



Brothers and Sisters around the Eucharist table.

Two Communities: One Heart

- brother Michael

IN OUR TRIP TO SPAIN THERE WERE MANY EXCITING places to visit. We went out on a fishing vessel that received its annual blessing from “Our Lady of the Port.” The prehistoric caves of Altamira with the 35,600 year old paintings of bison and deer charged our imaginations with the wild nature of time past. And there was the Church of St Mary of Bareyo, built between the 12th and 13th centuries—a jewel of Romanesque Cantabrian architecture. Just the sheer beauty of the Suesa countryside with its rolling fields of corn being harvested during our stay would have made the trip worthwhile.

Yet what “made” the trip was not these outings. The trip became meaningful for us through our common prayer and the times of discussion that are a regular part of monastic life. In the exchange with each other we encountered ourselves as two communities that live in the present moment of our world. There are challenges that are unique to our time, as there are perennial challenges, but we did not shy away from our common quest of trying to live as vibrant and prophetic witnesses to the Gospel.

Our regular times of prayer were inspiring. The sisters have a presence to each other and their guests that is permeated with silence, soft lighting, and respectful movements to reverence the Scripture and the table of Eucharist. Their table is fashioned from an old tree stump that speaks to the theme of “Creation.” It is large and solid and has a presence to it that asks the question, “Where are you now?” So when we came to prayer we were simply at prayer. That may sound simple, but often times there are so many distractions that we are never quite present to the actuality of prayer.

One of the feast days was for the "Triumph of the Cross," and we were invited to make the sign of the cross consciously. The action of making the sign of the cross can be reduced to an automatic motion. Our slow movement and our letting the dimensions of relationality permeate our hearts complemented the soft light of the dawn that was gently illuminating the church.

My favorite prayer was Midday Prayer which consisted of singing a mantra in Spanish, "Tu estas aqui. Dios, tu eres amor." "You are here. God, you are love." This was followed by a single verse of scripture. Again this may seem too simple. "Where are the psalms?" you may ask, as I did. Yet this moment of prayer took on a solidity of rock for me. "How is it that prayer can be so simple?" is a question that we are still exploring.

To complement the rhythm of prayer was the vulnerability of sharing personal experiences on various dimensions of monastic life. Common areas of understanding abounded. Our love for scripture, the challenge of communication with each other when there is fear or anger, and our hopes for the future were topics that immediately resonated with everyone and the spirit of exploration and adventure was tangible in the silences and the laughter.

Two discussions continue to amaze me. The first was when the sisters presented a 17 minute video on their life. That short video took about two and a half hours to see. We would stop at each picture, from the first to the last, and enter into the journey of their long history. Questions and stories would pour forth. The days of "The Grill" with its very strict and perhaps dehumanizing cloister had given way to a vision of the Trinity dancing. That kind of journey is fraught with risk and opposition both internal and external. That the whole community continues to move together is a witness to the courage of the sisters.

Another discussion on "Personal Prayer" still informs my imagination. This time together held a depth of heart. None of us were defensive, nor were there any triumphal pronouncements of spiritual achievement. A spirit of wonder and gratitude pervaded, along with the realization that we are still beginners. How is it that we can go to our own rooms, after being nurtured and supported by common prayer, and continue our deeply personal seeking for the face of God? The Atlantic Ocean separates us in a very real way, and yet the search is the same. We are participants and agents in a vast mystery which is both loving and challenging. To feel that common bond encourages a desire to move forward with our lives.

When the sisters drove us to the airport to leave, one driver, sister María José, had trouble parking the van we used for transportation. It was a large van with a high ceiling which made for great window area, but the parking decks have height restrictions. By the time we boarded the plane she was not present to say a last "Good-bye." For me it was a sign that we were not truly leaving. Our hearts had connected in a way of spirit that is open to the future, and we will let the path unfold. There are neither plans nor blueprints. We hope to continue listening and to respond as best we can with one heart. ■