

BENEDICTINE NUNS IN THE REGION OF TODAY'S CROATIA

It is a great privilege for me to have the opportunity to be with all of you today. I was asked to give a presentation on the profile of the Benedictine Nuns in Croatia.

So I will start with a brief history of the Benedictine nuns in our region and then I'll continue about the nuns today.

Female monasteries had existed in the regions of today's Croatia even before the arrival of the Croats in the 7th century, probably even before Christians were granted religious freedom in the 4th century. So we know that in Srijem (Syrmia), during the time of Emperor Diocletian, seven virgins were tortured together. In some documents they were referred to as *Septem Virgines canonicae*, which would indicate that these martyr virgins were living according to particular church rules, without, however, being nuns in the strict sense of the word.

Near the town of Poreč in Istria there might have existed a female monastery in the 5th or the 6th century. Whether the women on the mosaic of the 6th-century Poreč cathedral were some kind of nuns, we cannot know. Furthermore, we cannot be certain whether the oldest religious female communities in Istria were Benedictine nor do we know whether communities of Benedictine monks had existed in those areas before them.

A more certain proof of the monastic life of women in these regions can be seen in the last dated inscription that was found among the ruins of the Roman city of Salona (near Split).

During the 4 centuries following the destruction of this town (around the year 614) there was but scarce information indicating the possibility that over that period female cenobites existed in these regions.

The existence of Benedictine nuns in our regions goes back to the 11th century, when all of Europe was swept by enthusiasm for religious life, with the first monastery being established in Dalmatia. Like in most cases, the Benedictine nuns came to Dalmatia following Benedictine monks.

In connection with Benedictine monasteries, St. Benedict forbade that among his followers the distinction be made between slaves and freemen. Even less a distinction was to be made between lower-class members (or commoners) and noblemen. In fact, the distinction between the higher and the lower wasn't so significant as the distinction between your and my monastery. Therefore, when there were not enough noblemen's daughters, commoners' daughters were

accepted without hesitation. In the same way, two insufficiently filled monasteries could easily be merged into one, regardless of the fact that in one of them, by pure chance, there were noble women and in the other commoners.

In the Middle Ages, there were far more monasteries for noble women than commoners, despite the fact that there were far more common or lower-class families than those of noble birth. The main reason, however, for so many cenobitic communities consisting of noble women was the fact that there existed a comparatively large number of unmarried noble women. On the one hand, the ruling aristocratic class wasn't allowed to marry except among themselves, and on the other hand, limits were imposed on marrying as such, to avoid dividing or diminishing the rich inheritance of the old patrician houses by giving away rich endowment. So female monasteries made it possible to provide an appropriate, yet cheap way of providing for those women who, due to the structure of the feudal society, had to remain unmarried through their entire life.

This class elitism, which was so out of accordance with the principles of the gospel, as well as with the Regula, caused a great deal of damage to the quality of the rising young generation of religious sisters and also contributed to the decrease of discipline. Due to this, as early as at the beginning of the Modern age some monasteries with aristocratic members made it certain that one third of the nuns were of a low-class (common) origin.

The monks in the majority of cases chose the countryside as the place of their monasteries while the nuns regularly stayed connected with towns. During the Middle Ages it was practically unthinkable that nuns could exist far away from a town, because of the arrangement of a female community as well as for security reasons, because life in the country was full of risks. It could, however, occur that Benedictine nuns had to stay in the country, but only for a short time or as refugees during a war.

The nuns proved, however, to be more persevering than monks. So, when the Napoleonic wars broke out in these areas there were about a hundred nuns in seventeen monasteries. Many of these monasteries, as well as those of other religious orders in the coastal parts of the land, were abolished during the period of the Austrian rule as well as the French, according to the principle that one monastery for each town can be left for the sake of the education of girls.

In accordance with that rule, nine Benedictine monasteries were spared, eight of which are still alive and inhabited. These are, starting from the north: St. Mary (Sv. Marija) in Krk, St. Peter (Sv. Petar) in Cres, St. Andrew (Sv. Andrija) in

Rab, St. Margaret (Sv. Margarita) in Pag, St. Mary (Sv. Marija) in Zadar, St. Lucy (Sv. Lucija) in Šibenik, St. Nicholas (Sv. Nikola) in Trogir and St. John the Baptist (Sv. Krstitelj) in Hvar. The nuns of the ninth monastery (St. Rocco - Sv. Roko in Rijeka) emigrated after the World War II to Italy. The oldest two of the existing monasteries are those of Zadar and Trogir, both dating from the 11th ct., the youngest are those of Šibenik and Hvar, dating from the 17th ct. Today in Croatia, there are in total around 80 nuns.

Benedictine nuns have for many centuries played a significant and important role in the Church and in the society of Croatia. The first monasteries were founded by Croatian rulers and kings, like St. Mary (Sv. Marija) in Zadar and St. Nicholas (Sv. Nikola) in Trogir whose history as mentioned earlier, goes back to the 11th century.

Our presence in the Church as well as in the society has always been discreet but firm. The monasteries have always been schools and places for prayer and for work, for taking care of the national and cultural heritage. The monasteries exercised an important impact on the public life in the areas where they were situated; they were the promoters of economy, arts and various aspects of housework and education as well. The first girls' schools in this country are linked to Benedictine monasteries. Benedictine nuns have in the seclusion of their monasteries managed to protect and preserve valuable national treasures of culture and art. To witness this, let us remind ourselves of the museum collection of the Benedictine nuns in Zadar and Trogir. Other monasteries also have valuable treasures of culture and art collections but are not opened for the public exhibition.

Due to communism, the position of Benedictine nuns in the Church today and in the society is handicapped by the lack of continual advancement and firm walk within the recent happenings in the world in the last sixty or seventy years. The communist regime managed to distance our communities, their function and work even further, so the activity of the majority of the monasteries was reduced to a strenuous battle for their bare existence. During this period of time, even the contacts and the work with the people from outside were reduced to a minimum.

That was also the time when the Second Vatican Council took place. However, since at that time our monasteries lacked union and flow of information, engagement in adjusting our monastic life to the new circumstances wasn't sufficiently organized.

So the situation in our communities has always been a particular one: we have always had independence and autonomy on the one side but we have also been isolated from others on the other, and also too small to be of any major importance and potential for the Church and the society. Today our communities are predominantly elderly, with a small number of nuns and few new vocations. This is a problem for most of our communities and it is the biggest challenge we are facing today - the decline in the number of vocations. There's a big generation gap. It's hard to attract young people if the youngest in your community is 45 or 50."

This in turn makes it yet more difficult for our communities to have a certain influence and importance for the Church and the society in our country. Still, regardless of the size of our communities within the Church and in today's society, we are aware that now is the time to act and it lies with us to formulate our status and our structure for the present time and the future, where we will have smaller communities. Therefore, it will be more and more necessary for those smaller communities to interact. They will need each other to continue the dialogue and share with each other the talents of their members. Isolation option could be fatal. This means breaking out of any self-isolation to form a common understanding with those who differ from us and the willingness to broaden ourselves in the light of what we can learn from them.

Looking back at the long history of Benedictine nuns in our nation, we can say that our monasteries have had a clearly defined feeling and sense for the needs of our people. Here I especially want to point out the sensitiveness of our communities during the recent liberation war when for several years the refugees and displaced persons of all confessions and creeds were clothed and fed, given shelter and medicine. In this way we tried to reach to all people who were in need at that time.

Some of our communities were caring for kindergarten children in their monasteries, educating young generations in their schools, running orphanages during the periods of war and hunger, when at different times in history many were repeatedly deprived even of their daily bread. Along with other charity institutions and humanitarian organizations in and outside the Church, the nuns in Croatia dedicated a great deal of their time, effort and means to the needy. For a period of time during the last war of independence our shelters were known as the shelters of journey, a temporary home to many, a roof above the heads for those whose houses were destroyed, burnt or devastated, a place for those who had nowhere to eat, a pharmacy for the needy, as well as refreshment for the soul, an impulse of hope against every hope! Love always finds a way to conquer human misunderstanding, strife and separation!

Engagement for a fellow man in trouble is God's command. Those who follow and fulfill this command become a gift for the needy, for the poor, for Life itself.

In a way, our communities carry the burden of the people around us. Many people come to us, confide in us, share with us their hardest as well as their most beautiful experiences. We pray, especially for those in difficult personal circumstances. We try to welcome all who come to our monasteries, whether believers or unbelievers, to share the liturgy, meals, massage therapy and whatever else we can offer of monastic life and values. Therefore, we witness our faith in different ways - in responding to the needs of the people through the simple and earnest life that we lead, through our participation in the life of the surroundings, showing solidarity and giving assistance to those who come to us for our support.

Monasteries today can also contribute to the benefit of the people around us. In each monastery this is done in different ways, especially through education, e.g. teaching of music, lacework etc.

Our monasteries have never been trained in running a guest house and working with people who come to us seeking God and with a desire to refresh their faith in our communities. For us it is a big and complex assignment and it is not easy for us to establish such an organization and organize functioning of our communities in such a way. One reason is that we lack the knowledge as well as the practice, and the other reason lies in the fact that our communities are small and it exceeds our power to additionally run guest houses as well.

We need professional help in establishing guest houses, in animating our possible future guests and attracting people to spend time with God in our monasteries. It is also crucial to organize our liturgical celebrations well and make it possible for our guests to pray with us. This, too, calls for training and continual effort to have a vivid celebration of the liturgy of the hours. If that could be organized, every community would be more open and ready for the people outside, contacts would be established more easily and new vocations could be expected.

Futhermore, it is a particular challenge to share our inner spiritual prayer life with those who come to our churches and our guest houses. What people nowadays need most is God, peace and spirituality. Consuming people today have a big spiritual hunger and thirst for God. We need to recognize this hunger and respond directly to it, as a top priority.

How will our communities cope with these future challenges? It is certain that we need a sense of vision about the future, to serve the people of God, to be the witnesses of monastic life, in our own time. The challenge of being called into an unknown future is our challenge today. We are no longer called to do what we did 50 years ago. The needs are different and it is still hard to give up doing things

the way we have always done. The need for spirituality, prayer and work and simplicity is as great in our time today as it was for the nuns 50 years ago.

Therefore, our monasteries should not only be the places where enclosed nuns live but also the places where people come to draw strength for their everyday life on the way of faith following Jesus. That should be our basic activity, although we shall continue to guard our cultural values and treasures and help people in need as well.

So looking into our future is challenging. We can't and won't be the same kind of communities we were many years ago. The challenge is to let go of the past and in new ways, based on history, experience and hope, step into the future. That is, we need to contemplate upon new visions, make commitment to these visions and commitment to one another. Since we are the communities of conversion, our responsibility is not only to be the people of peace but also the people who are willing to move beyond the superficial changes onto the changes of the heart. The question our communities face today is more or less the same question the Benedictines of the sixth century faced. St. Benedict didn't try to reform Rome; but he began to build a new society in the FORM (shell) of the old one. He was faced with many questions like us today; regarding material goods, and personal relationships as he presented in his rule for beginners.

Whatever we do is part of our search for God. So, each member of the community is expected to make some contribution to the common good. This contribution results from the recognition and development of each person's talents. Our communities need to contemplate on talents, how to use them and search for new forms of work. The future also lies with the communities where nuns will serve more as advisors, providing guidance to the people struggling with questions of life and in this way giving the assurance that the Benedictine values are valid also for the technological society; we need to demonstrate to people that we are not bystanders.

These are some of the big challenges awaiting us in the near future. It is our mutual responsibility to share these challenges today and to make commitment to those challenges and visions for the future.

By way of a more solid administrative linking of all our monasteries (like e.g. CONGREGATION), it would be much easier and effective to meet the actual needs and achieve the fulfillment that our Christian conscience and this particular moment in history puts before us. The communication links within our Federation will have to be open to diversity and mutual support and allow the possibilities of new visions in mutual understanding and respect, solidarity and co-operation.

My conclusion is: there is a hope for Benedictines in Croatia. “I believe monastic life holds a key to the secret of stability, peace and love. We then have a responsibility towards the healing of society, to help, through our liturgy, our prayer life and our hospitality, through our Ora et Labora. This is the challenge of the new millennium for us in Croatia.” Certainly our world is greatly in need of gentle, healing hands. We desire to be witnesses of that healing and signs of hope in our days so **“That in all things, God may be glorified!”**

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