



# *Monialibus*

*Nuns of the Order of Preachers  
International Bulletin*



**N\* 17 - December 2007**



**BLESSED JOSEFINA SAULEDA PAULIS  
VIRGIN AND MARTYR  
1885-1936**

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# Farewell Letter of Fr. Manuel Merten, OP

## Dear Sisters

The preparatory meeting for the assembly of prioresses and delegates of the Europe region that will take place in September 2008 in Strahlfeld (Germany) has just finished. After three days of intensive work under the direction of Sr. Maria Magdalena (Lage, Germany), together with Sisters Mary John (Lisbon, Portugal), Breda (Drogheda, Ireland), Dominika (Regensburg, Germany), Dominika (Radonie, Poland), Pavla and Jozefa (both from Prague, Czech Republic), I am now sitting in the train and travelling in fine weather through a winter landscape, back to the Dominican convent of Walberberg, to the community which has provided me with a home over the last seven years, whenever I needed accommodation in Germany. This convent will close at the end of the year; the last public Mass has already been celebrated. My new home in Germany will be the convent in Düsseldorf. In the next few days, I will be busy with packing and finalising my move. There will be a similar process in February for my Roman belongings, even if I won't be taking them back to Germany until later in the year.

My days as General Promoter of the Nuns are numbered, as you know. Only a little "official business" remains in my diary before the 6<sup>th</sup> January 2008, when I will hand over my task to Fr. Brian J. Pierce OP at Prouilhe, the cradle of the Order. Amongst these outstanding engagements is that of moderating the Assembly of prioresses and delegates of our monasteries in Africa, which will take place between 6<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> December in Rweza, Burundi; the preparation for the election of a new prioress at the monastery of Prague from 27<sup>th</sup> to 29<sup>th</sup> December, and quite practical help with the move of Sr. Maria Regina (the last prioress of the former monastery of Luxemburg) whose temporary transfer to Prouilhe has come to an end. She is returning to Germany, in order to find a definitive home with the community at Lage.

I am happy to look back over a few events and experiences of recent months.

From 16<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> June, the meeting of the prioresses and novice mistresses of our monasteries in Eastern Europe took place in Krakow (Poland). The theme was the significance of the Chapter for the life and leadership of our monasteries. This was not simply an exchange of experiences and theoretical considerations, but rather we turned our attention to very practical exercises and the communication skills that are a prerequisite for the successful process of the Chapter. In the evaluation of the meeting, the participants considered it "so intensive, so helpful and so close to reality – we've never worked together as closely as this before." A fine outcome, I think.

For the 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> June, my way led back to Luxemburg. This was to celebrate the laying of the foundation stone for the three large apartment blocks, which are being built with funds from the sale of the former monastery, and on a piece of land that belonged to the sisters. Subsequent rent from this project should for the most part be paid into the fund for the nuns of the Order (*Fondo Monache*). Unfortunately we had to postpone the intended blessing of the foundations, as the heavens took over the intended ritual of blessing with holy water. The rain came down in buckets!

Only two days later, I was on my way to Bogota, to take part in the General Chapter. I believe that you have all heard or read things about this Chapter, especially concerning the sudden death of Fr. Dominique Renouard, former vicar of the Master of the Order. As you can imagine, this event left its mark and changed the climate of the Chapter. I myself need not tell you too much about the Chapter here. For one thing, Sr. Isabel from Jumilla (Spain), who was also invited to the Chapter, has written a report of her experiences for *Monialibus*. Amongst other things, you will learn from this

edition, if you have not done so already, that the Chapter wrote to the nuns of the Order on the occasion of the celebration of the Jubilee of “Eight hundred years of Dominican Community life”.

From Bogota I travelled to Germany; there the main celebration of the eight hundredth anniversary was scheduled from 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> August. Prioresses and delegates from the German speaking monasteries, as well as from the active Congregations (especially Germany, Austria and Switzerland) gathered together for an impressive celebration to which some friars and lay people were also invited. In particular the “day of witness” has been engraved on my memory. Each community presented its mission from the beginnings until today. Varied were the forms of expression and the content, and this day was something like a “harvest thanksgiving” for an amazing number of courageous initiatives on the part of women following the lead given by the community of Prouilhe. Unbelievable were the privations that the pioneer sisters embraced in the making of so many foundations and missions. Unbelievable also, the capacity for endurance borne by scattered communities in the mists of time. All, yes all, of those present drew courage for the future from this as well as a deep feeling of gratitude. I myself was able to celebrate the principal mass of the celebrations and give the festive lecture, for which I drew largely upon the content and examples from the General Chapter of Bogota. On the return journey to Strahlfeld, I took a detour via Orbe (France), where, together with Sr. Jean Thérèse and her community, we made preparations for the annual gathering of the International Commission of the nuns.

From 20<sup>th</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> August I visited our monastery of Corpus Christi in New York, on behalf of the Master of the Order who had appointed me as his vicar. This visit enabled all to make their position clear and to elaborate the possibilities for moving forward in the future. On account of the desire of several sisters to move to other monasteries or to explore new paths in the development of Dominican monastic life, and especially on account of other factors that I cannot go into here, this community had experienced some difficult years. Therefore I rejoice that they are now facing the future with renewed courage; this came to concrete expression during my second visit to Corpus Christi monastery from 14<sup>th</sup> to 23<sup>rd</sup> November. After careful preparations which the sisters found beneficial and profited from fully, an election was held and the community chose Sr. Maria Pia to be its new prioress.

On 9<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> September, I made a lightning visit to Ireland to our monastery at Drogheda. At the heart of this visit were discussions about the possibility of founding a new monastery of the Order in White Russia. For some time the sisters in Drogheda have been offering hospitality to two White Russian nuns. Now the Bishop of Vitebsk had offered an abandoned convent in his diocese to enable the founding of a contemplative Dominican monastery. Together we came to the conclusion that the time is not yet ripe to go ahead with this foundation, and that the preparations for such an undertaking require more time. Nevertheless the two White Russians visited their homeland, took a look at the conventual buildings and made an agreement with the bishop that he should “reserve” them for a possible foundation in the spring of 2009. May I request the support of your prayer that possibilities may open up before this point in time to smooth the way forward for this hoped for foundation in White Russia.

On 5<sup>th</sup> October, I was able to meet Fr. Brian J. Pierce at Fiumicino Airport in Rome, as the first step in the process of handing over my responsibilities to my successor. Only two days later, Fr Brian travelled on to Siena, to begin learning the Italian language.

Understandably, many friends and acquaintances have taken advantage of my last few months in Rome to visit me. It was great, but consequently I had less time for work than I really needed. Obviously it was good to be with people who are dear to me and it gave me somewhat of an opportunity for taking leave of Rome. Rome is indeed a city of incomparable beauty and variety.

From 28<sup>th</sup> October to 2<sup>nd</sup> November this year’s second meeting of the General Promoters of the Order was held. As this would be the last opportunity, I invited the brothers and sisters to come to

Walberberg. On this occasion also, as we usually do during the days we devote to these meetings, we took advantage of the opportunity to meet with the different branches of the local Dominican family.

On the very first evening we met lay Dominicans from Walberberg, Cologne and Düsseldorf, with whom we sang vespers, ate and had a lively exchange. One afternoon was devoted to a visit of Cologne and its venerable Dominican attractions, of which the high point was the celebration of Mass at the grave of St Albert. Over and above our meeting with the sisters, our visit to the nuns in Lage acquired an added spiritual dimension through the carrying out of an age old custom. Right next to our nuns' cloister there is a chapel in which a very old and very heavy cross is housed. On the day of our visit to Lage, we got the news that Turkish troops had advanced into Iraq to attack Kurds living there. It was only a short step from this news to the idea: "Should we carry the cross?" We did this, accompanied by our nuns, in an unusually moving and intense moment of our meeting. Further on in our programme were visits to two other Dominican communities: the Dominican Sisters of Bethany with their children's village apostolate and the Dominican Sisters of St. Catherine of Siena of Arenberg, who have installed a very up-to-date "Wellness Centre" in their old convent, where they offer not only recuperation for the body, but also for the soul, an interesting and modern means of preaching.

From 2<sup>nd</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> November, this year's gathering of the International Commission of the Nuns of the Order took place. Sr. Vincenza has written a poetic account of it that needs no further additions. I will add to it only what I had in my heart as I participated in the meeting for the last time as General Promoter. At the same time, six sisters are leaving the Commission in accordance with the rotation process, to be replaced by new representatives from the federations or regions. This would all merit no little retrospection. But don't worry, I am not going to list everything the Commission has done since 2001, but I would like, alongside a general expression of thanks, to mention two things that in my opinion constitute outstanding service to the Commission. Our publication *Monialibus* has, from very modest beginnings – N° 0 was nothing more than an opinion poll – evolved to be an instrument of multifaceted exchange between the nuns of the Order; this has helped reduce the sense of isolation for many and increased the sense of all belonging together in one entity. Without the efforts of the members of the International Commission, and above all of the two who have been editors up until now, Sr. Claire Marie and Sr. Mary Emmanuelle, this outcome would have been unimaginable. The second point that should receive special appreciation in my opinion is the enormous amount of work the Commission undertook in preparation for the Jubilee Year. At the meeting of the International Commission in Rome in 2004, the Master of the Order apportioned various tasks in the planning process. To the lot of the Commission fell the blocking off of the time schedule, and subsequently filling it with possible content, the composition and distribution of the Jubilee prayer, as well as concrete proposals, such as the twinning of monasteries in North and South, East and West. That we have to be grateful to the Commission for the success of this Jubilee Year is probably known down to even the very last sister and so it is all the more incumbent on me, as I leave office, to be fully aware of all this.

I have already mentioned in various contexts that my time as General Promoter is coming to an end. Personally, I have experienced these seven-plus years as a time of special grace. I had not dared to dream that it would turn out like this when, on the Thursday before Pentecost in the year 1999, Timothy Radcliffe, then Master of the Order, phoned and asked me, whether I would, at the end of my term as provincial, be prepared to take on this task. He gave me five days to think it over. When they were over, I told him my hesitation but wrote of the hopes that would be involved in such activity. "Welcome to Rome" was the subject of the e-mail I received from him at that point and a new challenge in my religious life began.

It is impossible to thank everybody for everything that has contributed to making this new experience so beneficial for me. It goes without saying, however, that I would like to thank Fr. Timothy and Fr. Carlos for having placed their trust in me—and for continuing to do so; the community of

Santa Sabina, in which I have been happy and which has always supported me; the brethren of my province, especially those at Walberberg, who constantly gave me the sense of having a home somewhere in the big wide world, and thus not to have had to give up my German homeland. The Dominican Sisters of Bethany have also contributed to this feeling, as I have links of special friendship with them since my beginnings in the Order.

Above all, I would like to thank you, dear sisters, for all the hospitality that I have enjoyed during my visits to your communities, for the trust and openness that so many of you have shown towards me, for the many ways in which you have supported my work (financially, through the translation of texts and letters, time and prayer invested, taxi services, availability and accommodation etc.), for the times of prayer we have shared, the times of work, and not least for the many hours of relaxation and recreations on the evenings before departure. I know that I will continue to find great pleasure in looking at the photos that I have taken over these last years, and through them in a concrete way to remember all the beautiful things that I experienced during this time.

I would like to apologize to each sister and to each community that I have disappointed or even offended... In fact in the seven years I did not succeed in visiting all of the monasteries, not even all of those who repeatedly made pressing invitations. I am really sorry about it. I would also like to express regret that one or other letter or e-mail remained without answer. I assure you that this was not an expression of ill will, at most I was short of energy or strength of purpose, but usually simply short of time.

I rejoice from my heart that the Master of the Order has appointed Fr. Brian J. Pierce as my immediate successor. For several years now he has been regularly attending the meetings of the International Commission of the nuns, and God knows that he did far more than simply translate. He took it all to heart and contributed to our common work in many ways through his various competencies "as if he were already one of us". You can look forward to good times ahead with Fr. Brian as General Promoter, I can assure you of that.

I myself am now taking leave. I commend your communities as well as each one of you individually to God, the Blessed Virgin and to our dear Father Dominic. I count on your continued prayer and promise you mine. That will be particularly true as I celebrate the Eucharist.

In gratitude I remain united with you as your brother



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Original: German

# **I'm Brian Joseph Pierce, your brother!**

## **Introductory Letter of the New General Promoter of the Nuns of the Order of Preachers**

**My Dear Sisters in Saint Dominic,**

I write these words from the Convento of San Domenico in Siena, where I am presently trying to learn some Italian. Though the “official” reason for my being here in Siena is to study Italian, my “unofficial” reason is to be close to the place where our sister, St. Catherine, lived and prayed and poured out her life to God in loving service to the Church and to the poor. When I was “called” to Rome, I was told that there were several cities in Italy to choose from for learning basic Italian. As soon as I saw that Siena was one of possibilities, I didn't have to think about the question any further. I thought to myself: there is no place that will better prepare me for ministry with my contemplative sisters in the Order than to go and “drink from the same well” that Catherine drank from. So, be assured that as I struggle these days with conjugating Italian verbs, I am also praying with and for you as I walk the holy streets of Siena.



My name is Fr. Brian Joseph Pierce, and at the request of Fr. Carlos, the Master of the Order, I have joyfully (and with some trembling and trepidation!) accepted to be the next Promoter of the Nuns of the Order. When my family and friends ask me why I am moving from Lima, Peru to Santa Sabina in Rome, the easiest way for me to respond to them is by saying that I have been asked to “be a brother to our contemplative sisters.” And I think that this is exactly how I hope to begin this new ministry.

I am the second of four sons, which means that I grew up without sisters! I think that being promoter of the nuns is perfect proof of God's sense of humor! From one day to the next I have three thousand new sisters! I think that's a world record! I am not exactly sure what this new ministry will be like, but I can say that I am happy to be a brother to so many sisters! During the Jubilee Year, the Master of the Order has often mentioned the encounter between Diego, Dominic and the Cistercian abbots in Montpellier in 1206. It was there, notes Fr. Carlos, that Dominic left behind his title of Canon of Osma and adopted the name “Brother Dominic.” So, with the help of Dominic, I will try to be a brother to you, my Dominican sisters. I ask for your mercy and I promise you mine.

I grew up in Texas, in the southern United States. In June of this year my parents celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary, so for me the Jubilee Year has also been a chance to celebrate the Jubilee of my parents' fifty years of faithful love. I give thanks to God for their witness to the gospel in my life.

When I was 17 years old, I was chosen to represent my high school as a foreign exchange student for several months in Cuzco, Peru. That experience changed my life. Not only did I learn Spanish, but I saw another world – a world marked by poverty and violence. I returned to the USA with many unanswered questions, but also with a desire to do something meaningful with my life. I went on to get a degree in Spanish and Political Science at a university in the eastern part of Texas.

During my first year at the university I was invited by the Catholic campus ministry to go with a group of other students, to visit “a monastery.” I had no idea what a monastery was. I expected some old stones from ancient times piled up on a hill somewhere. Again God surprised me! We arrived in

the town of Lufkin, Texas to discover a community of more than thirty contemplative Dominican nuns! I did not believe them at first when they said that they prayed all day, so two weeks later I returned to see if they were still there praying. They were. And they are still there today. Between my friends at the Catholic campus ministry, the Dominican nuns in Lufkin and St. Martin de Porres (whom I am sure was calling to me to the family of Dominic as I walked the streets of Peru a few years earlier), the path to my Dominican vocation was already being prepared.

Most of my ministry as a Dominican friar has been either as a missionary in Latin America or as part of two preaching teams in the United States. I lived for nine years in Central America (Honduras and Guatemala), and I can say with gratitude that the poor have been some of my greatest teachers. These past three years I have been back in Lima, Peru (with San Martín, Santa Rosa, San Juan Macías and Blessed Ana de los Angeles), serving as the Promoter of the Dominican Family in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Dominican Family in these countries is alive and vibrant, and it has been difficult to say goodbye to them, but I know that what I have received from them I will be able to share with you, our contemplative sisters.

My greatest hobby is my love for the outdoors, so please do not be surprised when I set off to explore the streets and forests and hills around your monasteries. Few things speak more deeply to my heart and soul than the silence of a forest or a mountain. I am also very interested in interreligious dialogue, especially the dialogue between the mystical traditions of East and West. I am always happy to share what I am discovering in this area, for I truly believe that peace will become more and more a reality in our world when we recognize the beauty and dignity of the diverse religions of the world.

So my dear sisters, I thank God for the many blessings that have brought me to this moment in my life. I ask for your prayers, and you will be in mine daily. Like you, I am just a pilgrim on the way, trying to welcome the gratuitous love of God in my life. I end by thanking Fr. Carlos for his trust and for showing me Dominic's brotherly love. And I also thank Fr. Manuel Merten for all his support and wisdom as I accept with joy the mantle that he, and Fr. Viktor before him, so generously entrusted to me.

**In the Peace of Christ,  
Fr. Brian**

Original: English

## **BLESSED JOSEFINA SAULEDA PAULIS VIRGIN AND MARTYR 1885-1936**

The first Dominican contemplative nun to be beatified as virgin and martyr was born on 30 July 1885 at San Pol del Mar (St. Paul of the Sea). Her parents, Josefa Paulis and Victoriano Sauleda, raised their twelve children in a profoundly rooted Christian family. Buenaventura (Mother Josefina) was baptized on 5 August 1885 and received the sacrament of confirmation on 14 June 1887.

Ventureta (nickname for Buenaventura) was a normal child, born and reared in an exemplary Christian household. Like all ordinary children, she played games with joy and laughter. The child



could also throw a tantrum when contradicted. What a temper! The Dominican Sisters of the Annunciata took charge of her education where she showed great interest and talent in music, art and literature. Ventureta learned to pray and to make time for silent prayer before the altar at the college oratory. At age eleven, she received Our Lord at her First Holy Communion on 23 May 1897. As she was wholly enraptured, God infused into her soul the desire for total self-surrender.

Relatives and acquaintances described seventeen year old Ventureta as “tall, slender, graceful and well-poised with refined manners. She had a round face, always ready with a smile, and enhanced by her expressive eyes with their distant, contemplative gaze.

She was assiduous in prayer and the reception of the sacraments. The writings of Fr. Louis Granada nourished her spiritual and intellectual life. Pastoral ministry was not alien to Ventureta for she was among the zealous catechists who gave instruction on Christian Doctrine to the young people in her parish. Ventureta was sixteen years old when she felt God’s call to the religious life. Possessed of a tender heart with exquisite kindness and sensibilities, Ventureta was drawn to the care of the sick. It was logical that she first thought of joining a community of nursing sisters who administered hospitals.

Her oldest sister, Mercedes, was already a nun at the Dominican monastery of Our Lady of Mount Sion in Barcelona. Mother Mercedes prayed for her young sister who was in the process of discerning her vocation. Ventureta made a retreat with the Filippini Sisters in Barcelona and after a period of intense spiritual exercises, she decided to become a Dominican contemplative nun.

In January 1905, the Dominican monastery of Our Lady of Mount Sion in Barcelona opened wide its enclosure door to receive the nineteen year old postulant, Buenaventura Sauleda-Paulis. The welcoming embrace of the community, especially of her own sister, Mercedes, filled her with great peace. Her monastic cell was a sacred space where she would find sweet repose for her soul and a quiet place for study, prayer and intimate encounters with God. The furnishings were very poor: a bed, a table, two chairs, a crucifix, a statue of the Virgin Mary and a small closet to hold clothing and personal things. The monastic horarium revolved around the Divine Office, *lectio divina*, study and work.

The monastic chronicles recorded the stages of her formation in the Dominican monastic contemplative life: Reception of the Habit on 12 March 1905; Profession of Simple Vows on 24 March 1906; and on 12 April 1909, she made her Profession of Solemn Vows. She memorialized her mother in her assumed religious name. A nun of unlimited charity, Sister Josefa was generous in serving her sisters. She discharged the offices of portress and infirmarian with great generosity and fidelity. She served her community as prioress (1929-1935) and afterwards as novice mistress (1935). The Dominican mottos *Veritas* and *Contemplare et contemplare aliis tradere* were deeply etched in her being. She was a well-tempered soul, fervent, exemplary, and enthusiastic at the liturgical celebrations. Her spirituality was christocentric and mariological.

The Lord granted her desire to shed her blood to the last drop for her divine Spouse. In the religious persecution and tragic war of 1936, on August 31, she was taken captive; soon afterward, at night, she was subjected interrogations, followed by a slow and cruel torture. At the first streak of dawn, her suffering was crowned with martyrdom. While she was dying, she prayed for her country, forgave her persecutors, and commended those who, likewise, died as martyrs. Her lifeless body – bloody and horrendously disfigured – was later discovered at the hippodrome outside the city of Barcelona. The body was taken to the Hospital where it was identified and prepared for burial. On 23 June 1950, her remains were transferred to the cemetery of the Esplugues de Llobregat convent.

The Process for her Beatification was opened in 1958 and was solemnly closed on 26 February 1963 at the Episcopal Palace of Barcelona. Sister Josefina Sauleda-Paulis, OP was beatified by His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI on October 28, 2007.

(Excerpted from **SINTESIS BIOGRAFICA DE LA SIERVA DE DIOS SOR JOSEFINA SAULEDA** by Sor Catalina Febrer, OP. Translated by Sister Maria-Agnes Karasig, OP, Summit, New Jersey, U.S.A.)

## **Homily for the 800<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Foundation of the Nuns Monastery of the Mother of God—West Springfield, MA (USA)**

This is how the birth of the Dominican Order came about. When its father Saint Dominic was preaching with Bishop Diego, but before they lived together, he had found that he had gathered nine women to himself through the Holy Spirit. Since he was a righteous man, and unwilling to expose them to the shame of an Albigensian world, he decided to found a monastery. Such was his intention when on November 22, 1206 he made the first foundation of what would ten years later become the Order of Preachers.

That original foundation, now 800 years ago, is the reason we are gathered here today in this Chapel, at this altar, with these nuns, and our bishop. And it is fitting that we celebrate this Mass on the Feast of the Birth of the Blessed Virgin Mary for just as her birth prepared the world for the birth of her Son, the birth of the Dominican Nuns, prepared the Church for the birth of the Dominican Friars.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony, the successor to Saint Dominic as Master of the Order, described this foundation of nuns in this way: “In order to give assistance to certain women of the nobility whose parents were led by poverty to give them over to the heretics for training and support, he established a monastery between Fanjeaux and Montreal in a place called Prouille. There, to this day, handmaids of Christ give a pleasing service to their Creator. By the vigor of their holiness and the noble purity of their innocence, they lead a life which is of spiritual benefit to themselves, a source of edification to men, a joy to the angels, and a pleasure to God” (*Libellus*, # 27) [as in the Bogotá Letter].

The nine women that Saint Dominic received were Adelais, Raymunda, Berengaria, Richarde, Jordana, Gugliemina, Curtolana, Claretta, and Gentiana. It was because of *their* “vigor of holiness” and because of *their* “noble purity of innocence that we are all here today.” It is all together likely that without them we would have still had Saint Dominic, but would never have had the Order he went on to found.

This past summer the Order held a General Chapter in Bogotá, Colombia and for the Feast of Saint Dominic the Capitulars sent a letter to all the nuns of the Order. In it, they wrote:

Together with you we joyfully celebrate the monastery, *Blessed Mary of Prouilhe*, as the first foundation of a Dominican Community and as the beginning of a process which led to the confirmation of the “Order of Preachers” by Pope Honorius III on 22 December 1216. From the beginning, you, our sisters, are not just an essential part of the Order: you are at the very heart of the Holy Preaching and an “always efficacious help to the life of the apostolate of your brethren” (*cf. Aniceto Fernandez, 22 July 1971, in his letter of promulgation of the provisional text of the revised LCM*). The very heart of the Holy Preaching of the Dominican Order is to be found in the Monasteries of our Order, and even to elevate it even higher, the nuns of the Order of Preachers ARE the heart.

The Bogotá Letter continues: So dear to our father Saint Dominic [were the nuns] that one of his last concerns [before his death in 1221] was the building of the [nuns’] monastery at Bologna: “It is absolutely necessary, brothers, that a house of nuns should be built, even if it means postponing for a

time the work on our own house.” Dominic entrusted the monasteries to us all. And we are entrusted to the prayer and the care of the nuns. This mutuality is at the heart of the Order.

Father Bede Jarrett, O.P. remarks in his life of Saint Dominic that this first foundation of nuns was to be “apostolic, educational, and a refuge from hostile surroundings.” There were, at the time, many errors concerning the Catholic Faith in that region of France. People were easily led astray and away from the Church. But these nine nuns were going to change all that. They would not only consecrate their lives to the Evangelical Counsels but they would also establish their monastery as a center for Catholics to come and learn about their Faith.

Saint Dominic’s solution to the whole problem was to consecrate these nine women to the Lord. His solution was prayer in the face of adversity, his solution was teaching the Truth to combat and conquer all error, and his solution was the Lord against all odds to convert the world to Christ.

Again, from the Bogotá Letter: “Your prayer, your life of contemplation, your world of enclosure and silence – without abandoning humanity as the place to meet God – your work, your seeking the truth at the heart of things, your belief in God’s faithfulness, your searching the Scriptures with loving hearts, your practice of penance – all of this is the way you share in the common mission of the Order.”

It is a dangerous thing to celebrate an Anniversary. We can easily think that all of the work has been done already, that we have much to be proud of, and that therefore we can rest. That’s the danger. The reality is that an Anniversary calls us to an even greater effort to be faithful to the foundation, to be mindful of our own heretical world and how we are to convert both it and ourselves more profoundly to Christ.

If you are connected with Our Lady and Saint Dominic you must be prepared to be on the move. This was the way of life that Saint Dominic had formed for the nuns, not a building or a particular people—but a way of life. The Nuns’ Constitutions detail this life:

“Therefore, the whole life of the nuns is harmoniously ordered to preserving the continual remembrance of God. By the celebration of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, by reading and meditating on the Sacred Scriptures, by private prayer, vigils and intercessions they should strive to have the same mind as Christ Jesus. In silence and stillness, let them earnestly see the face of the Lord and never cease making intercession with the God of our salvation that all men and women might be saved. They should give thanks to God the Father who has called them out of darkness into his wonderful light. Let Christ, who was fastened to the Cross for all, be fast-knit to their hearts. In fulfilling all these things, they are truly nuns of the Order of Preachers.” LCM, 74, IV.

The Bogotá Letter has one final request of the Nuns: When the Jubilee Year of the foundation of the first Dominican Community ends, we begin a “novena of years” from 2008 to 22 December 2016, when we celebrate the 800th anniversary of the confirmation of the Order. These nine years are “a pilgrimage to our origins,” dedicated to the rediscovery of Dominic’s original intentions, rekindling them in today’s Church, today’s society and today’s world, discovering together new paths to travel. We are aware, that this asks a conversion from each of us. We, your brothers, ask you to accompany this “novena of years” with your continuous prayer that “we may walk faithful to our first love” (Rev 2.4).

And that was how the birth of the Dominican Order came about.

V. Rev. James Sullivan, O.P.  
St. Dominic’s Priory, Youngstown, Ohio (USA)

Original: English

## MEETING OF THE INTERNATIONAL COMMISSION OF THE NUNS

*Sr. M. Vincenza Panza, OP  
Italy*



In this Jubilee year of the 8th centenary of the Foundation of Prouilhe the meeting of the International Commission of Dominican Nuns was hosted by the community of the Monastery of St John the Baptist, Orbey, France from 2 – 10 November 2007. This community traces its history back to the famous monastery of Unterlinden founded in Colmar in 1232 – the monastery church was dedicated by St Albert the Great in 1269 and Eckhart conducted a visitation of the community in 1322. After the French Revolution the nuns were expelled in 1792 but the community was refounded in 1899 in Colmar and remained there until it moved to the present location on the Vosges Mountains of central Alsace in 1973.

The ancient monastery of Unterlinden is still preserved but now functions as a museum. Mid week we took a break from work to visit it and view some of the very beautiful works of art. Passing from one masterpiece to the other and admiring them, the time passed quickly. Then we visited the Marian Sanctuary of Shauenberg, which was once the famous hermitage of St. Ulderico. The cold was intense, but to kneel in prayer at the feet of the small miraculous statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary fortified us in spirit and warmed us in body.

Without doubt Orbey was an ideal venue for our meeting. The well prepared and beautifully sung liturgy, with times for personal prayer and silence, set a well balanced rhythm to our working days. The melodious singing to the accompaniment of stringed instruments raised our minds and hearts to heaven. A wall of windows behind the altar opened onto a view of the surrounding valleys and hills – all decked with magnificent autumn colours. It was simply breathtaking. It was wonderful to see the large number of laity who attended Sunday Eucharist and Vespers and participated in the prayer of the community – an authentic form of preaching.

The community extended a very warm welcome to us and at once we felt at home among them. Each meal was a feast and was obviously prepared with care and attention. On the first evening they invited us to their recreation and later in the week we had a meal and recreation with them. For the members of the Commission, as well as for the hosting community, these exchanges are very enriching. The fact that the Commission meets in a different monastery each year broadens our vision of our vocation – we have the opportunity to experience the similarities and differences of our Dominican contemplative vocation as each community tries to respond to the culture and needs of its situation. In turn the hosting community has an excellent opportunity to get to know the members of the Commission and its work.

### **The Work of the Commission**

Work began on Saturday, on 3<sup>rd</sup> November, with the greetings and the presentation of the week's Program by Fr. Manuel. We were all sorry that Sr. M Inmaculada – representing the Spanish

Federation de la Inmaculada - was unable to attend due to health reasons. We missed her presence very much. The other ten members were present.

As usual, Fr. Manuel moderated the meetings while Fr. Brian Pierce – who will take over as Promoter on the 6<sup>th</sup> January - translated from Spanish to English and vice versa. Before we began Fr. Manuel proposed that we observe a moment of silence in remembrance of Fr. Dominique Renouard RIP. Then, remembering that our being physically present in a place did not necessarily mean that our minds and hearts were focused on the task at hand, each one reflected and we shared with the group what had been preoccupying us during the recent past and which still engaged our minds. Fr. Manuel has a great gift in facilitating these sharings which unite us as a group and prepare us for the week's work ahead. He then presented his report on his service to the Monasteries in this Jubilee Year, and there was time for questions. Much of this report will be included in his letter – so there is no need to repeat it here. Sr. Jean Therese – a member of the Orbey community who represents the French Federation – gave us a very interesting account of the history of France and the relationship of the Church and State as well as a brief history of her community.

### **Reports on the Regions**

Usually each member of the Commission gives a short report on her respective region after which there is an opportunity for the others to ask questions. This year the highlight of these reports was the accounts of the various jubilee celebrations. It was wonderful to hear how the whole Dominican family joined with the nuns in making this year a very special one. Another interesting and encouraging factor was the way monasteries from the same country or location joined in a common celebration – thus bearing witness to our unity in diversity. The sadness of hearing about communities experiencing difficulties due to lack of vocations and illness was balanced by the hopes of new communities springing up in places like Bolivia, Belorussia, Nigeria.

### ***Monialibus***

At each meeting we spend some time evaluating the bulletin *Monialibus* – always seeking ways of improving its quality and ensuring that it continues to be an organ of communication between the nuns. The encouragement from communities and individuals as well as their criticisms are of vital importance in this regard. We owe a deep debt of gratitude to Sr. M. Emmanuelle of the Asia-Pacific Region for her competence and dedication as editor. As she finishes her term of office on the Commission, Sr. Isabel from the Federation of the Holy Rosary, Spain will take on this responsibility in January 2008. We wish her well, full of assurance that she will continue to be at the service of the nuns in this important task of ensuring that *Monialibus* is not only a newsletter, but also will become a means of formation for our contemplative life and for deepening our appreciation of our Constitutions and of our vocation in the Order and in the Church. It is good to remind ourselves that the primary purpose of *Monialibus* is to circulate information and to invite the nuns to dialogue among themselves, while the views expressed in the bulletin are not necessarily those of the editor, the Promoter or the members of the Commission.

A special issue of *Monialibus* on the various experiences of the Jubilee Year celebrations will be published around Easter. In future issues of the bulletin we hope to have two sections – one with news and a second with an Open Forum where communities and individuals can exchange views on various topics pertaining to our life. In order for this to become a reality we need the co-operation of all the nuns.

### **Regular Chapter**

We had a brief sharing on how regular chapter is conducted in the various regions. This topic seems to be sparking an increasing interest among the monasteries in recent years, and a few regions have taken it as the theme of the annual prioresses' meetings. In view of this interest and in order to invite communities to share their experiences and views, we hope to include this topic in the Open Forum section of a future *Monialibus*.

## **Contemplation**

It does not seem likely that Fr. Carlos will be able to complete the proposed letter on Contemplation before the end of his term of office. However, we still have the material on contemplation which the various communities sent three years ago in response to the questionnaire and which the members of the Commission have summarised and indexed. We briefly spoke about how we could publish some of this material but we did not come to any conclusion.

## **The Transition to the New Commission**

As you know, the term of the members of the Commission is for six years, with half of the membership changing every three years. The following members have finished their terms: Sr. Mary Emmanuelle - Asia-Pacific, Sr. Joyce-Rita - Africa, Sr. M. Blanca – South America, Sr. M. Immaculada - Federation de la Inmaculada, Spain, Sr. Flora - Federation of S. Domingo, Spain and Sr. M. Vincenza, Italy. One of the first tasks of Fr. Brian as Promoter will be to begin the process for the appointment by the Master of new members for these regions. We spent some time reflecting on how these appointments took place in the past, while seeking ways of improving the transition to the new Commission.

## **Promoter for Internet**

Fr. Manuel had invited the new Promoter for the Internet, Fr. Scott Steinkerchner OP, to spend an afternoon speaking to us about preaching via the internet. Fr. Scott hopes to prepare a programme by which we can compose an electronic Catalogus of all the nuns of the Order to which the Master of the Order and Promoter will have access.

## **Conclusion and Evaluation**

The days passed very quickly and the time arrived for the usual evaluation and farewells. Because this was the last meeting of the Commission for Fr. Manuel as well as for six of the members, the farewells had a slightly different tone – it was a question of looking back over the past as well as looking to the future. The prevailing theme was one of gratitude: gratitude to the community of Orbey for taking care of our every need; gratitude for having this opportunity to work together in the service of the nuns of the Order; gratitude for the opportunity of getting to know sisters from other parts of the world; gratitude in particular to the six outgoing sisters for their contribution on the Commission, their dedication in service of their sisters. We wish them every blessing for the future. The five remaining members remembered with gratitude the warm welcome extended to them by these six (now outgoing) members and would like to extend the same welcome to the new members at our next meeting.

We expressed our sincere thanks to Fr. Manuel for his constant dedication in promoting our Dominican Contemplative Life, for his encouragement – of communities as well as individuals, his hard work, patient listening and joyful spirit. He will remain in the history of the Order as the Promoter of the Jubilee year of the 8<sup>o</sup> centenary. Fr. Manuel in his turn had prepared a surprise for us – a slide show of the photos of the past four meetings and each member received a gift of a CD containing this slide show. Thank you Fr. Manuel, heartfelt thanks!

Finally, sincere thanks were due to our excellent translator Fr. Brian Pierce, who will become our new Promoter on the 6<sup>th</sup> of January 2008. His ability to pass freely from Spanish to English and vice versa without showing signs of tiredness demonstrates his exceptional mastery of both languages. No doubt the fact that he has acted as translator at the Commission meetings for the past four years has prepared him for his new task. Our sadness on Fr. Manuel's leaving us is softened by knowing that we can expect a similar dedication from Fr. Brian. We warmly welcome him as our Promoter and wish him all the best in his new responsibility. Now begins a new chapter of the Dominican contemplative life. Let us pray to the Spirit of our Lord to renew us in His love.

Original: Italian

**REGULAR CHAPTER**  
***An Informal Sharing among the Members of the***  
***International Commission of Nuns***

**Sr. Mary Lucy of the Divine Word, OP**  
**Buffalo, NY (USA)**

*How good and how pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity...there the Lord gives His blessing: Life forever. (Ps. 132)* Every aspect of our Dominican life is meant to deepen that oneness of mind and heart in the Lord toward which we strive daily. Regular Chapter is a uniquely important part of our observance for it is the place where the Dominican charism shines forth so clearly. It is the privileged place of our communal search for Truth, whether this be the truth about God, about ourselves, about the way the community is living. And it is this Truth which sets us free. You may recall the tour which St. Dominic and the devil made of the priory while our blessed father gleaned information as to how the brethren were tempted. At the door of the Chapter room, the devil tried to flee and howled that it was here that he lost all the fruits of his labors, on account of the brethren's humility. Humility, above all, means being grounded in the Truth.

In our discussion on how regular chapter is held in each of our communities, we were amazed to see the rich tapestry of experiences. For this reason, we wished to share with you some of the ideas and thoughts which came from our discussion. While both positive and negative experiences were reported, the overall impression was positive. Chapter or a community meeting is held on a weekly basis in most of our monasteries. Many of the monasteries hold the traditional chapter of faults once a month, others at particular points in the liturgical year. Some monasteries do not hold this form of chapter due to unhappy experiences in the past. One sister spoke of the wonderful experience it has been for her right from her first days in the monastery. She said: "Seeing the sisters show their weaknesses has helped me to show mine, and to love each of my sisters more. It is always a time of grace for me."

Most of the monasteries hold chapters where reflections on selected scripture passages are shared. One community engages in this type of reflection specifically to build up their capacity for listening to each other. This practice prepares them to listen in other discussions when the topic is more difficult. Other sources which have provided fruitful chapter reflections and discussions are: texts from LCM, encyclical letters, letters of the Master of the Order, letters from the vicar after a visitation, or other monastic texts. Usually the prioress gives the main reflection at the chapter before the rest of the community adds their reflections, but in some communities it may be a different sister each time who gives the main reflection. One sister reported that in her community, chapters which have a difficult topic for discussion almost always end with coffee, ice cream and recreation. Mention was also made of the beloved custom of the Solemn Chapters for Christmas and the Annunciation – highlighting the Order's devotion to the Incarnate Word – where one of the members of the novitiate gives the homily.

We are called to pursue communion through our manner of government, LCM tells us (1.V). This we can do in a special way during regular chapter where, in charity and humility, we reflect together on how we are living the way of life which our blessed father Dominic has made for us. Truly, *how good and how pleasant it is when sisters dwell together in unity...there the Lord gives His blessing: Life forever. (Ps. 132)*

Original: English

# Meeting of the Prioresses and Delegates of the Monasteries of Eastern and Central Europe - Grodek, Krakow - June 2007

*Sr. Breda Carroll, OP  
Drogheda, Ireland*

## **Attendance:**

**Sisters** - the prioresses and delegates from the following monasteries – Krakow: Sr. Roza and Sr. Imelda; St Anna: Sr. Joanna and Sr. Agnieszka; Radonie: Sr. M Dominika and Sr. Bernadetta; Vilnius: Sr. Zdislawa and Sr. Faustyna; Prague: Sr. Pavla and Sr. Josefa; Znojmo: Sr. Anezka **Invited guests** – Oslo: Sr. Anne-lise; Drogheda: Sr. Mairead and Sr. Breda

**Brothers** – Fr. Manuel Merten – General promoter of the nuns; Fr Jozef Pociecha OP - Promoter for the nuns of Poland; Fr Andrzej Ponikowski – translator; Fr. Raymond from the Curia - Socius of the Master for Eastern and Central Europe; Fr. Krzysztof Poplawski, Polish Provincial (for the first morning); Fr. Tom Jordan – Dublin.

## **Theme of the Meeting: The Chapter in Dominican Life and Spirituality**

**Speakers:** Fr. Krzysztof Poplawski OP, Polish Provincial – “The Chapter in Dominican Life”

Fr. Tom Jordan OP, Dublin – “The Chapter as revision of life”

Sr. Anne-lise, Lunden Kloster, Oslo – “The History of the Chapter in the Dominican Order. Our authority is our spirituality – a modern significance and experience.”

**Moderator:** Fr. Manuel Merten, OP



## **Introduction**

Sr. Roza opened the meeting by welcoming us all to Krakow during this special year commemorating the 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the foundation of the nuns and the 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of St. Jacek.

The theme for this year's meeting: **The Role of the Chapter for Dominican life and Spirituality** seems to be a topic which is very much in vogue at present. Last year the prioresses from the German speaking monasteries chose it as the theme for their meeting. In addition some



monasteries have asked Fr Manuel for some training in communication skills in order to help them with their chapter meetings. For example the community at Fatima – see Monialibus No 16.

Why is the chapter important for Dominicans? We find the following quote from the Primitive Constitutions: "Consequently our government is communitarian in a special way, for superiors ordinarily take office through election by the brethren (sisters) and confirmation by a higher superior. Furthermore, through chapter and council, communities in many ways have a role in exercising their own government and in settling important matters." (Nr. 7)  
See also LCM No 181.

Then Fr. Manuel referred to a Maltese newspaper which expressed surprise that Fr. Paul Cremona OP was selected as the new bishop of Malta – they had expected another dignitary – in their eyes Fr. Paul was just a friar. In his life he had ups and downs but always did what he was asked to do. Fr. Manuel drew the following conclusions: I quote in full:

"I think this newspaper touched the core of what we will deal with during the next few days, when we address the importance of the Chapter for Dominican Government and Dominican Contemplative life. It is the Chapter which enables us to avoid an understanding of government and religious life as having a "career" in the sense of climbing a ladder, of "lording over others" or "exercising authority over our brothers or sisters"; it is in fact the Chapter which enables the "up and downs", which helps to hold on to an understanding of what our life is about: being at the service of our sisters, our brothers, the Order, the Church, Jesus Christ - and thus making a real career, when the Lord will finally say to us (John 15, 14 - 16): "You are my friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you."

To come to a close: I consider it the final goal of our Chapter meetings, that this "expression of our democratic tradition" supports our seeking for a correct and life-long understanding of our personal as well as of our common "career". There is no ladder to climb in order to become a "dignitary" - our dignity exists in being a servant no matter to what service we are actually called. The only thing what matters is that the Lord may finally call us "his friends".

The discussion which followed dealt with the advantages of having a tractatus before prioral elections. Sr. Pavla, Josefa and Sr. Anne-lise shared with us the experiences of their communities in Prague and Oslo. Both communities held a tractatus with and also without outside help. Both said they found it a positive experience and they had learned from their mistakes. None of the other communities represented had tractatus. Fr. Krzyszytof told us about their experience of tractatus at the last Provincial chapter – which was a very positive experience.

### **Reflection and sharing on our experience of Chapter our monasteries**

In this meeting Fr. Manuel asked us to reflect individually (for 15 minutes) on the following questions:

1. What has been my most impressive experience regarding community chapter?
2. What has been my worst experience with community chapter?
3. What do I like most about how chapter meetings are held in our community?
4. What would I like to change in how chapter meetings are held in our community?

Then we met in groups of four sisters – (not from the same community) and shared our reflections. One sister from each group prepared a short report which we then shared in a plenary session – keeping in mind the following questions:

1. How did you experience your group work?

## 2. Is there anything helpful for the others?

The following are the feedbacks from this plenary session:

- some of the **positive aspects** of our community meetings:
  - when we are able to talk honestly and openly with each other
  - when we listen to each other
  - at chapter of faults the experience of joy when one admits one's failures and experience forgiveness by others and come away feeling closer to each other
  - when we encourage each other
  - when we move towards consensus after perhaps many arguments
- the most common **difficulties** experienced with regard to community discussions:
  - when one sister disrupts the meeting by being overly aggressive
  - when only bad things are spoken about
  - fear of each other
  - when one person bullies a community
  - when community meetings become a place where everyone throws out her emotions
  - when a meeting lacks structure and continues indefinitely with the result that everyone gets tired.
  - When the agenda is not announced clearly and in good time
  - When we experience discouragement instead of encouragement
  - Sometimes it happens that the very sisters who stress the importance of communication are the ones who in reality block it!
- **suggestions on how to improve** the quality of our community meetings:
  - Seek ways to overcome mutual fear
  - More co-operation
  - Mutual confidence
  - Encourage each other instead of knocking each other
  - Have hope in spite of the difficulties
  - Seek ways to avoid humiliating people but instead seek to become humble together
  - Important to love each other outside the chapter in daily life
  - Differentiate between essentials and accidentals
  - Prepare for meeting – agenda in good time, structure, leader (prioress or another sister), secretary who will take minutes and write a report,
  - work towards consensus – take time and patience not to take decisions too quickly
  - keep to agenda and finish on time.

The prioress of each community shared with us how community meetings function in her community – then Fr. Manuel asked the other representative of her community if she would like to add anything.

Some points which emerged from this sharing:

- need for forgiveness and reconciliation
- learn to apologise to each other
- need to learn to facilitate and stop a discussion which is a disaster – but always promise to come back
- sometimes it is also necessary to stop a useful discussion – e.g. when the time limit is passed! But again always promise to come back
- sometimes we can have a good discussion where everything is said but not said by everyone!
- Important for the moderator not to force issues and not to be biased.

- Community meetings and discussions are meaningful only when a prioress trusts her sisters and would like to know what they wish. Unless she is prepared to listen to their ideas and with the community search for the truth together it is more honest for her to say “this is what I as prioress want you to do; this is how I wish the community to act etc”

### **Reflection and sharing on the Gospel – Mark 7:24 – 30 with a view to creating some basic rules for community meetings**

Fr. Manuel asked us to reflect individually on the Gospel passage of Mark 7:24 – 30 bearing in mind the following points:

1. Do you discover any particular behaviour when communication takes place?
2. What do you think caused the miracle to finally happen?
3. Is there anything you could learn from this part of the Gospel?

After personal reflection he asked us to meet with one other sister in whom we had confidence and

1. share the outcome of our meditation
2. formulate some basic rules for any communication - while distinguishing between
  - a. rules helpful before communication
  - b. during communication
  - c. after the process of communication.

Later we were asked to meet in the same group of 4 sisters in which we had worked on the previous day and

1. put together the basic rules which each had come up with,
2. discuss their practicality and
3. decide on which are of common value.
4. These rules were to be written as short as possible and left with Fr Manuel by 8 pm.

Many sisters said that they had enjoyed this exercise! And found it enriching.

### **Some Important points which were noted**

The main points which emerged from our sharing focused on the change which came about when the Vatican Council II asked religious to reclaim their charism.

We as Dominicans needed to reclaim Dominic’s vision of common responsibility. There is a general tension in the Church and the Order between the hierarchical model and the fraternal model of dealing with issues. Each of us must ask ourselves “which is the model to which I have a tendency?”

1. Do I feel that the prioress must solve all problems or do I feel responsible for the common good of the community?
2. As prioress do I feel responsible for everything or do I involve each of my sisters?

The same can be true regarding our expectations of a visitation

1. Is the visitor seen as one who can/should solve all problems? Or
2. Is the visitor one who supports the community – thus enabling them to solve their own problems?

### **Distinction between community meetings and chapter meetings**

At chapter the prioress is in charge – at chapter the community votes and makes decisions.

At community meetings a sister other than the prioress may act as moderator. In this case the prioress stays back and leaves the moderator in charge. Make sure that the meeting is not decisive and do not confuse ideas with decisions. It helps the quality of the meeting when it ends when supposed to end - unless something very important is at stake – to check that it is important let the community vote to clarify if it is important or not.

## Basic rules for community meetings

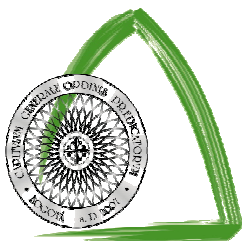
Manuel had co-ordinated and combined the **basic rules** which each group had given him the evening before. You have already got a copy of these from your prioress. I only add here a few comments while Fr. Manuel was going through the list with the plenary session:

- keep in mind that our Creator made us all different! If I only speak to those of same mind I fail to take seriously the Lord's idea.
- Try to be aware and get rid of prejudices – this in fact is difficult as we have no idea that our judgements are prejudiced. The fact that we have prejudices does not necessarily mean sin – but simply our human condition – but not to be open and learn might be sin.
- Importance not to lose hope
- Listening – since we think that we know each other it often happens that as soon as a sister opens her mouth and says 3 words we think that we know what she is going to say .... But maybe this time she intends to say something different – if we are working out our argument then we will not listen to what is being said.
- There is a discipline involved if we are to wait and listen – this is often difficult when we live so close to each other.
- Ask for clarification – imagine a situation: if someone starts to argue immediately against, then the sister who has spoken will not feel that she was really heard but if she is asked for clarification then she feels that the others are interested to know how she feels regarding a particular issue.
- Because communication is difficult misunderstanding is the ordinary outcome while understanding is the miracle!
- It is important to bear in mind that there are patterns in the manner which we understand things – the fact that others do not see things our way does not necessarily mean that the others are wrong and we are right and vice versa – it is often just a different way of understanding.

## Conclusion

At the beginning there seemed to be an ideal model of what chapter meetings ought to be but what has emerged from these days is that each community needs to work things out for themselves and even after years of trial and error, the need to continue to search together continues in order to improve the quality of our life together. We go home strengthened and full of hope and ready to put into practice what we have learned.

Original: English



## BOGOTÁ 2007: A GENERAL CHAPTER HELD 2600 METERS NEARER TO THE STARS

*Sr. Isabel M<sup>a</sup> Orenes Fernández, OP  
Federation of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary  
(Spain)*

I once read—I no longer recall where—that artists are people who are able to express ordinary things with beauty. It is one thing to say that a city is 2600 metres above sea level, and quite another to say that a city is 2600 metres nearer to the stars. This city is BOGOTÁ. “Welcome, brothers and

sisters to this house situated 2600 metres nearer to the stars”. With these words Fr. José Gabriel Mesa, OP, provincial of the Province of St. Luis Beltrán (Colombia), ended his welcome speech to all the brethren in the General Chapter of Provincials. As I listened to these words, my thoughts went to the Virgin Mary, the Star of Evangelization, the Light which always leads us to God. To the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother of the Holy Rosary, Queen of Colombia, I commended all the works of the General Chapter.

Last January when I received the invitation to attend the General Chapter of Provincials I felt a great joy—not only for the privilege of taking part in such an important event, but also because I was sure that I was going to have an experience which would help me to grow in my faith as well as in my vocation as a contemplative nun in the Order of Preachers. From that moment I started to prepare myself spiritually, reading many things about the Order such as the letters of the different Masters, books of Dominican spirituality and history, and especially, praying for the success of the Chapter.

I was not sure what I was to do at the General Chapter, but I was not worried about this. On the one hand I love adventure, and on the other hand, being an extrovert, I have no difficulty relating to other people; and besides, I am able to adapt easily to new situations.

While in Bogotá, I heard the brothers asking: “What are these nuns doing here?” Then I realized that perhaps the main reason for my presence there was simply to remind our brothers, the friars, that we, the nuns, are part of the Order and that all of us need each other to make the charism of St. Dominic alive in the Church. Well, what I truly received most was fraternity. I was moved by the brothers from English- and French- speaking countries who conversed with me despite their limited Spanish, and I was also moved by those who could not speak Spanish at all but simply smiled at me. However, I had long conversations with those who were able to speak Spanish. They helped me to learn more about the reality of the Order in the world and also about all their apostolic works. An Order full of Hope and life opened before my eyes.

I arrived in Bogotá on the night of the 15<sup>th</sup> of July with Sr. Rosario and Sr. Támara, both from the Roman Congregation. The Dominican students were waiting for us at the airport. They were very polite and drove us to the Monastery. The main entrance of the Monastery was well decorated with the many flags of the different countries where the Order is present. A group of students dressed in their Dominican habits welcomed us when we arrived at the Monastery. I loved this sign of fraternity. I could see what Fr. Orlando Rueda, OP, our efficient secretary, had told me about the brothers of Colombia. As the days went by their kindness only increased.

On Wednesday, the 18<sup>th</sup> of July, the General Chapter began with the votive Mass of the Holy Spirit. The church was decorated with flags and beautiful flowers. Everything pointed to the importance of the event. The day before, the 17<sup>th</sup> of July, I found a stack of papers at the door of my cell with the Master’s *Relatio* and a note on it saying: “To be read by tomorrow”. When I saw this I said to myself: “This is serious,” and immediately I started to read them. These were not the only papers I had to read; once we had gathered together to work in the Commissions we were told that the document we were going to elaborate had to be in continuity with the minutes of the previous Chapters, but without being repetitious. Then I said to myself: “Oh my God, I do not have any idea about these minutes,”—never having been at a Chapter before. Time was flying, but I managed to fill my head with all the information I needed. I really enjoyed it, as I have been fond of reading since I was a child. Scanning the minutes I could see that there were some problems which had



been left unsolved for a long time. We realized that it was necessary to have a look at them, even though repetition would be unavoidable.

My wish was fulfilled as I could take part in the Commission on Formation. There were eleven of us, and the work was intense and very interesting. Everything was very well organized and was directed by Fr. Alexis Páez Olivares, OP, provincial of Costa Rica. First, each member expressed his opinion about the topic; then the document was broken down into sections, and we were divided into different groups to work on each part; and finally, we discussed our points of view. After all these steps the voting was carried out. After long hours of deep reflection our document was finished and ready to be presented in the Plenary, which is more or less like taking the sheep to the shearers, so to speak. When a document is finished before it is presented to the Plenary, photocopies of it are given out to the friars to critique. They can then amend the document, that is, they are allowed to suggest any change or to eliminate any points they do not agree with. The Commission is free to accept or refuse the emendations. Should the emendation be refused, the friar who made it can ask for the support of other brothers and if there are enough friars who support him then the Commission is required to modify the document.

I was told that the presentation of documents at the Plenary would be a bit boring, but I found that I really enjoyed watching how the documents were being reformed and enriched with other friars' contributions. In fact, the way of proceeding in a General Chapter reveals the style of the Dominican government which defines our spirituality. After the dialogue the process of voting decides if something should be approved or refused, and we see how everybody is responsible for the end result.

During the Chapter I really had very exciting moments. Beyond doubt, one of those moments was the death of Fr. Dominique Renouard. Last year I met him in Fanjeaux and I still have very nice memories of him. Our Lord visited us in a surprising way. This event enriched us because we had the possibility of demonstrating to each other our testimony of faith, hope and true fraternity. I was really moved by some attitudes such as: a friar who suggested postponing the work of the Chapter for some hours so that we could assimilate such shocking news; watching tears running down some faces; and, especially, the quiet and prayerful atmosphere which was present all day long. Death is certainly an event which sets reality before our eyes. We are citizens of Heaven and we are journeying there. In that moment each of us needed to reflect on our own life and return to God. What does God want to tell us with the sudden death of a brother in a General Chapter? For Fr. Dominique it was a grace to die accompanied by the whole Order and for all of us, who could experience his death *in situ*, it was also a grace.

If I had to describe what a General Chapter is, I would use the words of Fr. Michael Mascari, OP, provincial of the Province of St. Albert the Great in USA, in his homily on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August: "A Chapter is a sacred time and space in which we recall St. Dominic and the vision that he and our earliest brothers had for the Order. Here in Bogotá, St Dominic and his vision once again come to life, as we strive to discover how we may best continue the mission to preach and teach, not as individuals but as a community of brothers, enlivened by prayer and a love of study."

The beautiful and well prepared liturgical celebrations truly reminded us that we were in a sacred time and space. To celebrate the faith in the present moment is not only to commemorate the past, but to launch out into the future. Celebrating our faith in a community fosters communion and helps our relationships to become more transparent.

At last the 8<sup>th</sup> of August arrived, the Solemnity of our Father St. Dominic. I was looking forward to celebrating this day. Over the years, as I have been getting to know the figure of St Dominic, my love for him has been continually increasing. At the beginning of this Jubilee Year I was pondering what I might do to live the 8<sup>th</sup> of August in a special way. Celebrating this day in Colombia and within

the framework of a General Chapter was like a dream—a dream come true. God granted me this gift. During first Vespers of the 8<sup>th</sup> of August, the Master of the Order invited me to speak to the friars. With fear and trembling I shared the experience of my vocation as a Dominican contemplative nun and my experience in the General Chapter. I took advantage of this opportunity to ask our brothers not to forget about the nuns, as we need their presence and their preaching to live our vocation authentically. Of course, I reminded them that we, the nuns, will always be with them through our prayers. The Dominican charism is very unique and it is the duty of all of us to keep it alive in the Church and for the Church.

I would like to thank the Master of the Order for inviting me to the Chapter and for all that he has contributed to the Chapter from his own experience as a person and as a friar. I am very grateful to the brothers of the Province of St Luis Beltrán of Colombia for all the work they carried out for the success of the Chapter and especially for enlivening the Chapter with their happy and friendly spirit. I cannot compare this Chapter with any others, as this is the first one I have attended, but in my opinion, such an excellent result cannot be improvised.

I would like to express my thanks to the friars of my Commission. They let me work with them on equal terms. They made me feel as if I were with my family. Last but not least, I am very grateful to Sr. Clara Mercedes, OP - Prioress of the Monastery of Ocaña (Colombia) - for all that we lived together during those days. Not only did we share the same physical space such as the cell and the table, but we could also share our time for prayer, and we talked about our experiences as Dominican contemplative nuns. From the moment I met her, I felt as if I had known her all my life.

Some events mark our life so deeply that they need not be written in a diary, since they have been engraved in our heart. This has been BOGOTÁ 2007 for me.

Original: Spanish

## **Contemplative Missionary Life or Missionary Contemplative Life?**

***Sr. Mary of the Savior, OP  
India***

In September, Fr. Brian Pierce, OP (who in January will succeed Fr. Manuel Merten, OP as Promoter for the nuns) visited the new foundation of nuns here in India. What has it been like, he asked me, your experience of being a Dominican nun and a missionary? (He knows my history well, since he used to visit us frequently during the years that he was in Honduras and I was in the monastery in the neighboring country of Nicaragua). And now, once again, I find myself here in the first Dominican cloister in India. When

Fr. Brian suggested a short writing for *Monialibus*, I said to myself: “There certainly are people with more experience than myself. In fact, the other nuns who came as ‘missionaries’ from Spain to India five years ago, could share much. Even Fr. Brian himself, who has been trying for many years to combine missionary work and contemplative life-style in Latin America, could share his own experience.”

As I think about Dominican nuns who have had “missionary” experiences, the categories themselves keep shifting their boundaries. But the same two questions seem to be important. First of all, what do we carry to our destination, what do we offer? And secondly, what do we receive, what are we given?

I am surprised to find that personal answers to both questions are very clear to me, in spite of the brevity of my stay in Nicaragua (three years) during the 1990’s, and the as-yet-brief duration (a year and a half) of my stay here in the south of India.

The context in Nicaragua was Christian and Catholic. Re-evangelization would probably be the right name for what Christians can *bring* there. What I personally received was a shift of the center of my religious attention toward ***Cristo hermano*** (Christ as brother).

In the little Dominican formation house where I now live in India, the context is three-dimensional: Muslim, Catholic, and Hindu – and in that same order these three different contexts daily make their mark upon our consciousness.

Again there is surprising clarity for me about what I have already received. It came like a wedding gift on the first two-hour ride from the airport to the monastery. I glimpsed the sea through the window off to the left, while women, dressed in their beautiful saris, walked along litter-strewn roads, surrounded by ox-carts and seemingly endless poverty – all of this mixed among the visible ruins of the British Empire. As I contemplated the beautiful red soil and the coconut palms, suddenly it came to me: “The Lord is Lord of the whole universe! I haven’t even begun to realize that!”

And what offering do I bring? What am I sent to say? Together with the beautiful Angelus bell of the Mary Rani church near us, I am here to preach the incarnation of God. That seems perfectly clear to me, and the realization came into my life like another permanent gift: a mission for which one would do everything possible.

The gifts, and their clarity, did not come as the result of time, diligent search, or “trials endured.” These came *after* the insights, and emerged from a swirling world of intense change experienced by skin and spirit. (Though the comparison has far too much drama in it, I recognize something like Antony’s “beatings by demons” – which left him nearly annihilated – in that experience called *cultural transition*).

I am convinced that the gifts given and received by one or another missionary can be just as clear to people who stay at home. “Of course!” they will say, in response to our dearest and most powerful insights. Could it be that some of us need – for our Dominican vocation to be illumined from within – the “missionary” experience? Blessed be the God who knows which persons need what!

Will there be other gifts from India, other clarities? One such is already forming, more slowly than the former ones: the validity of the contemplative aspect of life, the inner journey, which India has for centuries been prepared to teach us. It has been hard to recognize this aspect in the busyness of a still-new foundation, in the midst of a young, energetic, active house, whose members have experienced very little of inter-religious study and dialogue as I knew it in my earlier years in Canada and in the USA.

But India is not going to disappoint me, nor Catholic India either – the India known by Jules Monchanin, Henri LeSaux, and Bede Griffith, and the India known by contemporary Catholic Indian theologians and spiritual directors. The conviction taking shape is that my earlier ideals of contemplative life were not wrong, but incomplete without *Cristo hermano*, and that now they should be re-appropriated.



It is time to learn again from India about contemplation, a time for the awakening – as one Indian spiritual writer puts it – of the Hindu in me and of the Christian in my Hindu acquaintances. Awareness grows that religious diversity, including the diversity among the unique persons in our very own community of Catholic contemplatives, flows from our being “prayed” by the Spirit. Everything I read or sing in the Liturgy of the Eucharist and of the Hours, confirms this growing awareness.

What will I understand, what will I be like, what will my deepest desires be after a few more years of this cultural and religious “free fall”? I have no idea, except that the gifts already given have promised, in their profound orthodoxy, to be permanent.

In the tender Providence of God, there has come to some of us nuns, on top of the “robe” of our beautiful Dominican way of life, “the ring and the sandals” of some share in a missionary vocation. Should we find a way to talk about this together?

*(Sr. Mary of the Savior is a member of the Monastery of the Blessed Sacrament in Farmington Hills, Michigan, USA, and at present helping in the formation of the new foundation of nuns in India)*

Original: English

## **MONASTERY OF MARY IMMACULATE (OUR LADY OF HEALTH) PATZCUARO, MICHOACAN, MEXICO**



### **HISTORY**

Founded in 1747 by the nuns from the Monastery of St. Catherine of Siena, Morelia, Michoacan, Mexico.

This monastery has the special distinction of having been petitioned for by the Blessed Virgin herself, when she appeared, wearing the Dominican habit, to Josefa Antonia Gallegos, a humble and virtuous woman known as “la Beatita de Patzcuaro.” (*beata* is a woman who wears a religious habit)

and is engaged in works of charity). The Blessed Virgin charged Josefa to entreat the ecclesiastical authorities to establish a Dominican monastery of “Catherinian nuns.”

Miraculous occurrences surrounded the process of transaction and construction of the monastery, occurrences by which divine providence had shown how pleasing was, in the eyes of the Virgin, the advent of Dominican nuns in Patzcuaro whose contemplative mission would be to assist the Venerated Shrine of Our Lady in its dedication to the health of the sick.

The Virgin’s statue was fashioned and sculpted from **corn stalk paste**, an art technique typical of the Indian culture of that region. It was done under the direction of the Venerable Vasco de Quiroga, Bishop Primate of Michoacan and great benefactor, teacher and father of the Indian villagers in the region, the scope of which was much more extensive than the present Archdiocese of Morelia.

The building of the monastery was funded by donations of wealthy people of Patzcuaro under the direction and administration of Father Eugenio Ponce de Leon, who was the confessor of Josefa Antonia Gallegos. The arrival of the Foundresses – seven solemnly professed nuns – took place on 14 October 1747.

Less than a century had transpired when the peace of the community and the tranquility of secular society were disrupted by the ascent of Benito Juarez to the Presidency of the country. On 20 May 1859, President Juarez issued the **Decree of Exclaustration** and on 12 July of the same year, it was followed by the **Decree of Reform Laws** which enforced the expropriation of ecclesiastical property, the suppression of religious orders and the prohibition of new religious foundations. For the Dominican monastery as well as for all convents, monasteries and the Church in general, this was the beginning of an epoch of unutterable sufferings and a terrible crucible for their faith and fidelity to the vows they made to God.

Four exclaustrations resulted in the dwindling number of religious, not by defection from religious life but through other causes. All the sisters proved their great spirit of sacrifice and love of God to whom they had consecrated their whole being. Due to the adverse situation, new vocations were rerouted to Spain where they arrived at the Monastery of Bayona. Within two years, two of them had returned; Sr. Margaret of the Sacred Heart Calvillo Cortes and her sister Elena, the latter having returned in ill health upon arrival at the capital of Mexico and died at the Monastery of St. Catherine. Another group of six sisters arrived at the monastery in Calatayud, three of whom returned to Mexico. Other sisters who died exclaustrated bore witness to their faith and hope to the uttermost degree, but always with the experience of the love of God and of fraternal charity toward their other sisters in dispersal. When the community left for the first time, there were close to forty nuns; when they reunited in 1949, they were only nineteen, all of whom were very old and infirm.

It was not until 1956 when they reopened the novitiate and were able to receive new vocations.

It may well be mentioned that the exclaustrations and religious persecutions happened at intervals. At the end of the first three periods of open persecution, the sisters were able to return to their monastery and renew their contemplative life for several years until there arose a new wave of disturbance and persecution. At the end of the fourth exclaustration, the sisters were not able to return to the original monastery. When the statue of Our Lady of Health was transferred to the collegiate church, the sisters endeavored to find a way to live near Our Lady’s shrine. They succeeded in obtaining an old and small hostelry at the edge of the collegiate church. Gradually, they were able to acquire, by purchasing and through donations, two houses close to the hostelry.

The present monastery is the result of adaptation and remodeling done between 1977 and 1983. It is a colonial style monastery. The community is made up of twenty nuns in solemn vows and four sisters in temporary vows.

(Translated by Sister Maria-Agnes Karasig, OP of Summit, New Jersey, U.S.A.)

Translator's note: Patzcuaro means "place of stones" in the Purepecha language. It is a city in the central part of the state of Michoacan, Mexico. Founded in 1540, the city was developed as a religious center. The natives believed Patzcuaro to be the ante-chamber to heaven. The Basilica of Our Lady of Health, the city's patron is located downtown. The original monastery founded by the Dominican nuns in 1747 is now a center for local artisans. (Researched from the website)

Original: Spanish

**Mother Mary Peter Bergin, OP**  
**2 December 1918 – 29 May 2007**  
**Fatima, Portugal**

Mother Mary Peter entered religious life as a young girl leaving her home and family near the town of Callan in county Kilkenny (Ireland) to go to the eternal city of Rome. That was in 1936. There she made Profession of Vows on 13 February 1938 and soon after she was sent to the Monastery in Camden (New Jersey) USA where she spent the next 20 years of her religious life. Again, as a Dominican and prepared to respond to the call of the itinerant life...even from the cloister...she was called to the Glasgow Monastery as Novice Mistress and from there was called to Fatima as Prioress. Here she remained to fulfill the final 48 years of her life as a Dominican Nun of the Perpetual Rosary. Altogether, Mother Mary Peter's religious life spanned 70 years. She served her Communities at various times as Prioress, Sub-Prioress, Procurator and Mistress of Novices.

Though not one to speak often in a personal way, Mother Peter, when asked, related that the seed of her vocation was planted by her own Mother who at home would speak to visitors about the joy she would have if the Lord called one of her children to the priestly or religious life. Hearing this more than once, young Brigid Bergin began to feel within herself a call from the Lord. We are here today because she answered that call and remained faithful, very faithful to the end when her Beloved Savior and Spouse called her home yesterday at 3:30 in the afternoon. It was Pentecost Tuesday...and we Dominicans recall that on Pentecost Tuesday in the year 1233 the holy relics of St Dominic, founder of the Order of Preachers, were first translated in the city of Bologna. It was the day of the miracle of the sweet perfume that emanated from the tomb of the Saint upon its opening. Our Sisters were praying the Chaplet in honor of St Dominic just before Mother Mary Peter passed away.

We can say with conviction that the Holy Rosary was her life. Even when very ill recently she did not neglect her Rosary...and when she could no longer pray the whole Rosary it was only necessary for one of the Sisters to recite the first part of the Hail Mary and she would respond immediately with the second part: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners..."

Mother Peter not only prayed the Rosary but 'preached' this prayer and lived it. Her patience and endurance during this final year of her life on earth was heroic. She was always ready to encourage the Sisters and listen with an attentive heart radiating compassion and joy, like St. Dominic, who founded the Nuns 800 years ago. 2007 is a Jubilee Year for us, and the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Apparitions of Our Lady of the Rosary of Fatima, a fitting occasion for our dear Sister to enter the joy of the Lord.

May she rest in peace! Alleluia!

Original: English