

THE PLACE OF HOPE IN BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY

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I. INTRODUCTION

I am very grateful for the invitation to be here in your midst and for the opportunity that this symposium provides me to reflect on the riches contained in the charism we share.

It is the first time that I find myself in a place where Benedictine women from all parts of the world are gathered... Over the years I have gradually discovered the wealth of our diversity. My first contact was with Benedictine women from the United States of North America who founded the monastery that I entered in 1980. Once there, I became acquainted with sister and brother Benedictines from other Mexican communities, most of them founded from other countries. I also got to know the sisters from the Federation of St. Scholastica and the other North American Federations. Over the years I have shared with sister and brother Benedictines from Latin America and the Caribbean. My contact with Benedictines from Europe, Asia, Africa and Oceania has been sporadic, and more on a one to one basis.

So today, thirty years after I began my monastic journey, my heart overflows with the joy of being present at this gathering. I can't help thinking that the experience of this symposium, is a little bit like savoring that gift that Benedict received when

In the dead of night he suddenly beheld a flood of light shining down from above, more brilliant than the sun, and with it every trace of darkness cleared away...

According to his own description, the whole world was gathered up before his eyes in what appeared to be a single ray of light¹.

This reunion brings St. Gregory's text to mind, because, on the one hand, I am convinced that one and the same Benedictine heart beats in the depths of our universal diversity, and on the other hand, because I have no doubt that we are passing through a historical moment of darkness, and we need the light, just as Benedict did, to shine brilliantly from above, giving us clarity in the midst of the gloom.

We have gathered here to share our lived experience of hope. For me Rudolfo Cardenal describes hope well when he says that Hope is the content of the promise of our mother and Father God, incarnate in Jesus Christ, untiringly open to the future, sustained and animated by the Divine *Ruah* as she recreates life in human history².

I find hope condensed in our tradition, like that marvelous something that allows us to see clearly even in the midst of the darkness of injustice, exclusion, discrimination and the innumerable forms in which the dignity of humans and of all of creation is denied.

I have learned from the native populations of the Americas that hope sometimes wears the robes of resistance when times are especially hard. It sustains and supports us in times of discouragement.

So even though:

¹ Dialogues, Book II, St. Gregory the Great, Chapter 35., translated by Zimmerman and Avery, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, USA, p. 71.

² Cf. IGLESIA VIVA, No. 240, Oct-Dec 2009, pp. 53-65, accessed in January, 2010 at <http://www.iglesiaviva.org/240/240-14RODOLFO.pdf>.

- the UN Climate Change Conference at Copenhagen last January was considered a failure, and we continue to live under the threat of global climatic change and natural disasters;
- even when Haiti, the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere was devastated by an earthquake last January, which is another tragedy to add to a long history of that country's subjection and exploitation;
- even when there seems to be no viable solution to end the complicity between corruption and impunity within the political and economic powers that be;
- even though the democracies of many countries are considered at best dysfunctional and at worst, failures;
- even when the Christian Churches and Religious Life itself at times seem to refuse to promote God's reign for humanity....

the promise, the hope is still alive because:

- The question "Who will go for us?" put to Isaiah (**Is 6,8**) springs forth from God's heart, a heart that takes pity on the battered people in every corner of the world; and that question once again is an invitation to God's disciples everywhere.
- The one who calls us is "merciful and gracious, abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (**Ex 34, 6**).
- God has told us "although the mountains may depart and the hills may be removed, my steadfast love shall not be removed from you" (**Is 54, 10**).
- As we discover that we are accomplices of God's mercy in the history of humanity, we receive the strength that only divine goodness can give.
- And finally, because the instruments of good works conclude with the invitation to "never lose hope in God's mercy". (**RB 4,74**)

I will be weaving my thoughts today around the theme that the organizing committee shared with me and I will offer the following elements for my reflection.

- My frame of reference will be a relational-holistic perspective
- I will begin by considering some situations that cry for hope in our world, in the Church and in Religious Life;
- I will then reflect upon some elements of Benedictine spirituality that, from my perspective, nourish and strengthen our hope;
- I will proceed to underline some aspects of our Benedictine experience that serve as yeast or leaven for hope, so that we can describe how the Benedictine Rule forms us in hope.
- Finally, I will share with you the sources that strengthen hope in my life.

II. A REFLECTION FROM A RELATIONAL-HOLISTIC PERSPECTIVE. Personal (with oneself) interpersonal and communitarian, socio-ecclesial (with others); theological (with God); cosmic (with the universe and all that exists.)

My point of departure is that of the love relationships which exist in the life of a well integrated person. Benedictine spirituality, firmly rooted in the Scriptures, recognizes that the Bible gives us a relational way: love of God and love of neighbor as we love ourselves, with our whole soul, our whole mind, our whole heart, and all our strength. (**Mt 22, 34-40; Mc 12, 28-34; Lc 10, 25**) (**RB 4, 1**).

Therefore our Benedictine way leads us into processes of integration that embrace the various dimensions of human consciousness: cognitive (mind), affective (heart), ethical, moral (the will and all of its strength); religious (soul). This integration makes it possible for us to love in a unified way and it is the condition for advancing on the pathways of conversion. "The workshop where we are to work hard and faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in community" (**RB 4, 78**).

At this point I would like to insert the hypothesis of my reflection: we are called to enter into processes that unify all the dimensions of human consciousness—cognitive (the mind), affective (the heart), ethical-moral, (our will with all of its strength and the actions that flow from it), religious-theological (the soul)—in order to live as integrated beings from our deepest self and to promote that other dimension of God’s dream for humanity: “that all may be one...” (**Jn 17, 22**).

This is a Christian and Benedictine proposal. The monastic dynamic encourages processes of integration in those who live in the “monastery”, which is the space where we ask God with most insistent prayer to bring to completion the divine work in our lives: that all may be one. As we persevere, striving to live in “*conversatio*”, the experience of God’s unconditional love gradually integrates all of the dimensions of our being, and so we become unified among ourselves in the midst of the diversity and plurality that characterize us. The result of all of this is that we live with transparency and coherence; that we do not separate our judgments from our feelings or our conduct from our beliefs. In this way our personal and social integrity and responsibility will not allow us “to say one thing and do another” or to settle into lives of contradiction and incoherence, and even come to justify those contradictions and incoherencies.

The Benedictine Rule avoids a dualistic interpretation of human existence; rather it considers the human person in its entirety. We see in the prologue the need to “prepare our hearts and bodies” (**RB P.40**) to follow Christ. In chapter seven, essential for structuring the human person, the sides of the ladder of humility are body and soul, in which our divine vocation has fitted the various steps of humility and discipline (**RB 7, 9**). When the Rule refers to our attitude during the Divine Office, it requires that our minds be in harmony with our voices (**RB 19, 7**). Furthermore, in the kitchen, the garden, the workshop, we are called to treat everything as sacred vessels of the altar and not to waste or neglect anything (**RB 31, 10-11**). This way of unity finds concrete expression in the good zeal which “supports with utmost patience one another’s weaknesses of body and character” (**RB 72, 5**).

Therefore, the key to understanding my approach to hope from the perspective of Benedictine Spirituality is the conviction that the human person is a being called to unification, based on the experience of God’s unconditional love. That experience invites us to enter into processes that lead to the integration of all the dimensions of our being. As a response to that integrating love, we gradually become able to “love God with our whole heart, our whole soul, and all our strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves” (**RB 4, 1**).

Thus unified, monastics are called to unity among themselves, recognizing their diversity and equality. A monastery is that space where we become one. The monastery is the school of divine service.

From this perspective we will consider, first of all, some of the situations in our World, our Church and Religious Life that cry for hope.

III. SOME SITUATIONS IN OUR WORLD, OUR CHURCH AND RELIGIOUS LIFE THAT CRY FOR HOPE.

III.1 To refer to the situations that clamor for hope in OUR WORLD is to become aware of all that dehumanizes, and that hinders a person’s opportunities to become a better person.

From a faith perspective this will include all those situations which impede our participation in the promise of Christ: “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly (**Jn. 10,10b**), and it presupposes the necessary resources for both human and spiritual growth and maturity.

The situations that clamor for hope in our world have to do on one hand with subjective elements, with all of those things that prevent a person’s healthy self-esteem, and a sense of having a reason for living. On the other hand they are related with all those things that prevent growth in a dignified, human way. Pope John XXIII, almost a half a century ago³, stressed that the dignity of each human being demands

³ *Pacem in terris*, #11, John XXIII, 1963

that she or he have adequate nourishment, clothing, housing, work, rest, education, medical assistance etc. However, today in the second decade of the third millennium, more and more countries and people are sinking into misery and living with insufficient and inadequate food, clothing, housing, health care, education, work and entertainment. Creating the conditions for a life in accordance with our human dignity goes hand in hand with the right to live in a healthy and harmonious environment. The deterioration and exhaustion of our natural resources and the resulting damage to the environment, to humanity's common home, are situations that also clamor for hope.

To this list of conditions that are a threat to human dignity and to the integrity of the environment, we add what has come to be called a "change of epoch". Among other things this implies that we are going through a new period in history in which the tried and true answers to yesterday's questions do not respond to today's problems. Society as a whole is living a crisis of meaning. The institutions that regulate socio-cultural and religious relationships are losing credibility and this creates confusion and disenchantment, especially when those institutions fall back into self-defensive attitudes regarding their ways of acting, understanding and expressing themselves.

This transition is taking place in a globalized world dependent on a financial system that in recent times has revealed its limitations. The economic system fell into a world recession that has gravely affected the living conditions of millions of people who are barely able to survive today. At least half of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean is forced to live in conditions of impoverishment and exclusion that seriously compromise both their physical and mental wellbeing. I know this to be true to a greater or lesser degree on other continents like Asia and Africa. The responses to the crises that have come from governments have generally focused on protecting the financial sector before responding to the needs of the most vulnerable groups in society. Added to that was the failure of the UN climate change conference in Copenhagen in 2009. Once again damages to nature were minimized in favor of the interests of big business.

There is resistance to admitting that we are facing a major systemic crisis. Faced with the decline of a major civilization, radical changes are needed. To pretend to postpone the inevitable will only prolong and worsen the present state of affairs.

From my point of view, what provokes the crisis that we find ourselves in is the fact that the contradictions and incongruities in our relationships can no longer be sustained. On the one hand, since the French Revolution we have been using words and phrases like "equality, liberty and brotherhood", at the same time that the conditions of inequality and exclusion have continued to grow; repression has continued to be practiced and crimes against humanity have continued to be committed before our eyes..

In mid-twentieth century universal human rights were declared and, in theory, they have advanced to include the right to live in peace and respect for the integrity of nature; but, in practice, year after year, international organizations present their reports revealing the bloody violations of those rights, and the decisions of some States in the world to refuse to respond to the recommendations for improvement.

Morris Berman, in his book, *The Twilight of American Culture*⁴, describes the symptoms of a culture in its terminal phase of existence. These characteristics can be synthesized:

- a. growing social and economic disparity
- b. fewer and fewer social services and programs
- c. a rapid decrease in the intellectual capacity, critical awareness and understanding in the general population,
- d. spiritual death ensues, what Spangler calls classicism, culture becomes frozen and emptied of

⁴ Cf. W.W. Norton and Co. 2000.

contents and satisfies itself with changing the wrapping paper.

To live in a time of historical change requires audacity and creative imagination in order to risk trying possible alternatives. New wine needs new wine skins. Benedict and Scholastica received the gift from the Divine *Ruah*, a charism from the Spirit, in circumstances in some ways similar to our own. Benedictine monasticism in its origins was a creative response in search of other possible worlds. The twilight of the ancient Roman civilization saw the birth of the Benedictine cenobitic ideal, in which each person experiences receiving the Good News. That experience had as one of its goals, the freeing of the individual of the egocentric ties that bind, in order to seek with fervent love that which s/he considers better for the other, rather than what s/he judges better for her/himself. Isn't that a firm foundation on which to work for the common good, the respect for universal rights and inclusion? From there we can "seek peace and pursue it" (**RB P. 17**) and build a more just society. Scholastica and Benedict knew how to discern what, in their time, was an alternative for recreating life and they incarnated that alternative in the School of Divine Service.

III.2 Let's look now at some situations in the Roman Catholic Church that clamor for hope.

It seems to me that in some sectors of the church there has been back sliding as far as the dialogue with the signs of the times that was so strongly encouraged at the Second Vatican Council. Those signs have revealed that for centuries, both in society and in the Church, efforts were made to contain diversity and plurality so characteristic of humanity. Today, many human groups, with varying visions of reality, are coming to the fore and asking to be recognized, respected and included. New ways of discovering and understanding humanity make our old ways of relating based on domination, submission and exclusion, obsolete. Those old ways considered some human beings superior to others based on race, gender, social class, age, ideology, religion etc. In the face of a clearer awareness of the common dignity of all human beings, the absence of dialogue among those who are open to the signs of the times and those who continue to embrace visions of the past and close their minds and hearts to the historical change that we are living, cries for hope.

From a faith perspective, we are aware of and convinced that all of humanity, in its diversity, has been created in equal dignity in the divine image and likeness. We are children of God and sisters and brothers among ourselves in Christ, who is our peace (Eph.2, 14) and in whom all discrimination and exclusion is overcome (**Gal. 3, 26-28**).

From this awareness we hear the call and open ourselves with wisdom and maturity to our world with its urgent need to recognize diversity, promote inclusion, and encourage dialogue and participation. Many challenges emerge. I mention a few:

- a. to imagine and creatively update forms of relating that honor the dignity of every person, in recognition, respect and inclusion of their diversity and equality.
- b. to promote images of God that reflect the reality that all of humanity has been created in the divine image and likeness, transcending the tendency to identify God with a white, masculine representation.

The God of the Bible is not a projection of a patriarchal mentality⁵...God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. The Divine is neither man nor woman... God is Father, but also the God of tenderness and maternal love⁶.

Our images of God are very important in creating vibrant new alternatives for relating among people and nations, if we hope to open our ears and our eyes to what is new, to perceive the gentle sound of silence in which God is revealed.

⁵The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church. Pontifical Biblical Commission. March 18th, 1994. Section I.E.2.

⁶ Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church #239.

- c. to creatively express in the liturgy—through song, inclusive language, bodily gestures, symbols etc.—our growing awareness of the equal dignity of all humanity, as we celebrate and ritualize all that witnesses with greater clarity to God’s dream of extending a caring, responsible respect for all creation.
- d. to accompany processes that lead to the transformation of traditional familial and social roles of men and women. The goal is to achieve greater participation of men in domestic responsibilities and a growing presence and participation of women in creative cultural roles.
- e. to promote an ecclesiology which increases our awareness that all the baptized form the Church, the People of God. From there we will need to exercise our right to a solid theological formation and active, responsible participation in ecclesial ministries and in decision making processes.

Benedictine spirituality offers ways to face these challenges. Our charism is not marginal to the challenges and questions of our age. Benedict and Scholastica heard the cries of those who longed to build a world in which peace came as the fruit of justice in the recognition and respect of the dignity of each person. Those of us, who, by grace alone, have been called to participate in that same charism of the Divine *Ruah*, continue to hear those cries in our times.

It is a source of great hope to remember that Benedictine life, from its origins, has offered an invitation to organize community life in ways that are meant to overcome discrimination and inequality among the members. “For God shows no partiality among persons. Only in this are we distinguished in God’s sight, if we are found better than others in good works and in humility” (**RB 2, 20-21**). When we have been at our best Benedictines have practiced forms of life that have built environments of equality and inclusion. On the other hand, when our monasteries have become too aligned with civil and/or ecclesiastical powers, we have often sacrificed our capacity to transmit the good news of the equal dignity of every person.

For the above reasons, I believe Benedictine monasticism has a word to offer in the dialogues that seek answers to contemporary challenges.

III.3 Some of the voices in Religious Life crying for hope.

From my own experience in Mexico and in the CLAR (Latin American and Caribbean Conference of Religious Life) I believe that Religious life groans with labor pains, (**Cf. Rm 8, 22**). Many religious are longing to give an account of their hope (**1 Pe 3, 15**), to recreate the meaning and relevance of their lives.

What we know as Religious Life in general, and the same can be said of Benedictine Life, is not a uniform and static “something”. It is a rich, diversified, dynamic tapestry that is expressed in multiple forms of relationships and is in continual transformation. The variety of expressions of Religious Life goes beyond the traditional distinction between the cloistered and the active, or the monastic and the apostolic life.

We became more aware of this after the Second Vatican Council. The council invited us to begin processes of reflection and experimentation in light of Scripture and our founding charism. From that point on a profound search for the identity and meaning of Religious life in dialogue with the signs of the times began. The other important criteria was the need to take into account the physical and psychological needs of the members, and all of this in the context of a spiritual renewal.⁷

As the years went by and we moved forward in these processes, we have gradually discovered that the form of life that we had come to call “religious”, had grown away from its roots and had become

⁷ Documents of the II Vatican Council, *Perfectae caritatis*, #2-3

structured on the basis of a dualistic worldview that was more exclusive than inclusive. Today this situation demands a serious transformation.

I mention a few examples of how this happened in our monasteries, as we became mirrors of our society rather than leaven in the dough.

- When the abbess or prioress, moved away from her primary role as spiritual leader (**RB 2, 31, 33, 34, 37**) and became more an administrator of her monastery and/or the institutions the monastery had founded.
- When we made our decisions primarily to please our benefactors, the hierarchy or civil society, and we lost the whole spirit of obedience as communal listening to God's will, discerned with responsibility and purity of heart. (**RB Pr 1, RB 71.**)
- When we modeled our relationships in general on a hierarchical pyramid, and we forgot that the entire community should be called together and heard when important issues were to be decided (**RB 3**) and for less important matters, the counsel of the elders was sufficient. (**RB 3, 12-13**).

I consider one of the major questions that we face in Religious Life in general is this: In the face of the present paradigm shift, are we really willing to move ahead with conviction to reconfigure our lives? We have a gift to offer: paths of personal and communal transformation which give witness to God's power: the love that makes all humans equal in the divine image and likeness. Our God, who has created us equal in dignity in the midst of our diversity, trusts us with the task of building that equality in history, by promoting inclusion and respect for our common home, the cosmos. In this way, as we have affirmed throughout this reflection, we receive a call to work not only so that each member may find her place in the monastery and have the opportunity to use her gifts to reach fullness of life, but also that each sister may participate in the creation of life in abundance for others. (**Jn 10, 10b**).

Let us not forget the important historical lessons learned from the last great change of epoch that came at one of the worst periods of ecclesiastical and monastic decadence. Precisely because the ecclesiastical institutions and the abbeys were so accustomed to and identified with the feudal system, they were unable to recognize the new paradigm that came with the Renaissance and so, they ended up fighting against those who defended human rights instead of illuminating that struggle with the Gospel message.

Today we find congregations, institutes, orders and intentional associations that have in common their efforts to seek God with their feet firmly on the ground; the ear of their hearts attentive to what is happening around them and a clear-headed vision of their ultimate values on the horizon. They are communities trying to find concrete ways to live, love and serve that will witness to the humanization of all the lives they touch.

These dynamic pursuits of meaning and relevance are indispensable at this time of historical change that calls for new ways of perceiving reality. Some communities risk trying new ways of living their charism, others choose to retreat into the tried and true. What can't be done is to simply ignore the impact of these transforming times.

I would like to mention two initial responses made by Religious communities to the challenges of the Second Vatican Council. One of them accentuated the psychological dimension of the members in their search for personal development and maturity. The other used a more sociological approach and responded to the alarming conditions of poverty and misery in which the majority of people live. With the passage of time we have seen that these two dimensions are interrelated and need to be interwoven, with a vision that also includes our common home, the cosmos. We will look briefly at some of the characteristics of these initial responses.

Experiences that emphasized a psychological approach to renewal

I think we can affirm in retrospect that the need to create spaces that encourage human maturity will always be not only necessary, but indispensable. Pyramidal structures tend to work against maturity and personal freedom, and therefore, impede human and spiritual development and prevent the exercise of responsibility and creative participation.

As religious responded to the council's call to return to their original gospel inspiration and to respond to the signs of the times, they often discovered infantile attitudes of dependence within themselves as well as situations of oppression and exclusion within the structures. After the council many religious took on some of the developmental tasks usually resolved during adolescence, such as discovering and expressing the personal identity and autonomy, not only of their Institutes, Orders and Congregations, but also of the individual members.

From an inter-personal perspective, many communities left behind inappropriate ways of relating and began trying out ways of living in community that were more collaborative and participative. They achieved this with greater or lesser success. Gradually more advanced levels of human maturity have been reached. Religious communities have discovered in the process the risks and the wisdom of their choices; and they have opened themselves to new possibilities as they grew in awareness that they formed part of a larger, very complex socio-cultural universe. They have discovered that human maturity is intimately related to spiritual growth and as persons and communities grow in these areas they transcend individual interests in order to participate affective and effectively in the common good.

Experiences that emphasized a sociological approach.

On the other hand, the responses that accentuated sociological aspects, initially didn't give much importance to the personal needs of the members and the tasks dealing with human maturity. Rather their point of departure was the discovery of the collective human subject in all of its suffering. They concentrated on that dimension related to class and the systemic injustices inherent in the socio-political and economic structures. They reached out before looking inward at the personal and communal tasks at hand. From their perspective they denounced the deadly realities so opposed to God's reign. Their efforts had mixed results. As the years passed they discovered that the "poor" have differing faces and histories that need to be seen and heard.

We can't group "the poor" all together in one homogenous social category. We need to recognize the particular characteristics of women, men, the elderly, the young, children, the original inhabitants of each continent, afro-descendants, migrants, those who live in rural areas and city-dwellers. We must seek the causes of poverty for each of these groups, and explain how it has hindered them in the recognition of their human dignity.

This leads us to consider the personal, communal, social and cosmic aspects and their interrelatedness. A spirituality understood as energy that recreates life, weaves all of these dimensions of existence together with bonds of unity that lead us to an awareness of being part of a loving whole.

These responses to the council were necessary and important. Today we know that they may have been partial, but they pointed to the horizon of a holistic and liberating spirituality that opened us up to what the prophetic tradition urges us to recognize: that others, in all of their diversity and plurality are our own kin. **(Is 58, 7)**

The psychological and sociological dynamics and the return to the sources

The experiences that I have mentioned above, some more psychological and others more sociological in their nuances, went hand in hand with a return to the sources of Scripture and the founding spirituality.

All of these factors influenced the process of discerning the signs of the times, which, in turn played a part in the search for identity and meaning in religious life. From centuries past a uniform static and “objective” definition that considered religious life a “state of perfection” had disfigured it. Such a mentality did not translate into “being in the world but not of the world”. Rather it created an almost insurmountable distance between people, with a resulting judgment and exclusion of what appeared to be different and “imperfect”. This separation isolated and dehumanized religious life and left profound traces in its path. So even today we are challenged to return to the sources that make our lives a school of humanization. This is a key element in our efforts to reweave the meaning and significance of our life form in a world that frequently questions our very reason for being.

I see other challenges facing Religious Life from the perspective of our key word, which is “hope”:

1. To deepen our theological reflection on discipleship/mysticism and mission/prophecy in the lives of women. On this point the feminine monastic tradition has a gold mine to recover. Many Benedictine women have lived their mystical/prophetic identity with passionate enthusiasm.
2. To actively participate in processes that develop mature, responsible adults who participate in both church and society in response to the signs of our times⁸. (DA 215)

A careful reading of paragraph #215 in the Aparecida Document leads me to the conclusion that the present situations in the world, the Church and Religious Life, crying for hope, are related to clarity of conscience. At this historical moment we urgently need to realize that the root causes of these situations are systemic (macro-cultural) and they form the basis of relationships that are structured on domination and submission. These relationships limit and wound human life and nature as a whole and they are no longer viable, no longer satisfy, no longer respond to human longings.

As people and groups become more aware of this dissatisfaction and of the necessity of promoting systemic change, they gradually begin to build resistance movements. At the same time, those who have decided to respond to these challenges have come to understand that any transformations they achieve will come from alternative experiences lived out in their community’s concrete everyday situations. From this perspective, our spirituality offers possibilities for strengthening and nourishing hope in this change of epoch.

IV. ELEMENTS IN BENEDICTINE LIFE THAT NOURISH AND STRENGTHEN OUR HOPE.

Given the above panorama of historical transformations with their inherent risks, possibilities and challenges, how can Monastic Spirituality strengthen and nourish hope?

We have stated that Benedictine spirituality is eminently biblical and that it is centered in relationship: “First of all, love God with your whole heart, your whole soul and all your strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” (RB 4, 1-2)

From there we go on to affirm that Monastic Life strives to create the conditions that foster the human integration of all the elements of our beings, grounded in the experience of God’s unconditional love. The entire monastic journey has to do with this process of integration of the self in each person and of the members in their interpersonal relationships. Thus organized, cenobitic life pursues its goal: that each one progresses on the ladder of humility, deepens in her knowledge of the truth about herself and

⁸ The Aparecida Document (DA), is the result of the V Conference of Latin American and Caribbean Bishops, (CELAM) which took place in Aparecida, Brazil in 2007 and which gave pastoral guidelines for the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean. #215 states: *We recognize the value and the efficaciousness of Parochial, Diocesan and National Councils of the Laity because they encourage communion and participation within the Church as well as active lay presence in the world. To build citizenship, in the broadest sense of the term, and to build up the ecclesiality of the laity, is one and the same movement. (translation my own.)*

God, so that she may live the fervent love of good zeal in her interpersonal, community and social relations:

- being the first to show respect to another;
- supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior;
- competing in obedience to one another;
- seeking what she judges better for the other person over her personal interests;
- giving herself in pure love to her sisters
- following God's paths
- loving the Abbess or Prioress with unfeigned love
- preferring nothing whatever to Christ
- living daily in the hope that Christ will bring us all together to everlasting life.

These characteristics, taken together make up a life style that allows compassion to flower. They help us to transform relations of domination and submission into a new way of relating, characterized by acknowledging and respecting our own and the other's dignity, and seeking the other's good.

Those who take up the adventure of Benedictine spirituality, LIVE in a monastery and SERVE under a Rule and a Prioress or Abbes. They develop a fundamental capacity that sustains them throughout their journey, that is, the quality of never losing hope in God's mercy which is the culmination of the instruments of good works. **(RB 4, 74)**.

Divine mercy is the ultimate gift, and like all gifts, it has a corresponding task. That task in Benedictine spirituality is to form in each person, the basic cenobitic disposition of good zeal, "Not to pursue what we judge better for ourselves, but what we judge better for the other person. **(RB 72, 7)**. This is a concrete expression of monastic humility, which presupposes that we are growing in truth about ourselves as well as the truth of God, and that we are pulling out by the roots those two vices that, according to this spirituality, destroy the person and her ability to live in community: murmuring and private property.

In synthesis, Benedictine Spirituality, rooted in the Word, fleshes out hope within relationships by developing the following fundamental attitudes:

- In relation to God we LISTEN WITH FILIAL LOVE (obedience) **(RB Pr 1, Chapters 5, 68, 71)**.
- In relation to others we practice GOOD ZEAL **(RB 72)** that we develop through stability:
- With regard to ourselves, HUMILITY **(RB 7)** Conversion to the monastic way of life releases compassion in us.
- In relation to all that exists, REVERANCE **(RB 31, 10)** by treating all things as sacred vessels of the altar.

The elements that structure our lives as Benedictines give shape to hope. When we take the path that unifies all the dimensions of our life, through the experience of God's unconditional love, we are able to live a coherent life of personal integrity and responsibility. As we said at the beginning of our reflection this will be evidenced in a life coherent with the Gospels.

I want to look now at how these elements that give form to our monastic experience, can be offered as an alternative to our societies today

V. HOW THE RULE OF BENEDICT GIVES SHAPE TO HOPE

A characteristic note of Benedictine Monastic Life is its understanding and exercise of leadership. From my point of view, Chapters 2, 3 and 64 of the Rule are a work of art that can offer an alternative in

response to the challenges of our times. This alternative speaks to the needs presented by the global leadership crisis, evident in all of our social institutions. One of the difficulties that affects Religious Life in general, as I see it, has to do with a lack of creativity and audacity in developing leadership forms that contribute to a healthy birthing of this new period in history.

In Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia and Africa we urgently need to form new generations of mature, humane leaders, capable of taking on responsibility with a transcendent vision. Our cultures are still suffering the effects of internalized domination and have not yet been able to fully overcome the results of the imposition of colonial institutions on socio-political-economic and religious levels. New generations of religious women need to make a conscious effort to overcome mistrust, insecurity, low self-esteem and immaturity that tend to go hand in hand with the self understanding of people who have grown up in cultures dominated by others. If this doesn't happen new leadership will repeat generations of conditioning in their service to their communities. There will be an ever-present, latent risk of authoritarianism and mismanagement of funds. On the other hand the development of mature leaders in the new generations will offer a clear sign of hope for the present and the future. Those who exercise leadership in our monastic communities, have an essential role to play in facilitating processes of conversion that encourage a more human, integral and honest life style, reflective of Gospel values.

Now I want to point out some of the qualities that will be needed to make this happen. I will talk about the importance of collaboration and intergenerational, intercultural participation in the development of this new leadership.

Characteristics of emerging leadership that will facilitate our responses to today's challenges.⁹

I begin by describing leadership as having to do with a community's or a society's capacity to make the alternative model that they propose become a reality in their lives. In the case of the Benedictine charism we express the alternative that we offer in the new forms of relationships that we have described above. We try to live these relationships in daily interactions in a harmonious dance that through our being, thinking, and acting, mirrors our recognition and respect for our own dignity and that of all other persons. New leaders will create the dynamic conditions that will be able to articulate the vision of the group and bring it to life.¹⁰

Some of you who are gathered here will have experienced leadership that, for whatever reason, rather than giving birth to new life open to God and others, has given birth to suspicion, rigidity, competition and murmuring. If we haven't had the experience in our own communities, we've probably seen it in other groups. If we recognize the discouraging and dehumanizing environment that arises from such leadership, we can appreciate, by contrast, the strength and hope that tend to thrive in a group that experiences genuine Benedictine leadership.

I also think that we need to develop leadership models by and for women rather than following clerical models. This requires certain aptitudes and abilities that I mention below. The leader:

- **Is honest about herself.** She knows her gifts and limitations, as well as recognizing the type of situations in which she feels threatened. In this way she responds rather than *reacts* in the face of difficult relationships, because she knows that reactions tend to make matters

⁹ For this section I have used the definition of leadership given by Marcela Lagarde (see below) as well as the insights that Esther Fangman osb, past President of the Federation of St. Scholastica, an association of 22 women's monasteries in the USA, and Patricia Henry osb, Prioress of Monasterio Pan de Vida, in Torreón, Coahuila, Mexico, shared with me on the topic

¹⁰. See Marcela Lagarde and de los Ríos, *For my partner in life*, Ed. Horas and Horas, Unfinished Notebooks series, # 48, Spain, 2005, p.13-14. Marcela speaks here of the leadership of women and permit me to apply it to any leadership in religious life.

worse. Self-knowledge increases our ability to take some distance from problems and redirect our energies away from overly defensive reactions. Responses as opposed to reactions, do not trigger the other person's anger, rather they tend to diminish it. Our goal is to reduce the destructive potential and channel the positive energy in the discussion. Self-knowledge helps us to develop the capacity to better understand ourselves, others, the world and life in general. Certain characteristics of human maturity help us to avoid defensive attitudes that come from over reactions in our interactions. Women who are embracing mature forms of leadership have the capacity to handle conflict, by resolution instead of avoidance, and thus channeling the energy involved in the conflict in a positive way. Self-knowledge helps the leader to be aware of her true intentions and to act with prudence and moderation. It also helps her to leave behind her masks at the same time that she avoids hurting others or aggressively tearing away their masks.. On the contrary she tries to see beyond others facades and delicately touch what is in their hearts. That leads us to the following characteristic.

- **She cares for what is in her own and others' hearts.** This fruit of self-knowledge makes her an excellent confidant. But her ability to keep a confidence should not be confused with a conspiracy of silence. True respect for confidentiality has nothing in common with control of information.
- **She is realistic and assertive.** The leader combines friendliness with firmness. Her kindness is a mixture of exigency and tenderness. She corrects and encourages and does not let negligence and or disdainful attitudes slip by. She does not cover up her sisters' transgressions but cuts them out while she can as soon as they begin to sprout. **(RB 2, 23-26)**. She takes into account the weakness of the needy, not the bad will of the envious. **(RB 55,21)**
- **She listens from the heart.** She tries to get to the bottom of things, listening attentively to her sisters and discerning the truth. In this way she articulates the community's vision, not her own.¹¹ As she continues to listen, she allows the common vision to evolve and encourages participation in its recreation.
- **She develops community** by means of an environment of mutual respect and care, in which each member is encouraged to cultivate and multiply her God given gifts.
- She **transmits energy and enthusiasm** and keeps creativity alive in the group.
- She **encourages a unity of purpose** even though the ways of achieving the goal will vary among the members.
- **She is a team player** and calls forth qualified people for each task. This becomes more important today as it becomes almost impossible for one person to have all the gifts needed for any given task. Even if someone thought she had all the qualifications, she wouldn't have the time, and so needs to assert herself in seeking those who can help.
- **She delegates tasks** to those around her, allows people to make mistakes and have shortcomings, knowing that we need space to learn and grow and mature.
- **She inspires others**, creating an atmosphere of attention to what is going on around the community. She encourages reflection on the responsibility that we need to assume to face the challenges inherent in our present circumstances.
- **She innovates, creates and is an instrument of peace that is the fruit of justice.** The person in leadership calls us to evaluate and transform, when necessary, the mindsets and traditional power structures that produce injustices. She does not call for violent confrontation but strives to personify the changes that she proposes in effective, valiant and just ways. She achieves peace by practicing justice. **(RB PR.25)**
- **She listens to God in the signs of the times.** Theologically speaking, the signs of the times are those events in which we understand not only society as it is, but also as God wants it to be. This helps us to take on responsibility in facing the challenges of the broader socio-

¹¹ I understand "vision" to mean the orientation and meaning for the future, to which we commit ourselves and from there, plan our concrete actions.

cultural context. She maintains a sense of perspective so as not to be overcome by internal problems that distract her capacity to see the broader picture, where she is able to discern and distinguish justice from injustice.

- The leader knows that she needs **courage** to face these socio-cultural realities, which presupposes a **profound life of daily personal and community prayer**. Only then will she be sustained by the Gospel as she makes decisions that respond to the challenges that confront her.
- She lives in a **permanent attitude of discernment** that she weaves together with the strands that she receives as she listens to all of her sisters with the ear of her heart.

We need that fundamental Benedictine disposition of humility if we are to work conscientiously to develop these attitudes and qualities of leadership that our world so desperately needs. One of the characteristics of humility that makes it a gift is the capacity to evaluate and respond to ordinary and extraordinary situations, from the heart, centered on our true treasure: the search for fullness of life for everyone. (**Jn 10, 10b**). This disposition is indispensable for building and recreating relationships in community on a regular basis, and that is why it is so central to Benedictine spirituality.

The leadership qualities that these times urgently require also call for openness to intergenerational and intercultural collaboration. These are characteristics proper to Benedictine Spirituality. All the sisters, without exception, are expected to share their wisdom in important community matters. We must listen to discern what the Divine *Ruah* is calling forth. We listen to the wisdom of the women who have lived the Rule and walked in its ways for many years and we listen as well to the creative audacity of those who, having joined more recently, bring understandings and sensibilities closer to our times.

It is also important to consider the cultural nuances in which Benedictine values should be expressed. We know from the history of the Catholic Church as well as from our Order that often in the past, we have identified the Good News and our charism with their European expression. As we return to the sources, we discover that inclusion and the value of diversity were values of great importance in Benedictine life in its origins and in the first centuries of expansion.

Women with collegial leadership styles are inclusive and promote participation, because they trust that God's will is manifest through all of the sisters. They also favor human maturity and personal as well as interpersonal spiritual development within communities. These types of leadership can become the leaven of transformation for those who accompany us in our pastoral ministries, for those who come to our guest houses or live near the monastery.

To conclude I would like to reflect on what I consider makes Benedictine Spirituality a leaven of hope.

VI. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY THAT MAKE IT A LEAVEN OF HOPE.

- a. Faced with the longing of a part of humanity to move beyond intolerance of differences, Benedictine Spirituality proposes a process that leads us to honor and respect equal human dignity and to include it in all of our human diversity.

Above all, Benedictine Spirituality creates the conditions for honoring and respecting the equal dignity in which we have been created. It underlines, affirms and reveals the divine design that all of us, in our diversity, created by God, are equal: because whether slave or free, we are all one in Christ.... and share alike in serving the same God.... for God shows no partiality among persons...only in this are we distinguished in God's sight, if we are found better in good works and in humility. (**RB 2, 20-21**)

Our spirituality honors the equal dignity of all, it promotes and encourages inclusion, participation and listening to each of the sisters when anything of importance is to be dealt with in the monastery. (**RB 3**).

- b.) In a society that has little use for the elderly, Benedictine Spirituality honors the experience and the journey of the older monastic members that has helped them to grow into wisdom.

In a Benedictine monastery no one follows her own inclinations...nor does she deviate from the example of her elders. **(RB 3,7; 7,55; and chapter 23).**

- c.) In cultures in which technology increasingly invades our lives with sensorial stimuli that impede reflection and encounter,

The Rule of Benedict provides for times and spaces of silence and humble, loving listening to God with the ear of our hearts. It also invites us to be attentive to others and to what is happening around us. The response to "LISTEN, OH ISRAEL..." provides us with the silence we need to discern God's ways and serves as a model for all relationships in recognition, respect, honor for our own and other's dignity as we follow the Golden Rule **(RB 70,7)** and practice the Instruments of Good Works. **(RB 4).**

We don't follow the world's ways, but we do enter into dialogue with it's proposals, striving to bring the light of the Gospel to bear on them, preferring nothing whatever to Christ, and living in the hope that he will bring us all together to everlasting life. **(RB 4,21;72,11-12)**

- d.) In cultures that privilege individualism and independence,

Benedictine Spirituality invites us to live in interdependence and strengthen it in communities of faith.

- e.) In societies where capital and production are more valued than people and human development,

The Benedictine Charism gives each member the opportunity to develop her gifts in humble service to others in favor of fullness of life that in all things God may be glorified. **(RB Pr 6; Ch.57.)**

- f.) In societies based on consumption, excess and waste, to which only privileged minorities have access, with no sensitivity to the needs of the impoverished majorities,

Our Benedictine Tradition calls for austerity and care of all things as if they were sacred vessels of the altar **(RB 31,10)**. At the same time, it calls us to share all that we have when faced with the needs of those around us¹².

These are some of the characteristics of Benedictine Spirituality that I identify as leaven that strengthens our hope. I will close my presentation sharing briefly what I consider are some of the sources that strengthen my own hope.

VII. SOURCES THAT STRENGTHEN MY HOPE.

This year I am celebrating thirty years of Benedictine life, thirty years of seeking with successes and failures, of moving forward and then retreating, of trusting in divine mercy that has led me into a little more freedom and serenity. Today I feel less naïve and more realistic, with a better sense of humor, less fearful, and still filled with profound longings and passionate about my options. I think I have learned a little of the lesson that Scholastica of Nursia wanted to teach us: in our charism love is more powerful than the law.

My encounter with Benedictine Spirituality began in February of 1980, right before the feast of St.

¹² Dialogues, *op.cit.* Chapter XXXVIII.

Scholastica. History has never been my strong point, so I knew nothing about monasticism at the time. Strangely enough it was the word "Benedictine" that captivated me. Perhaps I had the intuition that it contained something significant for me, since at the time it seemed like a lovely, mysterious, attractive and challenging word. Of course it couldn't have been otherwise because it contains a blessing.

A few days later I visited a Benedictine Monastery in Mexico City, the one I would later join. While I was there, one of the sisters shared some tapes of a retreat given to the community by a Benedictine monk from Argentine, Pedro Alurralde. One of his phrases became engraved on my heart: "We are people of an inescapable solitude, a fertile solitude that nourishes our relationship with God and with others." That was my first source of hope: Benedictines seek God and that relationship is what sustains them!

I was given a copy of the Rule of Benedict and I remember being moved by the words in chapter 58,2, "Test their spirits to see if they are from God". In my innocence I asked one of the sisters to please test my spirit that week of my visit, to see if it was from God! This became another source of my hope: to be centered in God's Spirit as it inhabits us and recreates our lives.

In 1980 the Order celebrated 1500 years of Benedictine life. Many resources, the result of careful investigations about the state of the monastic question in general and the Rule of Benedict in particular were published around that time. To begin to study our tradition was an exciting and fascinating experience at that time. I remember being impressed by the place of humility in Benedictine Spirituality, although I had trouble understanding some of its expressions.. I was surprised at the absence of references to humility in the Constitution of our federation, but I came to understand its absence within the context in which the Constitution was written. On one occasion, with other young sisters, we had a stimulating interchange on the subject with the then president of the Federation of St. Scholastica. The decade of the eighties was not the same as the decade of the sixties, when many questions had been raised. This has been another source of hope for me: our tradition has many treasures, new and old, that offer us the opportunity to enter into dialogue with the challenges that the signs of the times present.

The simplicity of our spirituality has never failed to amaze me during all these years. It is a spirituality for beginners. I have always loved the prologue, especially that promise which assures us that if we persevere the time will come when, "we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love." **(RB Pr 49)** In a special way I consider the very humanizing alternative that the Rule offers in today's world when it describes Good Zeal which we should foster with fervent love: "no one is to pursue what she judges better for herself, but instead what she judges better for someone else". **(RB 72, 7)**

In recent months what has truly reinforced the ground of my hope has been to repeat like a mantra ..."Never lose hope in God's mercy." **(RB 4,74)** I think that hope grows in the small, daily, fragile, vulnerable places of our personal and community longings, when we refuse to resign ourselves to the status quo, when we won't just settle in and adapt even as life in all of its expressions is being undermined. I find hope in the ongoing passion of all of those people who are convinced that another world is possible and are willing to share their grain of sand, offering the gifts that they have been given.

Our charism, our spirituality is very modest. As we have said, it is for beginners who each time we begin a good work, pray to God earnestly to bring it to completion. **(RB Pr 4)** Our hope is sustained in our confidence in divine mercy.

But this simple and humble charism was capable of enormous social relevance at the beginning of the Middle Ages. At that time our form of community life became the great model of social organization for Europe at its very beginnings. Once again we are at a crossroads. History offers us two options.

Will we live our Benedictine charism in all of its depth and offer it to the world today as our Benedictine ancestors did at the dawn of the Middle Ages?

Or will we accommodate ourselves to outdated life forms and deny our world today the transforming power of our charism, as many of our communities did at the dawn of the Modern age?