

Welcoming the Sign of Jonah at Pentecost

—*brother Daniel*

A FAVORITE STORY DURING OUR LITURGY HERE AT THE Priory is the tale of the prophet Jonah, who is asked to go on a journey far away from his native country. As the narrative is being read, smiles appear on the peoples' faces, a few winks of merriment and everybody seems to get ready for the fun of this biblical spoof!

Here is a reluctant prophet who doesn't want to travel to where he is being asked by God to go and prophesy. While he doesn't want any trouble, the chaos creates a delightfully charming adventure. Contrary to his intentions, Jonah ends up preaching to the Ninevites with great success! Yet, he himself feels hoodwinked, and to his astonishment he is the one gifted with the invitation to practice compassion. The story is somewhat amusing; but it is the prophet more than anyone else, who has the choice to develop a sense of humor and to take himself lightly. Jonah is given a beautiful opportunity to learn the even more awesome adventure of heartfelt empathy!

In mid September of 2010, four of us, brothers Richard, Peter, Mark and Daniel, had the opportunity to cross the great body of water to Spain. I was happily amused by the echoes of Jonah's story and how it impacted us as we considered this journey to a foreign land.

We had received an invitation the previous year from the Community of Trinitarian Nuns of Suesa who were celebrating the sesquicentennial of the foundation of their monastery in the Cantabrian Mountains situated in northern Spain. They had organized a "Feminine Monastic Forum" and had invited our community to attend. We had gracefully declined the invitation since we were a community of men with a culture, language and issues very different from those of Spain.

However, like Lydia, the woman in the Acts of the Apostles who made an invitation to Paul and would not take "no" for an answer, the Trinitarian Nuns pursued the invitation. As we continued to dialogue with the nuns and among ourselves, we suggested that if we were to attend the Forum, it would be true to our life and witness to also invite



Participants in the Monastic Forum in Suesa, Cantabria, Spain.

two of our Mexican Benedictine Sisters. The nuns agreed; and again like Lydia, they prevailed! We agreed to travel to Spain with our Mexican Sisters Miguelina and Fidelina accompanying us.

Prior to our leaving we were sent an agenda of the issues to be discussed at the Forum: solitude, silence, and current communication media; our experience of community, authority, prayer and liturgy; and our hopes for a monastic life relevant to today's world. As part of our own annual retreat, we brothers discussed these topics, and addressed how these reflected our own monastic experience.

We and our Benedictine sisters arrived at the monastery in Suesa several days prior to the commencement of the Forum. This small community of eight dynamic women welcomed us warmly. Recognizing our cultural, linguistic and gender differences, our initial reticence turned into curiosity and excitement. We realized that we had much to learn and share with this vibrant group of nuns. Our early arrival allowed for a more intimate exchange among our three communities. The vulnerability, trust and honesty with which the conversations ensued turned us from strangers into loving friends. This was a powerful sign of the Spirit of Pentecost among us.

What astounded us during the visit to this Spanish monastery was the simplicity in which we were able to engage one another. Our visit was neither formal nor institutional, and without any external agendas, which at times impede a more familial interaction. Communion and trust blossomed! Tears, hugs, and laughter culminated in lively liturgies!

The day of the Feminine Monastic Forum finally arrived. I was somewhat concerned that given the depth of the sharings among our three communities, we might experience a let down with the different voices now engaged in these conversations. There were Benedictine, Trappistine, Carmelite and Poor Clare nuns in attendance. Our American and Mexican accents contrasted with Catalanian, Galician and Basque lilts. The Forum was a great success. The confluent interaction



Monastic Forum participants in the Suesa community's dining room.

planted the seeds for a rich communal harvest for all.

The poignant “Grand Finale” in the book of the prophet Jonah resonates loudly with one of our experiences in Spain: that of being surprised. Jonah may have anticipated that God would be merciful towards the Ninevites, yet the prophet’s strong reaction prompts God to question him. Jonah had been very clever at anticipating God’s moves; but to his surprise, it was humility rather than intelligence that was needed to engage the Ninevites with deep empathy. This wisdom seems to have been active in God’s passionate outreach towards both Jonah and the people of Nineveh!

How do we learn this humble wisdom? What is the path towards empathy? Perhaps a glimpse of that path will emerge as we celebrate the feast of Pentecost. In the Acts of the Apostles, everyone is speaking in tongues. I ask though, does it make a difference if no one is listening with an understanding heart?

The story of Jonah ends suddenly. We do not learn how the prophet responds to God’s question inviting compassion and acceptance. Perhaps the question that Jonah recognized as coming from God was also coming to us through the hearts and voices of this experience. How far are we willing to travel to welcome in wonder the surprise of the Holy One, present in everyone and everything?

Our attempts at responding can be steps towards being fully alive, fearlessly engaging ourselves in forgiveness and peacemaking. May we have the grace and courage to listen openly and to understand in our own native tongue, the language of the heart! Can we journey together in the wild adventure of being enveloped by the fire of Pentecost, whose dancing flames tenderly embrace all that is? The gift of this mystery lingers in our response to a world longing for that embrace. ■