

**GOOD ZEAL AS IT IS LIVED TODAY
IN OUR WEST AFRICAN MONASTERIES
Henriette Wendbala Kalmogo OSB**

INTRODUCTION

*« I have come to bring fire to the earth, and how and how
I wish it were blazing already! » Luke 12:49.*

How can I fully express my gratitude to Sister Aquinata for such an enlightening analysis! She takes us straight into the dynamism of this testamentary chapter of our Father St Benedict, which is concerned uniquely with life...a life to be received, spread, transmitted...like a flame...so that it endures!

Generations of monks and nuns have given themselves to this mission, in the generosity born of a passionate love for God alone. It is thanks to them that we today pursue this « way of life » (RB Prol 20). From Europe to the Americas, from the immensity of Asia to Oceania and into the heart of the tropics, the savannahs and the forests of the vast continent of Africa, the Rule of St. Benedict has led men and women seeking « true and everlasting life » (RB Prol 17) to follow the Gospel of Jesus Christ. For my sisters at Kouabri and for me, this Rule has come as good news. And this chapter 72, at once its heart and high point, has been offered to us as a path for the « simple beginners » that we are. (cf RB 73:8) It has been opened up to us, so that we enter upon it by freely accepting to meet our Lord Jesus Christ: a meeting for everyday life.

The presentation of the text, which S Aquinata has so ably highlighted, points to a work of great energy, like a mighty breath, which at once animates and sustains. Living it implies a search, a thirst for happiness. For the disciple of St. Benedict, it is a question of letting oneself be touched internally as if by fire. Then day by day, the heart, constantly on fire, will open up more and more to the warmth of this love, which no words can express (Pro 49)... The fire which Jesus came to bring to the earth, and which he longed to see blazing.

My intention is to share with you, as I have been asked to do, some experiences of the fire of this Good Zeal where it is lived out. And that within a specific cultural context and environment of relatively young communities, stemming from a long and venerable tradition. Their implantation in new lands has revealed how these lands had been mysteriously prepared to receive them. It will be useful, therefore to glance back, to our roots, albeit briefly: there we will find illustrations of Good Zeal. Then we will visit those monasteries of our own day and age, which have grown from those roots: the heritage that has been handed down to us, monastic or cultural, is being tested, confronted by the most diverse currents, and great is the challenge presented to us. We will spend the most time on this section, before we go on to ask ourselves how we might live tomorrow; a tomorrow, which, just like today, cannot be envisaged except by taking into account a very pluralistic society, with its current preoccupations.

This then will be my plan:

- I - Yesterday, the Good Zeal which animated our foundresses.
- II - Today, the practice of Good Zeal in our monasteries.
- III - Tomorrow, like yesterday and today, « prefer nothing to the love of Christ ».

I - Yesterday, the Good Zeal which animated our foundresses.

The story of a monastic foundation, whatever the place, the time or the circumstances of its conception and birth, is it not fundamentally a story of love and passion? Leave, go beyond yourself and « leave your country, your family and your father's house » (Gen 12:1) to share the life you carry within you, to light a fire in another hearth for the Lord, who is loved above all else... Is this not the love of Christ » which overwhelms us » cf. 2 Cor 5,14? Is it not this the fervent charity which burns and consumes the heart?

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The founding years, for all our monasteries in French-speaking West Africa, are heroic years, marked by sacrifice, even suffering. From the socio-political point of view, it was the rise to independence; from the socio-economic point of view, it was the uneasy groping towards financial viability. Again in our own days, whether in the Democratic Republic of Congo, North Togo, or Guinea-Conakry, young foundations are facing the same struggle: the context has changed perhaps, the challenges to be met are the same.

The Abbey of Valognes, to which our monastery of Koubri (in Burkina Faso) owes its existence, was itself founded at the beginning of the 17th century as a place of intercession and supplication for a particular family.

For all it was repeatedly a victim of the French Revolution and the ups and downs of history, the community was never destroyed. When the nuns were chased from their house, they always found a secret place to sing the Divine Office in small informal groups, whether clandestinely or in a refuge they were lucky enough to come upon, and in the greatest poverty. They touched the depths of suffering at the end of the Second World War, when a large part of the Abbey was destroyed in the bombing before the liberation. Valognes stands on the Atlantic coast of Normandy. The community was worn out, but driven by the conviction that it had to survive, it found the strength, strength born of humble love, to ask the help of the flourishing Abbey of Dourgne, right in the South of France, an Abbey bubbling with life. The venerable foundress, Marie Cronier, had been dead only twenty years; the fervour of beginnings was contagious...these generous hearts did not have to be asked a second time... »*No-one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else* » (RB 72:7) A group of seven nuns set out to support the monastery in Normandy. Shortly afterwards, one of their number was elected and consecrated Abbess, while two more were among the foundresses of Koubri, some ten years later. As she laid down her charge, the Superior of Valognes, which at that time counted 42 nuns, had offered her sacrifice to the Lord in exchange for « 42 Little Black Sisters »...Nobody could be contemplating a foundation in this time of dire need. Could Mère Anne-Marie be expecting the Lord practically to take her literally? She had simply chosen to prefer nothing to life. This passionate love devoured her heart and inflamed her with the desire to give life at the moment when she herself needed to receive it. « *Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies...* » (Jn 12:24).

And then, a couple of years later, there comes the vibrant call of Vatican II, exhorting monks and nuns of Europe to go beyond their own frontiers, to share with the young churches in Africa.

For a community to decide to found another is to consent to a little death of its own. Those members who are sent, just as much as those who stay behind, are called to the same sacrificial offering, for the birth of new life. The sisters who stay behind offer their adherence to the will of God in self-effacement, in the silence and prayer of each day; their endurance is needed by those who leave, while

these latter offer the renunciation of their security and the enduring warmth of the monastery of their profession. Both renew their YES to the Lord, the first to be served.

What fervour of charity was required of the community of Valognes to trust and respond to the call of this African Bishop! Mgr Paul Zoungrana was another apostle devoured with jealous zeal for the Lord! He was convinced that the presence of the daughters of St. Benedict would provide the solid foundations this Church needed, in this mission territory, known at that time as the Upper Volta.

And what courage was required of these five nuns to **leave**, without knowing what awaited them...they **left** sacrificing a large, strong and united community, which they loved. Today at the age of 77, one of them recalls what had been the guiding star of her vocation: « My childhood was spent under the vast skies of the solitudes of Argentina, in the loving warmth of the heart of the family. At an early age, the marvellous beauty of the natural environment let me sense the sublime greatness of the one who was its creator. Understanding as I did the infinite graciousness of his gifts, I knew I could refuse him nothing. On the contrary, it was worth leaving everything, to follow him all my days.» Little did she know that this decision would bring her to renounce, not only Argentina her splendid birthplace, but later too, France and her family roots. And this second uprooting entailed the double sacrifice of her community of profession (Dourgne), and the community to which in obedience, she had transferred her stability (Valognes).

Along with the other four nuns designated for the foundation, and among them her youngest sister, who had also entered at Dourgne, later to be sent to Valognes, they **left**, « overwhelmed by the love of Christ » to which they wished to prefer absolutely nothing. In faith, with the strength born of obedience, they sought, in their turn, to transmit that flame of monastic life which they had received from preceding generations, and which would spread under new skies, and for new generations. With perseverance, they braved the harshness of the climate, the austerity of the environment and the poverty they found around them. They were not afraid to encounter a different culture, because they set out to love this land which was to become theirs. Yet they had been warned, « You will never get anywhere with that people, that enclosed and arid land, at the furthest edge of the West African Sahel. »

They sowed in faith. And sure enough the first vocations were not long in coming. There seemed to be a kind of expectation here, secretly the ground had somehow been prepared. Maybe the harshness of the conditions of life had fashioned a temperament receptive to the demands of monastic life

What were the expectations?

As far as the Church of this country was concerned, welcoming these « women of God » was seen as a blessing. Without leaving their enclosure, they quite naturally filled a void, which up to that moment was empty. The need had made itself felt to add to the work of evangelisation, prayer, in a life of renunciation and charity.

« In a general way, the African soul is particularly receptive to the values of life and relationship with God. » And it is sensitive also to solidarity and respect of the other, in a spirit of openness and welcome which are traditionally the strong points of family life as it is lived here. In the eyes of the men and women living in these parts of West Africa, a community life that promotes these values speaks of the primacy of God, and at the same time highlights the precariousness of the realities and the good things of this world.

*In the villages around Koubri, which gave an enthusiastic welcome to this new form of religious life, life in harmony with the family group, the village community is seen as a vital necessity. This was how

a neighbour visiting the porterie put it. Listening to the other person, especially an older person or the elder is a wisdom that has been inculcated by traditional education. Respect begins by this listening, before expressing itself in language and conduct. Its twin sister is submission, out of fear of the group and fear of God. Patience, along with self-control, belongs to the one who respects his neighbour and knows how over a period of time to create space so that good can take root in the heart of the other.

*To function normally, a group needs in its midst, someone it can refer to. This need not necessarily be the most qualified, but the one who, like a guide, assures its unity and keeps it alert to its common patrimony, whether material, moral or spiritual. I was very happy to find in Nairobi, Kenya, this sense of harmony in the family and the need for reconciliation, values of the traditional African society. During an evening's entertainment, at the lovely community of Karen, which was hosting the meeting of the CIB, the young sisters produced two little scenes. The first showed how insubordination and serious abuse of the moral integrity of the group was punished, the second showed the management of conflict and reconciliation between clans of a village. It is not an exaggeration to say that the underlying traditional culture present in Burkina and elsewhere in West Africa can be found across several cultural areas of the continent. Nowadays the traditional system is attacked or damaged by the collision of cultures and globalisation. It remains true that the advice of Benedict receives a most favourable hearing in the hearts and mentalities of African men and women who knock at the doors of our monasteries, seeking a life for God in a community of brothers and sisters.

Let us now visit some of our West African communities. I would like to point out that what was said about the history of the foundation of Koubri, can be transposed, give or take the details, to nearly all the monasteries of more or less recent foundation.

II Good Zeal as it is lived today in our West African Monasteries

This part is above all a sharing of experiences and witness, hat try to provide examples of the practice of Good Zeal in the monasteries of West Africa on the whole, and in my monastery of Our Lady of Koubri in particular.

The First Generations of Africans

Several years ago now, a novice wrote this to her Novice Mistress, « I want to live sincerely, lovingly the monastic life as we were taught it. And I want to pray a lot to the Holy Spirit; it is the Spirit who forms and direct everything. »

She had been told- and she acknowledged for herself- that in many areas, the Rule of St Benedict echoed the traditional wisdom of our parts. But she had quickly understood that the cultural heritage, of which one can be legitimately proud, is for all that quickly exhausted without the power of the Holy Spirit. It is the Spirit who purifies and brings to fruition, the Spirit alone who opens the way to the new commandment of the Gospel, « *Let no one follow what he thinks is useful to himself, but what is of use to another.* » (RB 72 :7) Only the Spirit of Jesus can inspire and « accomplish » this love of charity, which goes further, and do more than just maintain the *modus vivendi* of a group or ensure solidarity among members of a family. Whatever creates or makes possible natural affection « among brothers and sisters of a same family » (RB 72 :8) is already fine and beautiful. We see evidence of selflessness and gestures of magnanimity in our traditional societies. But the lifestyle of the Kingdom, such as St Benedict teaches us, asks us to go well beyond those standards. Only the ardour of charity, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, can motivate us to give ourselves to the point of death, to help another, or allow the other to

grow. This is the love that should burn in the heart of all the baptised. Now, the Benedictine community makes its *raison d'être*, its specific mission, and the gage of its attachment to Christ above all things. It is Christ who helps us love in a life of community. In Him, God is our Father; the others become our sisters. God and the Rule are our common property, which enable us to live as sisters, coming even from different ethnic and national origins.

The first generations of African nuns had the merit of setting out on the path opened up by the foundresses. They later had the merit of persevering like their foundresses. They too braved contradictions, doubts, and all manner of opposition. For, whereas the majority of Christians bore only admiration and esteem for this new form of consecrated life, reactions were less enthusiastic, sometimes downright reticent, and at times hostile when it was a question of a family allowing a young girl to go to one of these « houses of prayer », from which they returned only with rare exceptions.

Our African senior sisters also had the merit of enduring the thrust and courage of the French foundresses, in a mutual 'taming', when the differences of culture could have been a source of incomprehension, slowing down the journey onward. This how one of our foundresses living now at Koubri recalls those first years, « In this difficult task of implanting and inculturating monastic life on African soil, the whole community, foundresses as well as new arrivals, had to place themselves before the Holy Spirit. Only the Spirit could help to discern the signs of a true monastic vocation, the ready soil of the local culture and the risks of going off the track. As in all lives in the imitation of Christ, they had to pass through death in order to come to the Resurrection and the Life! How many times in reunions or Council meetings did we arrive at an impasse! In the words of the Abbess of Valognes, who had desired and accomplished the foundation:

« We must take one step forward when the Lord sheds a patch of light on the path ahead.» In these moments we found our strength in saying, « If the Lord want it to come about, it will... » They continued to sow the seed...

Finally, our first African sisters also had the heavy but happy responsibility of welcoming younger sisters. From that time they were able to play the role of elder sisters, and soon of Counsellors to the foundresses. So, in their turn, they were being called to educate other sisters in the ways of the Lord, and for him, they were being called, in their turn, to pass on what they had received.

The heritage of the local culture and that of Benedictine monasticism

In 1995, the monasteries of West Africa were called to reflect on the monastic values which had been received in our monasteries. It transpired from these reflections, that among the values inherited from our monastic roots, some were particularly well received, and their practice gave a real life force to our communities.

Thus the search for the Absolute (the desire and search for God alone) the celebration of the Divine Office, fraternal and community life, hospitality and work well done, and a certain understanding of poverty. It is easy to understand the assimilation of these values is due in large part to the cultural baggage of our heritage, where these values mesh perfectly with the principal demands of RB 72 and thus lead us in our practice of Good Zeal, with all the shabbiness, the struggles, the shadowy areas and black patches of that practice.

Let us look for a moment at some of these values:

Desire for God and Quest for the Absolute

*« There is a Good Zeal which separates from evil and leads to God
and everlasting life. » (RB 72 :2)*
« They show...to God...loving fear. » (RB 72 :9)
« They will prefer nothing whatever to Christ. » (RB 72:11)

Very often it is the thirst to live for God alone that attracts the young African girl to Benedictine monastic life. And to want to live for God implies the determination to be converted. And so it goes without saying that anything that is provided to promote this search for God is particularly respected and cherished: silence and solitude, individual retreat days, times for lectio and prayer, etc, and all that develops the interior life, whatever stimulates zeal for the celebration of the liturgy.

It is always with emotion and fervour that, at the start of a new year, we recite in community this prayer composed for the birth of the foundation, and adapted for our own day:

*« May each member of this community have at heart to take as the foundation of its
interior life charity, total confidence in God, mutual trust, without turning in on ourselves.
It is in the most intimate union with God and in a fraternal union that is simple and solid,
that the community will find its strength, its peace its joy... »*

But then it sometimes happens that despite, the undoubted desire to live for God, and to take the means necessary, fervour cools. We end up short circuiting lectio and prayer to get involved in extra work, the necessity of which is real or imaginary; we lose the sense or the taste for lectio, and a sober lifestyle loses its attraction. Accidie takes a hold, in opposition to Good Zeal. And little by little, the other values of the interior life, discretion, stability, enclosure, become the « poor relations. »

Certainly such a situation can be put down to the influence of today's world and modern technology, which puts within reach new means of communication and information. Now we can go more quickly and acquire more, but at the same time, we get more agitated and make more noise both within and without.

So...what becomes of the desire of God and this attraction for the Absolute, which together contributed so perfectly to a peaceful life of prayer? How is it that the perverse effects of modernity disturb this balance? How is it that we are not able to remain faithful to our commitment by using the best discoveries of our times? We must ask the question honestly and face these new challenges, even if we do sense that the final answers are not to hand.

Community life of a family nature

A family spirit and a feeling for family bonds, respect for established custom and respect for authority or for the elder...this is what could be called the cultural baggage we enter with.

St Benedict tells us,

« They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other. » (RB 72 :4)
« They will earnestly vie in obedience to one another. » (RB 72 :6)

Respect for the other person, charity that expresses itself in humble and discreet service...this is indeed what constitutes the vitalising spirit for sisters living in community. Several of our communities have retained the gestures and practical attitudes proposed by St Benedict, and have added some of their

own: we incline towards a sister when we meet her for the first time each morning. We make satisfaction and acknowledge our sisters near us in Choir when we arrive late at Office We offer our seat to another sister. We acknowledge the senior, who is not necessarily the eldest, when we meet for work, and we do not leave without making a sign, a gesture or a word of excuse. We ask for a blessing when we have to go out of the monastery or when undertaking a particular assignment.

We show respect for the other and discreet charity by our mutual support, by sharing each other's burdens: marks of compassion and attentiveness in times of trial, death in the family (prayers and intentions shared in community, expression of support by the community... carrying our burdens together), mutual help in work

"Among themselves, they show the pure love of brothers and sisters" (RB 72 :8).

We also show respect and charity in our weekly community meetings - which we consider to be one of the strengths of our community - by the concern that each should be able to express herself, even a sister who might find that very difficult, and should be heard out by all. One can say that RB 72 invites each one to take the place that is hers in the community, with her temperament, weakness...even great weakness. The move towards horizontal relationships initiated in Europe after the Council was immediately given an important place at Koubri in our fraternal life. One of the last exhortations given at a community meeting by Mère Marie, our foundress and first Prioress, was to encourage us in mutual trust: « Let each one look with a spirit of goodwill at what the other is doing in her work. We must have kindness towards each other in our hearts.»

Elsewhere, another community expresses its experience thus: Community meetings build up. There we have occasions to practise mutual obedience: for example in giving one's assent to decisions taken by the community, and afterwards in defending these decisions outside, even if it is not one's own point of view, this is "going with the flow of the community."

"Let them vie in paying obedience one to another."

There is also the support of weaknesses...those of others, one's own: for example we try to respect a sister who is showing bad spirit, respecting the difficulties of her character, not allowing oneself reflections in public...That too is an aspect of carrying each other's burdens in union with Jesus who bears the sins of the world. It is so often a case of living in self-forgetfulness, with a great deal of mutual patience...

« ...supporting with the greatest patience one another's weakness of body and behaviour. » RB 72 :5

A community that is effectively a community knows how to practise reconciliation. As is the case in most Benedictine monasteries, the most obvious place of community reconciliation is the chapter of faults, in which we acknowledge our failings before our sisters. Nearly everywhere efforts are being made to renew its form, so that it can be at all times the place of personal and community rebuilding: in one house it is done by regular assessment of the life of the community, elsewhere there are Bible sharings and reconciliation, elsewhere again prayer groups...A year ago, we set up at Koubri a chapter of « fraternal promotion », and of community thanksgiving: once a month during a community meeting (where the novitiate is included), we share graces received and the signs of growth we have perceived in the community. When it is lived in a spirit of truth and openness to the other, this practice considerably improves the quality of fraternal life, and refines in us the sense of reconciliation. Being well-disposed to each other and holding each other in esteem generates confidence and well-being ! « When I do something good for my sister, that leads me to God: and when I try harder to see the good side of people and events, it becomes easier to relativise what is negative » wrote a younger sister. Is it

not this unceasing effort to go beyond ourselves which draws us to the practice of Good Zeal! Love always and love increasingly...because charity knows no bounds.

In the face of this treasure of community love, numerous are the stumbling blocks for most of our communities: fraternal life remains the battleground of everyday life. The challenges are endless and the obstacles are not lacking. Problems of communication which are related to generation gaps, rivalry, power struggles, the failure to listen and welcome each other, and this spirit of independence which resists control; we want to be mistress of our work and see only one way of looking at it: our own. This lack of humility which leads to endless self-justification, sometimes chronic complaining...so many ills which serve one's own self-interest and paralyse community life.

The only remedy for this deep-seated evil, the fruit of pride and egoism, is conversion. The conversion of each one in the depths of her heart to renew her faith in the love that comes from God alone. « To make everything I do a prayer » as one of our sisters likes to say. To do that, we must rekindle our faith in the presence of God, who is at our side in everyday life, letting himself be sought and found. In order to struggle against this spirit of independence, the work we receive and carry out in the willing obedience of a loving heart, the disinterested mutual service, where no desire slips in to put one's self in the centre : these are so many straws to light the flame of « Prefer(ring) nothing to Christ. » It is a question of endlessly inventing new weapons of love and learning to use them for ourselves and for those who come to us.

III- The same yesterday today forever

« Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ. » RB 72:11

The Fall of the Roman Empire and the barbarian invasions of 6th and 7th centuries, the French Revolution and political strife of 17th and 19th centuries, endless ravages in every country of the world since the two world wars of 20th century...such is the stuff of history. It tells us that Benedictine monastic life was born, developed and always survived in the midst of troubles, persecutions and every manner of conflict.

Today the same context is offered to the Rule of St Benedict both in the world, and in the Church which is in the heart of the world. Our own Africa, often exposed to the most diverse currents is constantly ailing: from its own inner contradictions, from struggles, violence, inter racial conflicts etc. It is trying to recover its breath and its unity.

It is at the heart of this bleakest of pictures that the sons and daughters of St Benedict must announce life and maintain hope, just as was the case in the past in Europe and elsewhere. Our monasteries are in full growth even if the rhythm of that growth is somewhat slow and sometimes imperceptible. At times, there were those who laboured and wore themselves out in countries already crippled by war or struggles of various kinds. In the cases where the monastic communities did not survive, one might ask whether they were not already attacked by from the inside by difficulties in their community and fraternal life. Their defences were consequently down before the death-dealing venom of division and violence that infiltrated them. This situation gave easy entry to the germs of bad zeal which separate from God and others: incidences of intolerance, struggles for influence, jealousies, arrogance, exclusion...and the darkness came, the darkness of defeat which was little short of death.

But for those who believe in Jesus Christ, has not life sprung from death? He took on himself the evil of the world, and died carrying its sin. And it was by becoming this Crucified one that He transformed our deaths into Life. What we are therefore called to, in the depths of our failure, is to believe in Life and in Love, always...like our predecessors who handed the torch on to us. But faith is a gift of God, which we receive freely into a heart that is open and thirsting. Everything can start afresh, if we accept repeatedly to take up again the « way of life », offering our open wounds as a place of reconciliation. For St Benedict, the arms with which we win back to life are in the first place the arms of obedience: they are strong and they are noble. For obedience belongs to those « *who cherish Christ above all* » (RB 72:7). And they are fitting to those who « *do not pursue what they consider to be better for themselves, but instead what they consider to be better for someone else.* » (RB 72:7)

Mercy and the desire to see the other person grow where there is the determination to follow the Lord and to serve one's neighbour. With the path of reconciliation re-opened and the desire for unity rekindled, the community can start afresh and recover life, in peace and joy, and it will remain that way as long as each one of its members is always ready to live out self-renunciation and the gift of self to others. Only the prayer of adoration heart to heart with the Lord can lead us to that. (cf. above : prayer of the foundress of Koubri) The Monastery is the House of God, reflected one sister. This House does not belong to me! What is more: what I see in my sisters can help me in my conversion: the smile of one, the availability of another who says, « Yes! » immediately; a sister at prayer in church, another working silently ! so many stimulants to return to the Good Zeal which leads to God and to life with him forever.

At Kigali, in November 1992, the religious men and women of French speaking Africa defined themselves as « carriers of hope for Africa ». Since 1992, we have had the tragedy of the Rwandan massacres and the Great Lakes, with the passion of our sisters at Sovu; there has been the war in the Congo, which brought about the departure of our brothers and sisters of Bouenza. Elsewhere in Africa, other dramas have unfolded. On the international scene, the same scenario reproduces itself, coming to a head in the USA, with the terrible day of 11th November. Today, as yesterday, the sons and daughters of St. Benedict are called upon to proclaim Life and promote Peace - and that well beyond the confines of their monasteries, and well beyond the frontiers of the lands where they are implanted. Because today, as yesterday and perhaps tomorrow even more than today, the fate of one hangs on the fate of everyone else. And we can have the impression that our human lives are being drawn more closely together on a planet that is shrinking more and more. How can we fail to recall the vision of our Father St. Benedict, at the end of his life on this earth? « In a ray of sun he contemplated the whole universe. »...the universe of humanity and of things, called alike to know Peace and Light and true Life.

We need love in order to live. Love and nothing other than that love which sacrifices and gives itself. One « *does not pursue what he considers to be better for himself, but instead what he considers to be better for someone else.* » (RB 72:7) Like today and yesterday, our monasteries tomorrow will have to offer to the world what it has always needed the most urgently: the hope which affirms that peace is possible on condition that we receive it as gift from God, even as we ardently « *seek and pursue it.* » « The monastic ideal, such as it has been lived from the beginning on African soil, is the ideal of a humble and hidden life, dedicated entirely to the search for God. Aiming as it does, at the perfect realisation of evangelical charity, effectively separated from the world in the common life of brothers and sisters, « having only one heart and one soul », the monastery will stand as a witness to the demands of the Kingdom of God, present among us.» (Dom Jean Leclercq in 1964 at Bouaké.) A house of God who is loved and adored, a house of brothers or sisters, who are aflame with this good fire which « *leads us to God and to life with him forever* », (RB 72 :12) and are called to be witnesses of the

charity of Christ, « so that many believe in love » (cf Jn1), and so that « in all things God may be glorified. » (RB 57 and IPet. 4 :11).

BY WAY OF CONCLUSION

« May he bring us all together to everlasting life. » RB 72 :12

Love is the foundation of everything: this is what chapter 72 of the Rule of our father St. Benedict is telling us. Now in the face of the demands of charity, we are always weak, our performance is poor. It is the poor Christ who gathers us together, and unites us. It is in him alone, and through him that we can love our sisters, and beyond them, all people, saved and reconciled by the blood of his Cross.

I asked a young sister in my community how she understood and lived Good Zeal. She wrote this to me « Every day the Lord gives me, I wish to spend by loving, by doing my work with care. I hurry up to finish it, and to be on time. I try to give myself with a happy heart to my community, in openness to my sisters. » All things are passing, said our Novice Mistress one day, but the love with which you carry out the activities of your day remains into eternity.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP SHARING

1. Can you share one foundational event (or speak of one person) marking the past or recent history of your community, and which inspires you in the practice of Good Zeal.
2. a) Give one or two concrete examples of what you do to stimulate Good Zeal in your community.
b) In your practice of Good Zeal today, what is the demand with which you have the greatest difficulty?
3. Have you sometimes remarked a cooling of Good Zeal in your community among sisters who had shown great zeal at the start of their monastic life ?
What does that come from? What can be done to put it right?
4. What would you like to say to your community, to direct the way Good Zeal could be live out in the future ?

Translation: Sr. Mary Philippa Manweiler OCist.