, they now are participants through regional representation at the Congress. I hope this will grow to a full participation in equality with the men, either as part of the very structures already in place for the men, or through a structure and organization the women set up on their own. It is a challenging time. Benedictine women have been extremely patient. We are very grateful to them for their courageous perseverance in this long process. The entire Benedictine family (both women and men) very much needs what these monastic women offer.

There was also a moment of embarrassment and sorrow, to which I, and we as Benedictine monks, must be more attentive and must acknowledge. Because a Benedictine monk, Columba Marmion, was being honored, both the men and women participating the Congress had special invitations and tickets to the beatification at the Vatican. Upon entering St. Peter's Square, and being rushed to our reserved places, the ushers in attendance pulled some of the abbesses and prioresses off the line and did not allowed them to be seated with the whole group.

For my part, I am sorry that I was not attentive enough to assess what was happening, and to think quickly enough to object to such discrimination and humiliation. Whether this was an administrative mistake or bureaucratic insensitivity, our sisters are entitled to an apology. Such an action was an insult to them, and to us all!

The journey of our own community, since our founding by Abbot Leo, has been to grow in equality with one another, and to remain open to inspiration of the Holy Spirit. In September 1959, at a similar Congress of Abbots and Priors, Abbot Leo, together with Father Damasus Winzen of Mount Saviour Monastery, petitioned and received approbation to give equal status in community to lay brothers and choir monks -- all of whom, both non-ordained or ordained, would be considered choir monks in solemn vows.

At this year's Congress, our community took this vision a step further. In collaboration with Abbot Jerome Kodell of Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas and several other abbots and priors, I (in the name of our community) petitioned that equal access be given to both the non-ordained and ordained to be elected as abbot or conventual prior of a Benedictine community.

The petition brings us back to the ancient sources of our monastic life and is in keeping with the original vision of St. Benedict for his community. I am grateful that the petition was accepted by an overwhelming majority of those present at the Congress. The Abbot Primate now has a mandate to bring this request to the Vatican's Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life, so that church law and practice can once again reflect this vision.

Timothy Radcliffe, OP, the master general of the Dominicans, addressed the Congress with some wonderful reflections on the influence of Benedictine monasticism in his own life. He reminded us that, as monastics, our prophetic witness is to be present in the world without having to "do" anything special to prove our relevance.

"We are going nowhere" in a world in which upward mobility is the measure of one's worth; and we can invite others into the inner space of our hearts, which we all fear is empty and useless. Monastic life sings and chants its prayer, he said, not in order to make God relevant to our world, but in order to tell others, by our song, that we find *in God* the relevance and meaning of our own lives.

There were many other beautiful and challenging experiences shared on this pilgrimage in the Jubilee Year. In the cultural and social ambience of Rome and Italy, there were also moments of relaxation and enjoyment shared with others. Inspired by the vision of Good Pope John, this journey has opened windows, allowing fresh breezes to again warm the land which lies fallow. New, even unforeseen, shoots are budding, green with hope. A springtime rich in diversity and plurality blooms as we discover each other. The Jubilee dream of Bethlehem's prophet aches to be born anew.

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