

“The challenges of the Women Benedictine order in France”

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M. Marie-Noëlle Etchelet

The French word “défis”, “challenge”, has various meanings. During this conference I will refer to “défi” in its sense of confronting a difficulty, overcoming it, getting out of it, and in so stimulating a reaction and inspiring us to give the best of ourselves all in clear-sightedness and hope. Saint Benedict encourages us in this; the challenge is it not simply to live the monastic life, that of the “strong”, the cenobites who “serve in the monastery, under a Rule and an Abbot”. We can see from the outset that our father Saint Benedict challenges us to trust in the feasibility of the undertaking when he states at the end of his Rule, with firm optimism “you will arrive, Amen” (73, 9).

We will not go into a detailed description of “French Benedictine monasticism”, diverse in its origins, yet unified in its way of life. A text from the Declaration made on behalf of the CIB by the CIVSCA (the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life) gives a good description of it, I quote: “we are cenobites living under the Rule of Saint Benedict and under and abbess or a prioress. Our motto is Prayer and work, and we place at the center of our life the daily celebration of the liturgy, lectio divina, and hospitality: such is our way of answering to the cries of our suffering world in a contemplative mode”. In France, women’s Benedictine communities are qualified as “integrally contemplative” in the sense that we do not devote ourselves to works of charity or education, nor apostolates like a pilgrimage sanctuary.

What exactly are the challenges that Benedictine women encounter today?

Before going further, we would like to point out that the challenges are not ours only but concern all forms of consecrated life, as well as the Church in general, and even the whole society. For line of thought, we will follow the three objectives given by Pope Francis for the Year of Consecrated life: “look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion and embrace the future with hope”.

1) “Look to the past with gratitude”

We have indeed many reasons to look back with gratitude upon 15 centuries of monastic life. These reasons were well known to Pope Paul VI, who proclaimed Saint Benedict patron saint of Europe. And Pope Benedict, in his address at the Bernadines College, said about monks throughout the history of monasticism: “their goal was to search for God, *quaerere Deum*... they wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is.”

Communities of nuns have been far from not meriting throughout their history. To give just a few examples from relatively recent times, communities of nuns lived through the upheavals of the revolution of 1789, when many of them, and this was the case here at Jouarre, were dispossessed and expelled from their monasteries and even forced to choose between faithfulness to Christ or death. Some, like the founding mother of Pradines, survived the prison of Terror; some were guillotined and are remembered as martyrs. After peace was restored, many were not allowed to regain their monastery and, grouping together as much as possible, in midst of poverty and deprivation, resumed monastic life, – l’Opus Dei and the work necessary to their subsistence. One century later, in 1903, anti-congregational laws forced many communities once again into exile.

Pope Francis also calls us to **give thanks to God especially for these last 50 years**, which have been for many religious institutes a fruitful path of renewal. Looking back, we can say that the **aggiornamento called for in *Perfectae Caritatis*** was heeded by Benedictine nuns in France: the Declarations or Constitutions which provide details on the practical application of the Benedictine Rule were revised; generally speaking, the liturgical renewal was welcomed with enthusiasm; the vernacular was adapted for parts or all the liturgical texts, even if Gregorian chant continues to be used for parts of the Office. *Lectio divina* found once again its place in Benedictine life. Fraternal life (community life) has been simplified, and the way of governing is more directly inspired by chapter three of the Rule. Hospitality, so recommended in the Rule, has been largely developed and taken on new forms in connection with the pastoral work and evangelization in the Church. Humbly and in our modest place, we can say that women Benedictines in France have not been failed in initiatives and creativity for sharing the Good News that fulfills their lives. They seek to answer the religious expectations of “those who are near and those who are far”. In general, they do not themselves go to the outskirts; rather it is the outskirts that come more and more often to them seeking to quench their spiritual thirst.

Just to detail some aspects: the prayerfully chanted **liturgy** is the first witness given by the community to those who come to take part in the prayer of the Hours or for the Eucharist: believers, non-believers, people in search of a meaning in life, even curious passers-by, all are sensitive to the beauty and prayerfulness of the liturgy. A huge task was undertaken to facilitate participation in the liturgy: renovation of the chapels and churches, improving the acoustics, booklets or partitions with music for singing, etc.....

Secondly, we can mention our **guest houses** –they are arranged in order to offer a place of retreat and silence, immersion in prayer and the Word of God for all who seeking God, our who are looking to find once again prayer and the presence of God in their heart, or longing to lay down their burdens and find new strength to hope. Our guest houses also offer spaces for listening, for spiritual accompaniment, guidance for *lectio divina*.

We participate in evangelization in various ways: sessions, retreats, religious bookstores, radio programs, web sites. Other areas a growing in importance : women and couples active in the Church often ask to make a closer bond with our communities by becoming oblates; ecumenical groups as well and interreligious dialogue have been formed. At my own monastery, a group of young Muslim women readily come to discuss questions concerning faith and God.

The drawbacks resulting from the canonical status of autonomy have been attenuated by the establishment of Federations and other structures of communion. This initiative has not yet been completed; and so, the group of six monasteries which I belong to and which are tied to the Congregation of Subiaco is looking into the possibilities of creating a communion bond more flexible than a Federation. We find that in a world marked by the culture of networks, all these different bonds are essential and do not conflict with our specific vocation, or with the autonomy of a particular monastery. They help us to situate ourselves among the various communities and to look on each other as interrelated members of a same body; for though a monastery *sui juris* is, in fact, autonomous, it is a part of a whole - the Church. In order that the autonomy of a monastery be effective and rightfully respected by the ecclesiastical hierarchy, there must exist, it seems to us, a vital communion with the local church as well as with other members of the Benedictine family. Without doubt one of the specificities of women Benedictine communities in France lies in the fact that numerous Communities are associated by a bond of communion with a Congregation of Benedictine men; these bonds are concretized by periodical reunions for the Superiors. To give an example, there is the *family of Subiaco Monte-Cassino of France* that holds reunions every two years for the Father abbots and Priors of the seven monasteries of Subiaco Monte-Cassino France; the three prioresses of the Congregation of Vanves; the six Abbesses and Prioresses of the Federation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary; the two prioresses of the Congregation of Benedictines of Our Lady of Calvary. In 2015, the reunion was held at Pradines; the theme proposed by the sisters was entitled *Renouncement: personal and community*. The program included time for individual and group encounters. The discussions, carried out with sincerity in a fraternal atmosphere, went from the re-structuration of over-sized buildings, work, formation, but also of the painful departures of sisters and all the questioning that followed.

We can also call attention to the reunions held for cellarers, for sisters and brothers in charge of guest houses, inter-novitiate gatherings and those for professed; the Inter Monastic Theological Studium which combines sessions of classes in a monastery and personal studies within the community. The STIM is also open to young non-Benedictine or Cistercian nuns.

Moreover, we have also in France the very active organization "Service of Nuns". Open to all orders without distinction, its purpose is to facilitate collaboration between monastic communities; to keep up relations with the Holy See, the National Bishops' Conference (CEF), and with the Conference for the Religious of France (CORREF), which is associated with the SDM, the Monastic Conference of France (CMF) – which re-groups abbeys and monasteries of Benedictine men, the National Service for the Evangelization of Youth and for Vocations (SNEJV), and with nuns and sisters from other countries – especially those who are members of associations equivalent to the SDM; another role of the SDM is defending the interests of nuns before the different levels of government, and protecting their economic, social and social rights. The work and discussions held on a national level at the General Assembly every four years are continued on a local level in each apostolic region.

2) Live the present with passion and face the challenges ahead with contemporary evolutions?

“Live the present with passion” comes down to saying we must love all humanity as Christ loves it, and so to look at the world with the God’s gaze, even if this means revising, even correcting certain expressions traditionally used in context of monastic life, for example, the “fuga mundi”. Fifty years after Vatican II, “seek first the Kingdom of God and his justice”, and, from *Perfectae Caritatis*, “*keep with care your life hidden with Christ in God (cf. Col 3, 3), from where streams love for our neighbor which urges us for the salvation of the world and the building of the Church...*” remains the goal of monastic life.

What challenges must we overcome, under the guidance of the Gospel and in the spirit of Saint Benedict’s Rule, in order to be coherent and credible witnesses of Lord Christ?

I will develop three major challenges:

1. Seeking God in an environment characterized by the eclipse of God and the digital revolution.
2. Living the Gospel in stability within a fraternal community and bearing witness that way of living.
3. The challenge of transmitting the ideals of monastic life to new generations.

1 1) The challenge of seeking God in an environment marked by the eclipse of God and the digital revolution.

We are in the midst of a change of civilization. Faith is in crisis in the western churches, sacramental practice, and even more, the number of baptisms is in drastic decrease, as is attendance at the Sunday Eucharist, not to mention the decline in sacramental marriages and priestly ordinations.

True, a real spiritual thirst in today’s youth can be perceived, but does this thirst have the capacity to inspire the commitment of the young person’s whole existence? “God is no longer God for the majority of our contemporaries”, exclaimed a former Carthusian prior, lamenting the diminution of vocations. In our opinion our contemporaries adore and serve many false gods. For us Benedictine women, our objective is not to become a museum or an antique model of monastic life “à l’ancienne”, however glorious that may have been, nor even to work for the survival of the monastic life in the Church, but rather to participate in the mission entrusted to each baptized. In that way of thinking, our challenges are changed into “chances” and the poverty of means becomes occasions for initiatives, in spite of the diminution and the aging of our Communities, for it is not the number that counts but the aspirations and enthusiasm of heart.

It is often said today that living witnesses are more credible than teachers. We believe that our form of life is prophetic in the sense that it directs the sight to God alone, gratuitously, without counterpart. We are convinced that in a world where man exalts himself as the “absolute center”, monastic life bears witness of God’s presence in the midst of mankind and that God, first served in the heart of a fraternal community, can suffice to fulfill a life, even when brilliant talents or particular skills lack. Here I would like to cite a nun, prioress of her congregation:

- “How to share the experience of the presence of God, who is the God of the Living?
- -The resurrection stands as the ultimate challenge, how do we live in light of that reality?
- Theology is the core, the firm foundation of our life; yet emotions and affections have dominated these past decades, and we must catch up on lost time, venture to study human sciences in order to learn the minimum things necessary.
- Dare I say I have the strong intuition that we have yet to discover what the Incarnation is! “It is Christ living in me” -... in the monastery, that changes everything and helps one not go seeking for things outside of oneself, but makes for a real reversal so that deep inside one’s self, Christ gives himself, lives, speaks, loves, forgives...and from deep inside of another, Christ gives himself, looks upon me, forgives me...simply, gratuitously, and that makes one still and everything comes together in a luminous point, as Benedict says...I stammer also.”

The digital revolution: the new technologies of communication have already profoundly transformed the way of living of humanity. They enter without difficulty the most rigorous cloisters. How must we deal with this challenge to the cloistered life, a life that cannot live its specific vocation without a certain retreat from incessant solicitations which disperse; however, it is clear that a life of complete autonomy is almost impossible today; moreover, there are also positive aspects to the digital culture, and in any case, they have become indispensable in the world of business, formation and culture. The actual challenge is to use them in a way that serves monastic ideals, all in being watchful to cultivate personal responsibility along with liberty in their usage.

1 2) The challenge of living the Gospel in the heart of a fraternal community, in stability and “under a Rule and an Abbot”.

The Bible tells us that fraternity is not natural. The gospel emphasizes that it cost the blood of Christ. Fraternity is indeed never-ending endeavor, in presence of a God Father who makes us his children; yes, a never-ending construction, fragile, costly, onerous, at times impossible – yet at the same time desired, dreamed of; often a stumbling block even in our relationship with God, for conflicts can invade our prayer life. But it is also a source of joy, a support for our humanity and the development of our personality.

In a world where people have such difficulties living together, where infidelity and emotional instability are so troubling for persons, families and the society, monastic life attests that gratuity, fidelity to one’s word, stability (in the Benedictine sense), and perseverance are still possible and bring happiness. For example, the way we handle the question of old age and the steps to take in order that the aging members may stay as long as possible in their community with respect and compassionate caring is often greatly admired.

In this perspective, a monastery is a laboratory (cf. Benedict XVI at the Bernadines) for fraternity which has a **prophetic dimension** for the individualist contemporary world full of fierce competition and

struggle for economic survival and power. The mere fact to desire a good community life and get down to the task of building it with perseverance is in itself a **protest** of contemporary values as well as a **proof** that it is possible.

Proposing Benedictine obedience today is a challenge, a major challenge that entails the aspects of free and joyful sharing material possessions, intellectual, artistic, and spiritual gifts, renouncing personal plans, open and honest dialogue, putting in time and effort for the mission, fighting dishonesty and trusting the word given; in short, a whole way of life the world no longer knows! There is also the challenge of articulating commitment to a specific community with personal spiritual life or discernment of personal callings. The vow of stability is completely contrary to contemporary mentality, which no longer comprehends perseverance in effort or gift of self, or fidelity but rather rootless self-fulfillment!

Women animated by the Word of God, our mission and challenge consist in relating the word of God to our changing society in a way that fosters humanization. In a world that seeks pleasure, personal satisfaction and material possessions, the monastic life is called to prophesize that true happiness lies in self-giving, in sharing possessions, with a “good simplicity” (cf. *Laudato Si*) and detachment.

In a world of unlimited consumerism, of waste and the non-respect of the creation, the Rule states that all objects should be treated “like sacred vessels of the altar” and that one should be content with “that which is just enough”, (BR 39; 40; 55) and the voice of the Church today exhorts us to “an ecological conversion for protection of our common home”.

1 3) The challenge of the transmission of life

I would like to quote once again the nun I mentioned above: “this prophetic vision, we must seek to proclaim it, to live it out, to transmit it, until our very last breath!”

Following a controversy concerning public education reforms in France, the question of transmitting culture has come back to the fore in public debate. I lack the details and hindsight necessary for a well-informed opinion, and I must say that transmitting cultural life and transmitting spiritual life are not quite the same thing... however, certain questions may come to mind: in a day of “zapping”, what to think of the recommendation in the Rule explaining reading in Lent “the book is to be read in order from the beginning to the end” (Ch. 49)? How must *lectio divina* be taught? How to form a disciple’s heart in newcomers? “Listen”? “And what is to be said about the 8th degree of humility?”

Perhaps instead of transmission, it would be preferable to speak of initiation and putting into contact with the living traditions of a Community where each member is responsible in making this heritage a path to live by.

Taking the risk to introduce concrete ways of seeking God and persevering is truly a challenge: “eagerness for the Divine Office, obedience and humiliations”, “the difficulties and austerities ahead on the pathway to God”. This is nonetheless the monastic way, a life based on the absolute preference for the love of Christ, through his paschal mystery.

“Embrace the future with hope”

Hope is in itself a challenge to be met: how to look to the future with hope? We face the facts: our Communities are growing older and are hard hit by the crisis of vocations, by the irreversible decline in numbers; the disproportion of the buildings compared to the size of the actual community; in some monasteries, the problem of finding within the community sisters having the skills required for specific responsibilities or for assuring the choir Office; the burden of daily tasks so imposing that there remains too little time for personal and community prayer, study and community life. Canonic visitations, whether ordinary or extraordinary, should address these questions and, all in avoiding discouragement and lamentations, stimulate community reflection before the situation becomes too critical.

However, we must bear in mind that the future is not written in advance; history shows that monasticism has seen periods of expansion and periods of decline; it teaches us also that old-age is not without spiritual fruitfulness for the good of the whole Church is a truth of faith.

But most of all, we believe that in a world overcome with worry and concern for the future, we are called to live on hope in Christ and to never hide the joy Christ gives and that nothing can take away. If we believe in our Father who resurrected Jesus from the dead, we can face death - our own and perhaps that of our community...face it with hope and joy. There is found the ultimate challenge to be overcome, with Christ, like Christ.

Amen.

M. Marie-Noëlle Etchelet
Prioress, Monastere Sainte-Scholastique
Urt France