

GLOBALIZATION IN THE SPIRIT: A Reflection on the Benedictine Congress

Brother Richard

In the early days of November, as I sit at the window of my room and reflect upon the Gospel beatitudes, I am drawn to the words: “how blessed are the poor in spirit...”

Although Jesus encourages us to take very little for the journey, while never condoning the imposed material impoverishment in which the majority of our world lives, the Gospel message invites a poverty of spirit, a purity of heart, which recognizes our need for God and one another. The more we recognize this interdependence on one another, the more we know the blessedness and happiness of human living as children of God.

Recognition of the cultural roots in our society that foster the image of the self-made individual, with the isolation and self-absorption that this brings, is a strong and urgent call to conversion. So many today have the hubris to make social, political and religious judgments claiming as their own the voice of God, and they fail to see that God is really speaking in the gentle whispers of people so easily overlooked and cast aside in our world.

From this perspective I would like to offer some reflections that come, not from the business and major presentations offered at a congress in which I recently participated, but from the voices “on the sidelines” that emerged for me as genuinely the word of God

The context is the Benedictine Congress this past September at the Abbey and College of Sant' Anselmo on the Aventine Hill in Rome. This Congress is a gathering of the leadership of all the Benedictine men's monasteries and the regional representatives of the Benedictine women's monasteries throughout the world. It is held every four years; and while it is a minimally deliberative body, it is a forum of international exchange and dialogue. Monastics came from Asia and Oceania, Africa, Latin America, Europe, and North America. There was also representation from the Orthodox and Anglican Monastic Communitons.

The theme of the Congress was “Globalization.” The exchange for me became an opportunity not just for theoretical reflection upon this growing phenomenon in our world today, but to hear firsthand the effects such a reality is having on so many of our brothers and sisters. Therefore, this is not so much a report of the daily events of the Congress, but a personal reflection inspired by that exchange.

When African and Latin American monks and nuns spoke of the gratitude for the Christian and monastic tradition that has been handed on to them over the centuries from European and United States monasteries, they also warned of the risk that the great and powerful of the world may simply crush the weaker and smaller shoots emerging and growing from the seeds that were originally planted. This analogy reminded me of the Latin and Greek root of the word “rule” which means a *trellis* upon which the vine or plant grows. The trellis is the Christian and monastic tradition that can support the vine as it develops in its own way; *or* it can try to control or force the growth to the form of the trellis, but eventually choking off the emerging shoots.

From India and Sri Lanka there was a profound understanding of the need for inter-religious dialogue especially with Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, and the native religious expressions of indigenous peoples in various parts of the world. These dialogues have to go beyond theological and cultural exchanges to the more simple dialogue of love, compassion, and true acceptance of one another. The challenge is to see reality through the eyes of the other if we are ever to undo the escalating spiral of violence and intolerance rampant in our times.

The so-called “clash of civilizations,” a phrase exploited by political and religious leaders, is a dangerous ideology. It should be acknowledged not so much as a clash between nations and religions, but as an internal clash happening within these very civilizations and religions. This can be seen so clearly in the deep polarization of our own country as we try to discern and articulate a Gospel response to the signs of the times.

An Asian monastic reminded me of the old wisdom saying: “When pens or styluses are broken, only knives remain.”

Another important voice came through the aegis of the emerging *Communio Internationalis Benedictarum* (The International Communion of Benedictine Women). Sister Máire Hickey of the Abbey of St. Scholastica in Dinklage, Germany, who is the moderator of this network of Benedictine women's communities, described this *Communio*: “to seek a structure and a status for the women's communities living according to the Rule of St. Benedict that would express in the Church and project into society, in a more satisfactory way than heretofore, the equality of man and woman in their complementary existence as Image of God and as members of the Body of Christ.”

Over the centuries, the voices of Benedictine women have contributed much both to the contemplative and spiritual dimensions of monastic life as well as to the practical living out of our lives in service, creativity, and hospitality. There is a growing need to engage and foster in very concrete ways the active participation and important voice of our Benedictine sisters in the larger Confederation. First steps, beyond simple association, to a deeper *communio* were taken by the Congress to acknowledge this long-standing reality. As Sister Máire said: it is an important witness to church and society.

In their reflections, the sisters brought a challenging consciousness of suffering and violence, especially against women and children, that has resulted from the rampant abuse and injustice that globalization can cause. This deeply affects the souls of us all, men and women alike.

Others called us to go beyond both the inspiring and the conflictive slogans of our T-shirts, in order to touch the common skin shared beneath the shirts and thereby to incarnate or “enflesh” the common sources of compassion and union.

The monastic representative of the Rumanian Orthodox Church told a story from his own tradition about a hermit who, when he was asked: “When will the end of the world come?” answered: “Do you really want to know? When people no longer see the distance from their neighbor.”

Another challenging question from the exchange on globalization really captures a mood prevalent today, especially here in the U.S.:

We have our cars from Japan;
coffee in our cups from Brazil;
flowers on our tables from South America;
fruits and vegetables from Mexico and Central America;
precious stones from Africa;
oil and gasoline from the Middle East;
and we like it.
But we do not like the neighbor next door
who comes from one of these countries!

It remains a deep challenge for us as church, and even as nation, to become truly “catholic”, i.e., global and universal, in our worldview by reaching out in humility and compassion to accept the giftedness of the other. There is a call to lay aside economic domination and power, and to truly invest time and energy with one another to create a world of unity and equality for all peoples. We need the spirit of one another to recognize the spirit of God. It is a poverty that we all share, and that can be our blessedness!

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The Monks of Weston Priory

58 Priory Hill Road, Weston, VT 05161-6400

Tel: 802-824-5409; Fax: 802-824-3573