



Monialibus

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Union of Monasteries in Africa of the Order of Preachers





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PROGRAM OF THE MASTER

May 30 - July 3	Visitation of the Province of Poland
July 6 - 7	Taiwan - (Ordination of Fernando Azpiroz Costa, SJ)
July 24 - 31	Nairobi - IAOP Meeting
August 18 - 25	Retreat to the Dominican Nuns in Mexico
August 28 - Sept. 24	Canonical Visitation of the Vice-Province of Central America
October 2 - 29	Rome - Participation in the Synod on the Eucharist

Letter of Fr. Manuel Merten, OP

Dear Sisters,

For the late afternoon and evening of April 19th, brothers from the United States of America working in the various Orders and Congregations in Rome had been invited to Santa Sabina. The first guests were having drinks in our community room, when the sun came out from between the clouds and it became noticeably warmer. Fr. Jerry Stookey and I quickly moved tables and chairs out on to the Belvedere, our balcony which enjoys a view over the whole of Rome, and invited the assembled company to come outdoors. Suddenly, there went up a cry of 'white smoke'. The youngest members of the community, Fr. Adriano, Fr. Benjamin and Fr. Almy ran over to St Peter's Square. We older ones went with our guests to the TV room where Fr. Mike O'Rourke set up a 'beamer' projecting live coverage from the Vatican Radio transmitter in large format on the wall, with pictures from St Peter's Square, interviews with people in the crowd milling around, the ringing of bells, flashbacks to the funeral of John Paul II and the entry of the cardinals into the conclave – then finally the curtain at the window of the loggia above the main entrance to St Peter's basilica moved. Cardinal Jorge Arturo Medina Estevez came out and spoke the traditional words: *"Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum, habemus papam"*. He broke for a short pause and the tension mounted. Then he continued: *"Eminentissimum ac Reverendissimum Dominum, Dominum Josephum"* – again a pause and the same thought was rushing through all minds: Which of the cardinals besides Ratzinger was called Joseph? Then he resumed: *"Sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae Cardinalem Ratzinger, qui sibi nomen imposuit Benedictum XVI"* – rejoicing broke out in St Peter's Square. Now Benedict XVI came out on to the balcony beaming. I was having a job to realise – one of my countrymen is pope. We paid attention to get his first words. Of course he spoke in Italian: *"doppo il grande Papa Giovanni Paolo II i signori cardinali hanno eletto me, un semplice e umile lavoratore della vigna del signore After the great Pope John Paul II the Lord Cardinals have elected me, a simple and humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord. I find consolation in the fact that the Lord knows how to use and to work with unworthy implements, and above all I recommend myself to your prayers."* Piously we received the first blessing of the new Pope for the city of Rome and for the world 'Urbi et Orbi'. Later on there was no keeping us indoors. Together with our guests we joined all the people sharing in the joy that we citizens of Rome had a new bishop and the world a new pope.

During the following days, I found it difficult to resume normal work. In the newspapers, on TV and on the radio and via Internet I looked for everything bearing news of the latest successor on the throne of Peter. The reactions to his election were controversial, but no one could deny that he had been elected rapidly and with an overwhelming majority. Most German newspapers, previously fairly reserved about all things Catholic, gave positive reports. One popular paper ran the headline 'We are Pope', just as if the papal election were a football match, and Germany had just won the World Cup.

I've just now come back from St Peter's Square. The celebrations for the inauguration of Benedict XVI were moving. It is true that you can see more detail if you watch on TV, but there

is nothing to beat direct participation in such memorable events. On the whole I had a pretty good seat with the best possible visibility.

What struck me especially? It would be pretty much the way the whole celebration was put together. Zefirelli, the famous Italian cinema director and producer said later in an interview that he had begun to feel really proud while watching this liturgy. Only the Catholic Church is capable of such an impressive production, on a par with British royalty, but they do not have the same impact on the level of content. As far as the aesthetic impact is concerned, I was moved by the ritual around the handing over of the papal insignia: the fisherman's ring and the pallium, and the significance associated with them in the Holy Father's speech. How worthy of note is his explanation: *"The pallium shows us above all that we are carried forward by Christ. But immediately he asks us to carry each other. And thus the pallium becomes a symbol for the mission of the shepherd... who cannot stand aside and see so many people living in the desert. There are many kinds of desert. There is the desert of poverty, the desert of hunger and thirst. There is the desert of those who are forsaken, of loneliness, of broken love. There is the desert of the darkness that conceals God, of emptiness of soul that cuts off from a sense of human worth and a sense of direction. External deserts are increasing in the world because the inner deserts have become so enormous. That is why the earth's treasures no longer serve the cultivation of God's garden, in which all may live, but rather the building up of power and destructive forces. Like Christ, the Church as a whole and the shepherds within her must point out the way, in order to lead people out of the desert towards places of life – to friendship with the Son of God, who gives us life, life in its fullness."* It was for me as if Benedict XVI was describing in new words the 'compassio' that our father Dominic posed as the pressing question of his time *"What will become of sinners?"*

I like to call to mind the request the Holy Father made in this connection: *"Dear Friends, at the present time, all I can say is: pray for me, that I may learn to love the Lord more and more. Pray for me, that I may learn to love his flock more and more -- in other words, you, the holy Church, each one of you and all of you together. Pray for me, that I may not flee for fear of the wolves. Let us pray for one another, that the Lord will carry us and that we will learn to carry one another."*

In the meantime we arrived at Wednesday 27th April. On that day there had been a special audience of the Pope for all Germans present in Rome. Obviously I would have liked to have gone. But for this day was booked of long date a meeting with the prioresses and novice mistresses of our Italian monasteries. They had gathered in Rome for five days, to grapple with the theme, 'Principal Characteristics of the Formation Relationship' under the direction of Dr. Saura Foriero, the eminent psychologist. In particular the main topics were: 'Asymmetry in Formation', 'Responsibility in Formation', 'Distance and Proximity in Formation': *emotional dependency, processes of identification, processes for letting go, the formation relationship and spiritual free space, difficulties concerning the practice of the role of formator, personal formation interviews [place, time, method].*

As the Master of the Order had cancelled his canonical visitation to Holland and Belgium on account of the exceptional events in Rome, I was able to arrange a visit together with him to these prioresses and novice mistresses gathered in Rome. His vicar Fr. Dominique

Renouard and the Procurator General of the Order, Fr. Robert Ombres accompanied us. For a good hour we exchanged about our joys and our concerns. Then the Master, Fr. Dominique and Fr. Robert went back to Santa Sabina and I stayed the rest of the day with the sisters, telling them of my experiences over the previous weeks and months and taking part in the concluding evaluation session of the meeting. I was also able to have individual talks with certain prioresses and novice mistresses.

Now I'm looking back over the last few months of my work. As always, it is impossible to write in detail about every aspect. So I will select a few highlights. Sr. Mary Rose Figura OP, Prioress of the Monastery of Farmington Hills (USA), had invited me to a 'historic event'. On February 5, 2005, the first Vietnamese nun of the Order destined for the foundation of a monastery in Vietnam made her solemn profession. Thereby a dream embarked on several years previously was nearing fruition. At that time, the sister now making solemn profession was still Prioress General of one of the five apostolic Congregations of Dominican Sisters in Vietnam. At some point she felt within her the call to the contemplative cloistered Dominican life. She then spoke to several brothers and sisters of the Order, not least of them Fr. Timothy Radcliffe who was Master of the Order at the time. To Sr. Maria Rose's personal dream was added a greater one: the foundation of a monastery in Vietnam. In August 1999, Sr. Maria Rose travelled to Farmington Hills in order to make a two-year novitiate. In May 2000, Sr. Therese Tham, former novice mistress of another of the 5 Vietnamese Congregations, followed her. In August 2001, Farmington Hills officially took on the responsibility for the foundation in Vietnam. Meanwhile, Sr. Maria Rose and Sr. Therese Tham returned to Vietnam, and in October 2002 there was a 'planning summit' in Saigon, attended by the Prioress and Novice mistress of Farmington Hills and myself. In various meetings with the Provincial, the Prioresses General of the five Congregations, the Cardinal Archbishop and many others, the necessary guidelines for the future were established. In April 2003, it was possible to buy in a suburb of Saigon, a house destined to serve for the beginnings of the monastery. In January 2004, ecclesiastical recognition was granted by the local bishop with the name of 'Monastery of the Holy Spirit'. In October 2003, Sr. Theresa Khan, Sr. Pauline and Sr. Martha came from Vietnam to Farmington Hills and began their two-year novitiate with a view to joining the foundation in Vietnam later. In February 2004, Sr. Maria Rose went back once more to Farmington Hills for a one year preparation for solemn profession. On February 5, 2005, as already stated, the big day came. I presided at the Eucharist and preached the homily for the profession of Sr. Maria Rose (the full text is elsewhere in this edition of *Monialibus*). Among the concelebrants were: Bishop Moses Anderson (!), Fr. Martin McCormick OP, Rev. Vincent Nguyen An Ninh and Fr. Don Goergen OP. Sr. Maria Rose is now back in Vietnam, where, together with Sr. Therese Tham and a small group of interested women, she is living in the '*Monastery of the Holy Spirit*'.

Farmington Hills had decked itself in snow for my arrival. Sr. Mary of the Trinity, the novice mistress invited me with the novitiate to an excursion on skis through the monastery grounds. This enterprise began with a talk for the novices from Vietnam and Africa. This was done over a cup of tea and a great deal of baggage. We finally decked ourselves out for the excursion in the snow: Nordic skis, pullovers, shawls, gloves, caps, etc. The goal of our mini

expedition was a 'hermitage' in the monastic grounds. This refers to a caravan that has been well equipped so that a sister has the possibility of withdrawing for one or more days in solitude. Probably not all of our monasteries are blessed with such an arrangement.



Among the guests at the solemn profession of Sr. Maria Rose was, as already mentioned, Fr. Don Goergen, former Provincial of the Province of Chicago. For several years, he has been directing the "Dominican Ashram" in Kenosha on Lake Michigan. I took up his invitation to spend a few days there in silence and inner renewal. It was a great experience. The sisters and brothers who live together there lead a truly Dominican life with a clearly contemplative emphasis, yet without papal enclosure. Alongside the preaching apostolate and spiritual direction that they undertake to a limited extent outside, the apostolate consists mainly in receiving guests for whom a silent space, prayer and the celebration of the liturgy are made available. I think back on the days I spent there with much gratitude.

In January and February I spent a couple of days in our Monastery in Herne, Belgium. In the role of moderator, I helped the sisters reflect together about their future, and a possible reorientation of their Dominican contemplative life. The starting point was a suggestion and a proposition from the friars to give up the monastery in Herne, in order to build a new one very close to their convent in Froidmont, whereby certain existing buildings could find a common use. The exchanges revealed that a majority of the sisters were basically in favour of moving forward in this direction, although many discussions and clarifications are still needed before a final decision can be taken. All the sisters agreed that this decision-making process needed professional accompaniment. Meanwhile a suitably qualified person has been found who is prepared to accompany these talks.

At the beginning of March I made my way to the monastery at Vilnius (Lithuania). On the flight there as well as on the way back there was a stopover of a good three hours in Prague. Our sisters there are so close to the airport that they did not want to abandon me to the boredom of the airport lounge, so they came to pick me up for a short visit to their place between the two flights. We used the time to talk about a couple of unresolved points concerning the first meeting of Prioresses from the Europa Utriusque region, which is planned for 5 -11 September 2005 in Prague (see *Monialibus* n° 11); We also looked at photos from my

travels and visits to various monasteries, and so I was talking and answering lots of questions. Time went by so quickly that in the end I caught my flight by a whisker...

Now for my visit to Vilnius proper: Winter still had the city in its grip. Sr. Zdislawa, the Prioress and Sr. Faustina had difficulty in getting through the snow to the airport to pick me up. On the way back to the monastery, here and there we came upon compacted layers of snow, or skidded on sheets of ice. But Sr. Faustina coped masterfully with every situation as if it were a routine occurrence. The monastery in Vilnius was founded in 1938. As a consequence of the Hitler-Stalin alliance, Soviet troops moved in June 1940 and Lithuania became a Soviet republic. In June 1941, more than 40,000 Lithuanians were sent to Siberia by the Russian secret service. Shortly afterwards, German troops moved in to Lithuania. In the following period of Nazi supremacy, the Jews were sorely persecuted. Almost the entire Jewish population of Lithuania was wiped out (in many towns, they represented 30% of the population before the war). In 1944/45 the Russian army pushed the Germans back. But this was not a liberation of Lithuania. Rather a time of repression was to follow with confiscations, collectivisation and mass deportations. Our sisters were also caught up in this: they were hunted down by the Bolsheviks and went underground, eking out a wretched existence.

Even after the fall of the Berlin wall, Lithuania had to campaign long and hard for its freedom and independence. In August 1991, Soviet troops occupied the television transmitter in Kaunas and cut all international telephone communications. The President at the time, Landsbergis called his people to non-violent resistance and the Soviets declared a state of emergency throughout the Baltic region. But then it was one victory after another: On August 27th Lithuania was recognised by the European Union and on 2nd September by The USA. On 17th September it became a member of the United Nations. At the end of August 1993, the last Soviet troops moved out. Today Lithuania, like the other Baltic States, is a member of the European Union.

It is only against the background of the history of suffering of Lithuania and other former Soviet republics that one can get a grasp of the history of our monastery in Vilnius and its sisters. All together there are fifteen of them, but only nine of them live fully in the community. At the instigation of Fr. Viktor Hoffstetter, my predecessor, Sr. Miriam of the monastery of Krakow had, as early as 1990, begun to seek out dispersed sisters in Lithuania and other countries, such as White Russia, and also for any who had become nuns after the occupation and had made vows secretly in the underground movement. Gradually she discovered them all. But not all were or are any longer in a position to take up monastic community life according to the constitutions of the nuns of the Order – many of them had never lived the common life.

Thanks to the initiative of Sr. Miriam, it became possible to rent a floor in an apartment block and later on a house was obtained and erected as a monastery. Following on from her, Sr. Zdislawa from the monastery of Sw. Anna in Poland is now the Prioress. In her fourth year of office, she is building up with great understanding and commiseration the inner identity of the

community. The great problem that she and the community see before them is this: How can we learn to communicate with each other in a trusting way? The sisters' decades' long experience of being overheard and spied on, the absolute necessity of being on one's guard with any form of authority, the daily training never to say more than was strictly necessary – all of this has left its mark on their souls. It actually seems as if the ability to trust has got lost along the way over many years of oppression and persecution. One may say in amazement: *"Yes, but it's not the State Secret Police any more, but your sisters; you're not dealing with a hostile authority any more, but with a prioress whom you elected yourselves"*. This is logical, but not psycho-logical. As an aid to understanding, a verse from Psalm 118 came to mind: *"In my need I called out to the Lord, and he heard me and freed me. It is better to trust in the Lord, than to trust in men. It is better to trust in the Lord, than to trust in princes"*. For those who have learnt to survive for years by praying in this way, how can they unlearn it all of a sudden, when they are already advanced in years?

When Sr. Zdislawa asked me to visit Vilnius, she expressed the hope that I might be able to help them a little in learning to communicate more effectively one with another. We made some progress along these lines. For three days we told each other our life stories and the story of our vocations, speaking about anxieties and joys, hopes and difficulties. More than once I had tears in my eyes and more than once my voice gave way when I wanted to react to something. Stories worthy of the martyrology, stories of great faith were told. I will share one with you as typical of them all and which it is difficult to tell briefly:

Sr. R. began with a report of the arrest of her parish priest in 1937, in Russia, where she was living with her parents at the time. The community no longer had a priest, but people continued going to Church. They laid the vestments on the altar, to symbolise the priestly presence and sang the texts of the Holy Mass. At age 15, Sr. R. was deported to Germany to a labour camp. The only possession she was able to save and have with her in the camp was a couple of religious books in Polish. From these, she says, she began to grow in knowledge of God and of herself. She desires to live according to what she has learnt to be right. Above all, she wishes to pray, but in the camp there is no private space, and she is embarrassed to pray openly. Then she said to herself: people here do the craziest things; they are not ashamed to sin openly, so why should I be ashamed to pray? At night she held council with God. From him she received the directive *"Love others and then pray!"* And so she began to pray openly and also to wear a rosary around her neck. She was teased, but as she remained always polite, the teasing stopped after a while.

In the factory where she had to work, a German girl discovered her rosary. *"Are you a Catholic?"* She answered *"Yes"*. The German: *"OK, then make the sign of the cross"*. She did so. The German: *"Do you want to go to church?"* She replied: *"If only I could"*. The German: *"I'll see to it"*. A few days later Sr. R. Was summoned to the camp commandant. *"You are a Catholic? Good, me too. You'd like to go to church? Good, but it's difficult. The stripe on your clothes marks you out as a forced labourer from the East. Such people should only leave the camp accompanied and for the necessities of work. I'll show you now where you can change and how you can go out of the camp, and how to come*

back in, and then you must change your clothes again. Not a word to anyone in the camp, and not a word to anyone outside. Is that clear?" "Yes it's clear".

And so now Sr. R. goes regularly to church. She would dearly love to go to communion also, but she hasn't been to confession for years. And the camp commandant had said: *'Not a word to anyone!'* Using the examples for confession given in her Polish books, she made her examination of conscience and worked at translating it into German. At some point she dared to address the sacristan in the church, asking his help in arranging an appointment for confession with a priest. At the appointed time the priest did not turn up. Sr. R. waited an hour, two hours, three... Finally the sacristan came to lock the church. She told him she was still waiting for the priest for confession. The sacristan fetched another and at last she could make her confession. She is overjoyed and is looking forward to receiving Holy Communion at her next attendance at Mass. She got back to the camp much too late and was caught by the head of the firm where she was a worker. He contacted the camp commandant. He is furious, and doesn't believe Sr. R.'s story about confession, and feels her trust has been abused. In consequence Sr. R. got 4 weeks' solitary confinement and it was made clear to her that that would be the end of her outings. And so even now, no communion! For Sr. R. it was the end of the world. But things turned out differently. The boss became curious and wanted to know the details from the camp commandant. She told him the whole story, including as she put it, the *'absurd business of waiting hours for a priest for confession'*. But the boss found the story too absurd to have been invented. He took the trouble to enquire of the sacristan and then of the priest concerned. He informed the camp commandant of the result of his researches. Sr R.'s punishment was quashed and she was permitted once more to leave the camp secretly. The boss was in the know, but kept silent.

Now Sr. R. really became a person of prayer. At some point, her cousin, who was in the camp with her, began to pray with her and asked her for religious instruction. Then a couple of Russian girls got friendly with them and asked: *'Can you explain to us how to pray, please teach us to pray.'* Gradually the prayer group grew and grew. The camp was peopled half with forced labourers, and half with criminals. In the end, with few exceptions, they were all praying, regardless of which group they belonged to, Sr. R. could go to Church regularly and felt – according to her own words, as if she were in heaven in this camp, or, and for her it is the same, like in the monastery. *"We used to pray regularly, our meals were frugal, our conditions also. We spoke with each other about God and his love for us. What more could I have wished for?"* And so the end of the war did not seem much of a blessing to her.

Together with her cousin, she fell into the hands of Russian soldiers when the camp was liberated. They suspected the two women of collaboration with the Germans. They were taken into Russian custody for investigation. When they were finally released, the cousin was so ill that she needed care. Back in Russia, Sr. R. had to care for her mother who was also sick. She took on the job willingly, but wished she had more time for prayer.

From clandestine sources, she got to hear about 'nuns in Lithuania'. The idea came to her to make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Vilnius. At Pentecost 1953 her dream was realised.

And then she herself fell ill. She made a further pilgrimage to Vilnius and there she noticed that she felt fine, that she could eat everything, and had virtually no pain. This time, thanks to a tip-off, she didn't stay in a hotel, but in a private house. These people turned out to be religious, living together in secret '*Sisters of the Angels*'. Sr. R. confided in them her desire for contemplative religious life, to which one answered: 'I can put you in touch with a Benedictine sister'. And so it came to pass. But the sick mother still needed nursing. When Sr. R. could eventually knock at the door of the Benedictines, they turned her down on account of her poor health, but gave her the address of a small group of sick and elderly Dominican sisters of the oriental rite. Sr. R. stayed with them, made profession, and thus became their nurse, caring for the elderly. When the last sister died in 1993, she got in touch with the little group of Dominican sisters already gathered together by Sr. Miriam in Vilnius. She joined her life history to those of the others. Each of them is full of experiences of suffering, but rich in faith lived to the full.

The sisters in Vilnius have invited me back for next year. Between now and then we decided on a few things that might help them to listen to each other spiritually, to share and trust in each other, to achieve growth and experience the exercise of authority in a new way.

From the 7th to 22nd of March I was in India. There would be much to tell about this journey, which led me to Mannarkad and the Dominican Sisters of the Holy Trinity, a Congregation of the Syro-Malabar Rite. I also visited the Dominican sisters of the Rosary in Cochin, who had invited me to the profession of 9 sisters, in their incomparable setting near the sea, like the community of Dominican Sisters of Pompeii. The principal reason for my journey was the consecration of the first monastery of nuns of our Order in this enormous country. There is a special report on this moving ceremony by Sr. Maria Luz, the instigator of this new foundation.

At the beginning of April, 'Bethlehem' was my home. No not in the Holy Land, but the diocese of Bethlehem in South Africa. To this belongs the monastery at Senekal, founded by the Spanish federation, and here there was to be from the 3rd to the 11th of April a meeting for prioresses and delegates from our monasteries of nuns in Africa.

At the beginning of the meeting came reports from the individual houses. Seen as a whole, the development of our monasteries in Africa is gratifying. Most of the communities have a young profile. There are over a hundred nuns of the Order in Africa, of whom about 50% are in formation. Elsewhere, such statistics can only be dreamt of. In Angola, the foundation of a new monastery is in process. Not blessed with the same flow of entrants are Senekal and St. Denis (La Réunion).

An important theme for the meeting was the request for collaboration amongst the monasteries of Africa. In concrete terms, it was decided to entrust the task of coordination *ad experimentum* for three years to the representative of the African monasteries on the International Commission of Nuns of the Order (Sr. Joyce Rita Mumu) and to her two assistants, of whom one should be designated as financial advisor.

The principal tasks of the coordinator:

- To convene a meeting of the representatives of the monasteries every three years, and to ensure the organisational preparation and management of this meeting.
- Consultation and advice concerning questions of formation and mutual support for the monasteries amongst themselves.
- Willingness to take up invitations to visit the monasteries.
- Fostering more active communication amongst the monasteries in Africa.

The monasteries agree:

- To pray for each other and for the work of the coordinator.
- To answer questions and requests from the coordinator, and to comply as much as possible.
- To submit suggestions and ideas to the co-ordinator.
- To work together for the improvement of initial and on-going formation.

This '*collaboration ad experimentum*' has been given the title **UMAOP (Union of Monasteries in Africa Ordinis Praedicatorum)**

Readiness to collaborate was already put to the test in a practical way at the meeting. For some considerable time, the Federation of St Dominic in Spain had signalled its desire to hand over responsibility for the foundation at Senekal to others, and the Master of the Order had been officially informed of this. It is one thing to wish to hand over the responsibility, another to find the hands willing and able to take it on.

This question occupied us during several sessions and talks. Is there a future for the monastery in Senekal, and what might it be, if the five Spanish sisters of the community wish to return to Spain as quickly as possible and only the three African sisters remain on the spot? It would take too long to go into detail about how we wrestled with it, how we prayed and searched for the way forward. Finally however, we came up with the following solution to '*save*' the monastery in Senekal:

- The monastery of Karen/Nairobi will take over canonical responsibility for the foundation from the Federation of St Dominic in Spain and will make two sisters available.
- The Monastery of Bambui (Cameroon) supports the initiative and makes two sisters available.
- The monastery of Rweza (Burundi) supports the initiative and makes one sister available.
- From August 1st the three African sisters from Senekal, the two sisters from Bambui and the one from Rweza will come together for six months at the monastery of Karen/Nairobi, together with the two designated for the rescue plan from that monastery.

- These eight sisters will prepare intensively for their future common life together in the monastery of Senekal, in order to see how they might give it a new image.
- The five Spanish sisters are requested to remain behind during these six months.
- On 2nd February 2006, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord, and day of religious vocations, there will be a celebration in Senekal. This will provide the opportunity to thank the Federation of St Dominic in Spain and the Spanish sisters for all their commitment to the monastery of Senekal, as well as presenting the newly composed community, and making them known within the Dominican family and beyond.

Two other high points of this gathering in Senekal should not go without mention. On Thursday 7th April, Bishop Bucher had invited us to his place in Bethlehem. He introduced us to the history of the Church in South Africa and gave us a report on the work in his diocese. Several of his collaborators (male and female) added detail to the overall view by outlining various projects. Together with them and the bishop, we set off for one of the so-called 'locations', enormous housing complexes where exclusively black people live in great poverty and unsanitary conditions. These 'locations' are almost always shrouded in a cloud of fumes, emitted from hundreds of chimneys. Lung disease and Aids rival each other for first place in the list of illnesses in these settlements. Confronted with this misery and very moved by it, Sr. Aurora de Fatima (Benguela) said: *"We must found a monastery here – on the border between this place for the poorest of the poor and the lands of the richest of the rich. "* Truly visionary sentiments! Our visit to Bethlehem concluded with a pontifical requiem mass for our late Pope John Paul. As a farewell a light snack was served.

The other high point was the *'Dominican Family Day'*. Sisters, friars and laity were invited to Senekal in great numbers, some of them had a journey of seven hours into the bargain. We celebrated the Eucharist together, gave information about our life and service in the Order, and naturally there was also a common meal. The day turned into an impressive manifestation of a sense of family and of the mission of the Order in South Africa. Later on when in the group of prioresses and delegates we were looking back on the day, Sr. Mary Anne (Karen/Nairobi) revealed the extent to which she had been impressed and overjoyed at this selfless action with the words: *"The commitment of our brothers, sisters and laity in South Africa needs and deserves our, the nuns' prayer – here in this country, here in this place."*

There would be much else to relate, but nevertheless I will bring my letter to a close. I'm looking forward to the gathering of the newly composed International Commission of the Nuns of the Order from 10th to 17th July of this year. Once more I would like to thank the outgoing members: Sr. Mary Thomas Michalek (North America), Sor Teresa Coronado (Mexico), Sor Isabel Maria Gutiérrez Reyes (Rosary Federation, Spain), Sr. Claire-Marie de Jésus Rolf (France) and Sr. Maria Thomas Schniederberend (Europa Utriusque) for their many years of committed service.

I wish for you all the experience of God's love and recommend myself to your prayer

With brotherly greetings

Fr. Manuel Merten OP

Program of the General Promoter

Year 2005

- | | |
|-------------|--|
| May 2 | Piccola Capri (Italy): Meeting of the General Promoters of the Order |
| May 5 | Valencia (Spain): Preparation for the Meeting of International Commission of the Nuns OP |
| May 18 | Leipzig (Germany): Congress on "Preaching in a Secularized Society" |
| June 4 | Prague (Czech): Planning Session for the Meeting of European Prioresses |
| July 8 | Valencia (Spain): Meeting of International Commission of the Nuns OP
Visit to some Spanish Monasteries |
| July 28 | Monastery of Union City (USA): Provincial House (St. Joseph's Province) |
| August 18 | Mexico: Preaching a Retreat for the Nuns of the Federation with the Master |
| September 3 | Prague (Czech): Meeting of European Prioresses |



“The Power of Empty Hands”

*Solemn Vows of Sister Maria Rose OP, (Vietnam)
5th of February 2005 Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament
Farmington Hills (MI), USA*

Andreas English, born 1963, studied literature and journalism. He became Roman Correspondent for several well-known and widespread German newspapers and magazines. In 1995 he was incorporated into the pool of the very few Vatican Journalists, who are allowed to travel together with the pope in the papal airplane. At that time, he still was extremely critical with regard to John Paul II. English’s articles, at least many of his comments, were cutting and mordant. That changed in 1999 and I would like to tell you how.

The pope paid a visit to India. One of the intended items was a visit to the monument of Mahatma Gandhi. There he should take off his shoes and put on sandals before he would approach the memorial. That was anything but easy for him if you bear in mind that already he was at the age of 79. The media seemed to be interested only in one thing: getting pictures of the Pope walking barefoot. I quote Andreas English, the German journalist:

“I remember that I stood close to the white wall of the monument and that I was extremely bored, when an old Indian Lady, dressed in a Sari, addressed me: “It must be a tremendous moment for you that the pope comes here, right?”

I can’t be proud of what I had in mind at that very moment: “Poor woman”, I thought, “you don’t understand anything. For all these media-people around here the Pope’s intentions don’t matter at all. He could do them only one real favour: stumble and fall over. This would make a picture, an excellent and best-selling front cover.”

“Yes, it is an event in fact that the pope is here”, I said lame.

“You admire him how we admired Gandhi, don’t you?”

“Maybe”, I answered curtly.

She looked at me and then she said: “I still knew Gandhi, I saw him using the spindle in order to make thread and weave his clothes.”

“Did you?” I answered.

"Yes, the Indian government asked me to come here today: as a witness!"

"Interesting", I said.

She paused for a long time, then, she said: "Gandhi didn't have anything. He had only his two empty hands and his Hindu belief. But the powerful British Empire, with all its gunboats and armies, was not able to win the fight against his empty hands. They had no chance against a small faithful Hindu. And so it is with the Pope. He didn't have any armies either. He had only two empty hands like Gandhi, but the Russians were not able to win the fight against his belief, his deep trust in a liberating God. Isn't the greatness of the Divine unbelievable?" Bewildered I said: "But Gandhi was Hindu". The woman laughed. "I am also Hindu", she said. "But do you know since then, I have been convinced that we are sisters and brothers altogether, we Hindus and Christians, Moslems and Jews, that altogether we have the same dignity of a human being loved by God?" She paused again before she continued: "I know this since I read the "Sermon on the mount" of Jesus of Nazareth. You certainly know it."

"Yes, I know it. But why did you read it?"

"Oh, you don't know?" she asked with astonishment. "Mahatma Gandhi once said: the "Sermon on the mount" of Jesus of Nazareth is the basis of any ethics. Any true judgment on good and evil comes from these words, which were proclaimed by the son of a carpenter at a lake close to Gennesaret, where ever that may be in Israel."

So far the quotation from English's book on John Paul II. I was extremely moved, when I read this very passage of it. Never ever have I heard a better, a shorter, a more precise summary of the "Sermon on the mount" than this one given by the Hindu woman: Only those who believe in the power of empty hands will experience the unbelievable greatness of the Divine – the loving faithfulness of God.

That is in fact what the whole Gospel is about, what is meant by conversion: "Stop trusting in your own or in other's power, in money, in property in whatever things you can possess. They finally won't make you happy or successful – as long as you do it that way, you are still moving in the wrong direction, you even betray yourself: "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."¹

The centre and the focus of the "Good News" is the message of "the power of empty hands": Blessed are the poor, blessed are they who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are they who hunger and thirst, blessed are the merciful, blessed are the clean of heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for the sake of righteousness ... all these people mentioned here in the "Sermon on the mount" are "people of empty hands", who have nothing to trust in anymore - except in God.²

¹ Mat 6,19 f

² cf. Today's Gospel (Mat 5,1-12)

Within the frame of the values of the kingdom of heaven, within the frame of the values of the Gospel, emptiness, powerlessness and detachment seem to be pre-conditional. As long as one has not understood the mystery of “the power of empty hands” one still lacks being blessed, one still misses happiness, one still has not achieved life which deserves to be called so: “For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it. What profit is there for one to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?”³

There is a track of this mystery through all of the Holy Scripture from the very beginning. I just quote one of the Psalms where it reads: “The strength of the war horse means nothing to him, it is not infantry that interests him. Yahweh is interested only in those who fear him, in those who rely on his love.”⁴

Again “letting go of power”, detachment in whatever sense is obviously pre-conditional to any experience and any deeper understanding of the kingdom of God. But this is contrary to almost all of our ordinary ideas and conceptions. We look for power, we are interested in security, we rely on our Dollar notes and their misleading inscription: “In God we trust” – and so did the disciples after years of apprenticeship. Back home one night Jesus asked them: “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.⁵ Jesus tries again to teach them, what real happiness is about. He puts a child before them and says: “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”⁶

Children do influence their surroundings, there is no doubt about that. Whoever watches how serious people change their behaviour in the presence of a little baby will discover it - but little children don't change their surroundings by using power, they don't have any. Children change the world surrounding them just by their powerlessness. “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Trying to understand this mystery we also touch the mystery of the meaningfulness of the life of our cloistered nuns, the meaningfulness of the solemn profession of our Sister Maria Rose: Within the frame of our ordinary values a hidden life, a life of detachment, of obedience and powerlessness makes in fact no sense at all, but within the frame of the values of the kingdom it becomes a very meaningful testimony for the mystery of “the power of empty hands” – our nuns preach and proclaim this mystery by their life, day by day – night by night. Their hands are empty of worldly power but filled with the power of their prayer.

When two years ago Sister Maria Rose, Sisters Mary Rose, Sister Mary of the Holy Trinity and I paid a visit to the Archbishop of Saigon I asked him: “What do you consider the

³ Mk 8,35 f

⁴ Ps 147,10 f

⁵ cf. Mk 9,33 ff, par

⁶ Mk 10,15

main reason for the fast growth of the Church in Vietnam.” He answered without any hesitation: “I believe it’s our powerlessness which makes us so powerful.”

Dear Sister Maria Rose, in a few minutes you will make your solemn profession as a Cloistered Dominican Nun. You will put your empty hands in the also empty hands of your prioress. Then you will promise obedience according to the Rule of St. Augustine and the Constitutions of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers. The term “obedience” stands for “powerlessness”. You dedicate yourself, all your life to the mystery of empty hands.

May this your profession become a means for yourself in order to achieve holiness. May it also become a powerful testimony for all of us gathered here for this ceremony but even more for the Vietnamese Church that there is truth in Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God: “Whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the gospel will save it.”

Sister Maria Rose, dear Dominican Contemplative Nuns, we are grateful for your testimony and we thank you.

Inauguration of a Monastery of Dominican Contemplative Nuns in India

Sr. Maria Luz Martinez, OP

At last the Order's dream of establishing in India a monastery of Dominican nuns has been realized. It is their first and only house in India.

On March 14, 2005, in Keralapuram, the monastery was blessed -- the culmination of many efforts and trials, but also of much help and understanding. With great expectation we have awaited this event, since for more than two years we lived in rented quarters -- not the most suitable setting for a contemplative life.

The cornerstone of the monastery was laid on Christmas Eve in 2003. Alternating between joy and surprise we followed all the stages of the construction. We discovered that the workers' methods involved not the least bit of machinery but only the strength of their arms -- and their great ingenuity. Like everything else in life, the work finally came to an end.

The inauguration day was a real feastday for the Dominican family in India, and for the many other persons who were with us. The ceremony began with the blessing of the buildings by the Bishop of our diocese, assisted by Fr. Manuel Merten. Then Mass was concelebrated by

many priests, among them seven Dominicans: Father Merten, representing the Master of the Order; Father Dominic, the newly elected Provincial of India, a great lover of the contemplative life; Fr. Paul, Vicar of the Master for this foundation; Fr. Thomas, Prior of the only convent of Friars in Kerala; Fr. Biju, who helped us so much with the construction of the house and with all our needs; and three other Friars, from other communities in India. Also with us were two priests from Spain, and priests from this Kollam diocese. There were Dominican Sisters of active communities and Religious of several other congregations.

His Excellency the Bishop spoke enthusiastically of our Dominican life. Toward the end of last year he had been in Spain and visited some of our houses there. He was delighted with what he saw, and he told the people here that we nuns are going to live that kind of life in this diocese. By happy coincidence Kollam was the very first diocese in India, and it was established by a Spanish Dominican friar, so there is much excitement because Dominican nuns are now here. Father Paul, Vicar of the Master, spoke no less enthusiastically. The friars and sisters had a dream, he said, that now is converted into wonderful reality. He told the people that they would not see us in schools or in hospitals, that St. Dominic had gathered nuns together before he assembled the friars -- to pray for their apostolate and for the needs of all people. He explained that the house they were viewing that day could not be entered afterward. Its inhabitants, the nuns, would be living in it in prayer, work and silence.

(Actually a little work on the monastery still has to be done, so we have not yet moved in, but surely by the time you read these lines we will be happily settled in our cloister.)

Since this is our first contribution to *monialibus*, Fr. Manuel Merten told us that we should give some account of our life here in India.

Perhaps you know that this foundation was made by the Monastery of Cangas del Narcea, in Asturia, Spain. We came to India from time to time but the Government would not let us stay for more than six months; though we could come back, we had to leave the country in order to renew our visas. We were not intimidated by such difficulties as this, since it is so noble a cause to make a foundation in a place where none has been.

From the very first, we managed to live in a way much like that of any monastery: prayer, study, and work. There was always joy among us as we came to love and understand each other in spite of differences among our cultures, language difficulties, and so on. We soon realized that love is the universal language.

Since our arrival in India there have been young people wanting to join in our life. Naturally we have had to select among them -- and some of those who came have not persevered. Presently the community consists of: two solemnly-professed nuns from Spain, one temporarily-professed Indian nun from the Cangas community in Spain, three Indian novices who received the Habit in October of 2004, three postulants, and four aspirants. In June of 2005 - God willing -- five or six more candidates will arrive.

The three novices are doing their first year of novitiate here in India; they will spend their canonical year in Cangas, as well as their three years of temporary vows. They will eventually serve as translators in place of the temporarily-professed nuns of the Cangas community who have been doing that work until now. Thus the program will go, for these first groups. Once the sisters have made Solemn Profession they will return to India.

From the beginning we have taken very seriously our responsibility for the candidates' human, spiritual and religious formation. We schedule for them the subjects that belong to the first stages of formation. They all study English and Spanish, and gradually they receive instruction in: History of the Order, Religious Life, Introduction to Sacred Scripture, Prayer and Sacraments, human and spiritual Values, basic Psychology, and so on. We are trying to translate the materials for each subject into three languages: Spanish, English, and Malayalam -- the last-named being the language of Kerala. The process is slow and difficult in these first years, but our enthusiasm is great and we see God's help in many ways.

Dear brothers and sisters, we ask you to accompany us with your prayers. We know the interest which this foundation has awakened in the whole Order, beginning with the Father Master who encouraged us at every step. We believe firmly that God who began this work will bring it to completion.

To all we send warm greetings from this distant and beloved land of India.

THE AFRICAN REGION - 5TH MEETING

By Sr. Joyce Rita Mumu, OP

The fifth Meeting of the Monasteries in the African Region was held from 4th -11th April 2005 in St. Dominic's Convent in Senekal in the Diocese of Bethlehem in South Africa. Participants came from six of the eight monasteries in the Region - Bambui and Douala (Cameroon), Benguela (Angola), Rweza (Burundi), Karen/Nairobi (Kenya), and Senekal, the host community, from which Sr. Maria Rosa, our Spanish English translator, is a member. We had an added joy on learning a new baby! The Monastery of Benguela has founded a new Monastery in the same country, soon we will be counting nine monasteries in Africa as this baby gets on its feet. Besides we had two Brothers, whose presence we could not have done without; Fr. Roger Hounbedji, OP, Socius for the Master for Africa who undertook the heavy task of translation (French > English) with deep love and dedication and Fr. Manuel Merten, OP, General Promoter for the Nuns who traveled extra miles as facilitator with such devotion and expertise that brought our meeting to conclusion with depth and fruitfulness.

Two years have passed since our last meeting and we were eager to look into the topics of interest which were under study e.g., *Formation* whose members are almost 50% in the region; *Common Fund* not only on its usage in dealing with our needs but also on how to sustain it through local income and possibility of having some kind of *Structure* in the region for better collaboration. The reviewing of our mutual collaboration within the recent past years was so positive that a call for some kind of Structure came into place. The name for this group of monasteries in collaboration became **UMAOP (Union of Monasteries in Africa of the Order of Preachers)**. Sister Joyce Rita Mumu from Nairobi was chosen as Coordinator and was given two assistants: a Sister from Benguela (name withheld for now) as Bursar and Sister Josephine Marie Etoke from Douala.

Our collaboration in the Region endured its first labor pains and birth in the decision making on our Monastery in Senekal which hung on the balance of either one African canonically elected Monastery taking over its responsibility or closure. The founding Federation could no longer sustain it with members after twenty years of its foundation. It was truly a problem at the heart of every individual and community noting that it is the only Dominican Monastery in South Africa. Despite our "*poverty*" both in members and in other ways, God's will was clear that He wanted us to take the "*risk*" and jump in faith into the deep. One community took the risk of responsibility and two others made their commitment to help with members. More news will be coming to you later as the project unfolds. For now we kindly ask your prayerful support for this new venture.

The death of our Holy Father John Paul II occurred as we gathered in Senekal. On Thursday the 7th, Bishop Hubert Bucher of Bethlehem Diocese invited us for the Requiem Mass for our late Pope. We joined the people of God that evening in the Cathedral Church for a very beautiful celebration. Before the time for Mass, Bishop had graciously welcomed us and took some time to give us a brief history of how Christianity came to South Africa up to Bethlehem, the "House of Bread". Very interesting indeed! This was followed by a cup of coffee after which the very dedicated lay workers shared with us their involvement in the development work in the Diocese especially with AIDS victims, their families, the orphans and the poor. Then we were given a quick insight into the townships where poverty speaks everywhere, while at the same time the joy of the poor challenged us.

Saturday, 9th of April was Dominican Family Day. All the members of FEDOSA - Brothers, Sisters and Laity drove unimaginable distance of up to seven hours one way on very good straight roads to be with us in Senekal by 10 a.m. The Vicar Provincial, Fr. Mark James and FEDOSA President, Sister Jean Tobin were present. It was a day to know each other, share our thanksgiving to God for each other through the celebration of the Eucharist. We shared food from every corner of the country, then at the end every group - nuns, congregation of sisters, the laity and friars explained how they are involved in their various ministries. It was deeply touching to see on the faces of our brothers and sisters the joys and pains of their involvement with the people that can be summed up in one word "JUSTICE". The President of the Laity even spoke of a group of aging lay Dominicans who meet regularly just to pray for the

Mission of the Order and they see this as a way of ministry. Truly, the Holy Spirit's guidance is evident in the work of the Order.

After a much graced intense week of work, we concluded by setting our next meeting for November 2007 in our Monastery of Benguela in Angola.

SUGGESTED MODEL FOR VISITATION OF MONASTERIES

*By Edward M. Ruane, OP
Province of St. Albert, USA*

PURPOSE OF VISITATION

Normally, the visitation is a creative opportunity for a monastery to examine its strengths and weaknesses. Affirming its strengths, the community is helped to recognize areas of needed growth and to develop a process of addressing those areas of concern. With the help of a priest of the Order, through interviewing each sister individually, an objective view of the state of the monastery is reflected back to the Chapter. The visitor facilitates Chapter discussions on the more important issues helping the nuns arrive at their own decisions. Of course, concerns of confidentiality are always respected.

By way of exception, in a monastery where there are some serious difficulties, it is understood that the visitor may need to make some, carefully considered decisions of his own. However, even in this situation, it is desirable that the Chapter expresses its opinion and be directly informed of the decisions with accompanying rationale, if at all possible.

PROCESS OF THE VISITATION

A. Preliminary to the Visitation

1. The Chapter conducts a discussion on what it hopes the outcome of the visitation might be. This is forwarded to the visitor.
2. The visitor asks each sister to be prepared to share with him/her response to the following questions:
 - a) What are the strengths of this monastery?
 - b) What do you see as the three major issues facing the community?

- c) What would you propose as a response to these concerns?
- d) Where do you see the community going in five years?

B. The visitation itself

1. The visitor begins the visitation with a community meeting. He explains the process to the nuns assuring them of anonymity and encouraging them to speak frankly for the sake of the common good. He responds to any questions the nuns might have.
2. Each sister is interviewed individually, responding to questions previously submitted as well as to any other concerns she might have.
3. The visitor collates the information and prepares for a series of community meetings addressing the issues that surfaced. The first section of the meeting should be an account of the strengths of the monastery.
4. Then each of the major issues should be frankly discussed and an action decided upon by the Chapter which addresses that issue. (Note: personalities are not discussed, but concerns are.)
5. The visitor reviews this with the prioress and assists her in whatever way would be helpful. Also, concerns affecting individuals, or issues of real delicacy that cannot be dealt with by the Chapter are worked through with the prioress and possibly, the council. However, the more the Chapter can deal with concerns, the better ownership of the decisions.
6. When this process has been completed, the visitation may be concluded or it may be adjourned for a period of time while the nuns implement the decisions made.

C. Possible follow-up meeting of the visitation

If the visitation is adjourned, after an agreed upon period of time, the visitor returns to the monastery for a follow-up discussion, assessment of progress made, or adjustment of decisions. Again it is desirable to see sisters individually and conduct the necessary community meetings. If the Chapter is satisfied, the visitation is formally closed.

- D. The final report on the visitation should be made public to the entire community, again without jeopardizing confidentiality. It is also sent to the Master of the Order and the Ordinary of the Diocese.

CONCLUSIONS

This is only a suggested process that some of the monasteries have found helpful. It is meant to be adjusted to each situation. The principle that underlies this approach is the involvement of the Chapter in addressing issues of the monastery. At the same time it allows

the sisters a certain anonymity as they present their concerns to the visitor. It is he that reports back to the community what he heard from the community and he provides facilitation as the community deals with these concerns. In addition, the follow-up session holds the monastery Chapter accountable for the implementation of their decisions.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

It has been suggested that the bulletin Monialibus include a section where nuns can share their experiences. These articles do not necessarily represent any official position of the International Commission nor are they an attempt to promote a certain point of view. It is a simple sharing of lived experiences. This can help us discover and respect the legitimate diversity in the ways of living the Dominican contemplative life around the world. Our intention is to promote understanding and develop links of communion.

An Interview of Sr. Claire Rolf, OP (Prouilhe) at the General Chapter of Krakow

Fr. Kasper: You are the prioress of the monastery of Prouilhe, in France, the cradle of our Order, and the first convent of Dominican nuns. They say that St. Dominic sent brothers to speak to people about God but it was the nuns' mission to stay in the cloister and to speak to God about people. How do you describe the place of a Dominican nun in the Order and, what is the sense of the monastic vocation?

Sr. Claire: I believe that the nuns have a vital place in the heart of the Order. You remember what St. Therese of Lisieux said: "in the heart of the church we shall be love". Our vocation is really a question of love. It is a great mystery, which can be compared to the mystery of Mary. What was the place of Mary? She was present, receiving, believing, interceding, holding in her heart all that she witnessed, she contemplated, she questioned, she tried to fathom the mystery of the incarnation. If you think about it, you could say that she was the first Christian theologian. Mary was present, lovingly present, from the crib to the cross. She was also there in the upper room with the disciples at Pentecost attracting the Holy Spirit upon the disciples. It is in this spirit that I desire to live this time of presence here in Krakow with my brothers. I would like to call the Holy Spirit upon the Order with them.

Fr. Kasper: In Poland we have two synonyms to describe the kind of life you live. We say a cloistered nun or a contemplative nun. Which of these would you rather apply to yourself?

Sr. Claire: Contemplative nun. Enclosure, the cloister, is important but I don't define myself by the cloister.

Fr. Kasper: And how do you think, to what extent the enclosure is essential to your vocation?

Sr. Claire: I think it is a real gift, a privilege. To live the enclosure frees one to be given whole heartedly to prayer... to seeking... to receiving... receiving Him who comes. You recall the Prologue of St John where it says: "He came to His own but His own did not receive Him". Jesus calls us all to abide in Him, abide in His love. The enclosure is a material help to support this abiding. It protects something which is important for the nuns, the continual seeking of the Beloved.

Like silence and all other regular observances, it has for its purpose to help us to be present, to be open so that the Word of God might dwell in abundance in our hearts and in our communities. The enclosure also makes us vulnerable. It digs a deep interior space for God. Hollowed out by the enclosure and the silence, we become sensitive and receptive, and it is into this sacred space that we welcome the sufferings of the world. We carry the misery of the world into the intimate sanctuary of our hearts, as our Father Dominic did.

Enclosure is important but doesn't mean you are contemplative. As they say in the Far West of Canada where I come from, "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink". One could live in an enclosure and yet permit that space which is meant for God and for others, be filled by our 'selves' and all sorts of compensations and interior noise. Also, since enclosure is a 'means' so close to the 'end', there can be a danger of giving it attention that creates tensions; it's not surprising, since things which are sacred and holy can easily be deformed or turned into idols.

Enclosure is a reserved space, a space for the intimacy of the community and a space for intimacy with God. The material reality helps to form in us, the true sacred space, which St. Catherine of Sienna called the, "Interior Cell". So, the true cloister is in our hearts; it's not just the material reality but it is in our consecrated hearts... hearts consecrated to Love. As you know, love can grow infinitely. Our hearts can eventually become large and open spaces.

Fr. Kasper: So we might say that the physical enclosure favours the spiritual opening?

Sr. Claire: Yes, exactly! It is like a door opening into a large interior space.

Fr. Kasper: There is the example of an American lyrical poet, Emily Dickinson, who spent nearly all her adult life without leaving her room and she said she rejected the outside world to the benefit of her spiritual life. Judging by her poems not only she progressed in spirituality but as well, amazingly, in this space of human affectivity. Do you think that enclosure is helping to develop our humanity, our human sensitivity, or do you think it might be harmful in a way?

Sr. Claire: I think it should, and normally it does favour the developing of our humanity. We become more and more conscious of our own humanity. We cannot flee from it.

Fr. Kasper: A nun living within the enclosure on the way to discerning her vocation discovers that this is really something really insurmountable for her, does she have to quit or can she continue making an offering of her suffering to the Lord?

Sr. Claire: If it's too hard for her psychologically or affectively then maybe it's a sign that she is meant to live something else. It's not a failure, it is a question of where is she being called. Where are her sources of life and of love? Where she can best be united to God and if that is not in the cloister then she is shouldn't be there. It wouldn't be good for her. God wants us to be whole and happy.

Fr. Kasper: It seems that this state of life of the Catholic nuns is difficult to understand today and especially the enclosure. I remember a story of Carmelite nuns who came to Iceland and built their convent. When they put bars in their windows the people from the neighbourhood gathered in a manifestation and they demanded: "free the nuns ". I wonder if this aspect of your life is to be a sign for other people or simply to be understood only by those who are a part of the inner circle of our faith. If it is a sign but it is not legible, does it still have meaning?

Sr. Claire: People can learn to read or understand a sign which initially seems strange or new. On the other hand, I also think that it is important for us to help people to understand. A sign should be visible or readable to the culture we find ourselves in.

The cloister is a sign that speaks of God's existence. It's worth giving your life to Him. If God didn't exist then it is complete folly, but, if you believe that God exists and with the power of prayer, then there is sense.

Even where you don't see the grills the contemplative monastic life is a sign. In France there are no longer grills and many of the signs are less visible, however I think that the interior reality exists very strongly.

Fr. Kasper: So your monastic life is a form of preaching?

Sr. Claire: Yes, a Holy Preaching. Our lives preach of the very existence of God ...that God can sustain us, He can be our source, He is enough, He is that priceless treasure for which we are willing to sell all and He is the essential. Not only is He our destiny when we go to heaven but our joy in this present life.

If a monastic community is healthy it radiates joy and people come and they have an experience of God. They can sense that God dwells in the community and He touches them.

We are a sign not only to the world, but also for the church. Now a days there are many (even priests), who no longer understand contemplative or monastic life. They think it is a complete waste of time and a scandal. Maybe they have lost a sense of the importance of prayer. If we lose this, it is like a well which dries up; we are cut off from Living Water and He who gives Life. Jesus calls us to abide in the vine, to abide in Love so that we can bear fruit. If we don't live a vital living relationship with Jesus in prayer, we will dry up. We risk becoming a club doing social work or intellectual research, or even theology but, will we bear fruit? And, we won't be Dominican at all because Dominic was a contemplative. He was man of prayer. So, I think that the nuns are signs of that contemplative dimension in the life of the Order and of the Church.

Fr. Kasper: So if the Carmelites stay on Iceland the neighbours would finally find out what it means to be a contemplative community?

Sr. Claire: I'd hope so.

Fr. Kasper: I don't know how the story ended. Thank you very much, Sr. Claire.



DOMINICAN FAMILY AT THE WORLD YOUTH DAY 2005

Dear Sisters and Brothers;

All roads lead to Cologne, Germany in August 2005 for the World Youth Day.

The city of Albert the Great is looking forward to welcoming 800,000 young Christians during the week of 15-21 August. We, a team of Dominican sisters, brothers and laity, promise all members of the Dominican Family and friends from around the world a very warm welcome.

Our two churches will be welcome points. Near the railway station and in the shadow of Cologne cathedral lies our wonderful Romanesque church of St Andreas. Also in the city is our

20th century Heilig Kreuz, (Holy Cross) church. Both will be centres of Dominican hospitality and prayer life for all comers.

We plan among other things

- 1) a drop-in café as meeting place
- 2) Divine Office
- 3) Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament
- 4) Confession
- 5) Singing, dance and the creative arts.

At present we are gathering the support of the Dominican Family. We hope that those who come to Cologne will roll up their sleeves to help.

But we also need the support of those who do not plan to travel. We need your prayers. As well as being the city of St Albert O.P., Cologne is the first city of the Dominican Rosary. The great Rosary Confraternity movement was started by our brother James Sprenger O.P. in Cologne on 8 September 1475. Only when we build on the foundation of the prayer of the Dominican Family will the planning team help to make WYD 2005 a celebration of our Faith.

On behalf of the Planning Team,

Andrea Strickmann OPL
Sr. Barbara Offermann OP
Fr. Bernhard Venzke OP



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