

## **“The French Monasteries and their International Connections.”**

**M. Fabienne Hyon**

CIB Conference Meeting in Poitiers Sept. 17th, 2015

In the 19<sup>th</sup> c. the Benedictine communities resurfaced – not without difficulties – after having been dispersed during the French Revolution. Most of them had continued in secret, the sisters living apart, but meeting daily to continue their life of prayer.

The community of Urt, which had only just come into being (1883) next to the monastery of Belloc, made the first foundation outside of France:

**\* In 1889 Urt makes a foundation in Oklahoma (USA) where the sisters will have a place to join again after having been expelled in 1903; they will found Ramsay in Louisiana in 1907.**

At the same time the brothers of Belloc made a foundation in Argentine (1899) and in Abu Gosh in Palestine (also in 1899).

Then the Congregation Notre Dame du Calvaire (Our Lady of Calvary) makes a foundation in **Jerusalem** with sisters from several of its French monasteries...

**\* In 1899 the Congregation ND du Calvaire makes a foundation on the Mount of Olives in Palestine.**

Except for these two foundations it is a situation of crisis in France which will give rise to new international links (the monasteries in Europe have already developed many contacts with each other): the crisis arises from the beginning of the separation of Church and State in 1880. The monks loose the right to live in community and must disperse or leave the French territory. An even more radical law drives them to cross the border and live in Belgium (Amay), Luxemburg (Clervaux), England (Quarr), Spain... In the following years, these communities, some of which still exist today, make new foundations in the USA and other countries. So Wisques f.ex. emigrates to Oosterhout (Netherlands).

World War I (1914-18) calls back the monks and the priests who are integrated into the French army. In this way, the relationship between the lay people and the clergy becomes closer and the tensions lessen. This leads to the return of the communities in the 1920s.

For the Benedictine women, the situation was different. Some could elude expulsion, others were forced to go into exile: examples for that are the Benedictines of Solesmes and Kergonan who took refuge on the Isle of Wight (Great Britain); on coming back in 1922, they left a new monastery in Ryde just as the nuns of Wisques in the Netherlands at Oosterhout. The community of Jouarre had to take refuge in Belgium, then in the Netherlands at New Herlaar and could begin to return in 1919.

During the 20<sup>th</sup> c. the monasteries started foundations in other continents:

**\* 1937: Wisques makes a foundation in Canada, Ste-Marthe sur le lac (which will found Westfield in the USA in 1982)**

Following the plea of Pius XI in his encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* to bring the monastic life to those places where it does not yet exist, a number of new foundations on other continents are being prepared. This plea will give its orientation to the foundation initiated by Dom Besse

(Ligugé) and carried out by Mother Bénédicte Waddington-Delmas: this foundation will finally become the Benedictines of Ste-Bathilde of Vanves. While the monastery of Vanves is being built, the first sisters go abroad:

\* **1934 Vanves makes a foundation in Madagascar**

\* **1954 Vanves makes a foundation in Vietnam**

There are more such foundations in this period of time: La-Pierre-qui-Vire makes a foundation **in Vietnam** (1940), En-Calcat together with F. Denis Martin makes the foundation of **Tioumliline in Morocco** (1952), which will found **Bouaké**, Ivory Coast (1959) and **Koubri** in Burkina Faso (1963).

Meanwhile Pius XII published the encyclical *Fidei Donum*, which strongly encourages foundations, and a number of Benedictine women communities made foundations just after the Second Vatican Council and again in recent years. In general they were made at the request of the bishops and often in collaboration with a monks' monastery; the first foundation could be either for monks or for nuns.

\* **1963: Valognes founds Koubri (Burkina Faso)**

\* **1963: Pradines founds Bouakè (Ivory Coast)**

\* **1963: Dourgne founds Dzogbegan (Togo)**

\* **1966: Vanves founds Toffo (Benin)**

\* **1970: Solesmes founds Keur Guilaye (Senegal)**

\* **1968: Brou founds Takarazuka (Japan)**

\* **1977: Solesmes founds Ste-Marie-des-Anges (Martinique)**

\* **1977: Le Bec Hellouin founds Abu Gosh (Israel)**

\* **1996: Maumont founds Friguiagbè (Republic of Guinea)**

\* **2005: Jouques founds Pèporiyakou (Benin)**

A foundation that means long-standing relationships in which people are sent out, financial support is given and above all formation... and all this continues for a long time. Now, 50 years later (and even more!), there are still a number of needs, but also exchange in various forms. The formation program Ananie, inspired by the English formation program which has been going on in Rome for many years, is a good example for a complementary way of life that can link the monasteries in the north and in the south.

What do the foundations mean to their founding monasteries today?

- They become aware of and care for the problems of the countries in the southern hemisphere. The connection does not only exist with the new monastery, but also with its friends who like to feel as part of the family when they come to France to visit the monastery of origin: just as the members of the community do, they provide information which is not given by the media and tell about what is really going on in their region. In this way we become more aware of the incoherency of the demands made by the northern countries...
- The community of the founding monastery is challenged by sisters who share their life during several months or years: the sisters get to know the founding monastery from its inside, while the community learns about different ways of seeing the world, of

reacting, of understanding fraternal relations and the Benedictine spirituality. You listen in a different way to the news when a sister from the country is present.

- The sisters coming from abroad, on the other hand, can discern the origin of certain customs and judge if they are rooted simply in the lifestyle of the founding monastery or in the monastic tradition in general.
- The close contact to the poor in the southern countries calls us to recognize the forms of poverty in our home country, which are often less visible, but still a reality: e.g. emotional shortcomings and fragilities, solitude, lack of orientation, etc. The closeness to our sisters in the South also allows us to become more sensitive for the consequences of the global warming for all populations.
- Another aspect of the contact north-south is the introduction of the Kora of Keur Moussa which is now used to accompany the divine office in Oriocourt, Vanves, St-Thierry, Orbey and also in the Dominican convents and other places. Often the traditional tones of church music are used, or they are replaced by our own tones which are more adapted to our European culture.
- What we receive from each other
  - \* The presence of our sisters from Africa, Asia and elsewhere provokes us to change our way of life: Our sisters encourage us to act more delicately in our relationships, to develop a deeper mutual respect, esp. in regard to the elderly. They, on the other hand, experience more direct relationships which do not avoid conflict, but where excuse is granted again and again. They learn how much the elderly sisters feel appreciated when they have a duty to fulfill, even if it is with the last ounce of their strength. The respect for the elderly is a good place for intercultural exchange: the old sister in Asia feels appreciated when everything is done for her, while the old sister in France feels appreciated when she can do as much as is still possible for her. This invites us to decode the culture of the other and the way in which for example respect is expressed. Meeting the other changes me – it is not me who must change the other. I am fascinated by one of our sisters from Madagascar who is at the side of one of our old sisters who has got Alzheimer's disease. She is always patient, helping her with the psalms every time and often even during the psalm, always with a smile. She edifies us a lot, just like the sick sister, by the way, who is radiating joy herself.
  - \* Some of our French sisters are sent to a community on another continent for a shorter or longer period of time in order to help or for their own formation. The direct contact with a different culture leads to a growth in maturity, both in general and in monastic life.
  - \* I could have talked about the international experience of the Center John XXIII (Centre Jean XXIII) in Vanves, which has been established by the AIM in collaboration with the community there. But I have chosen to concentrate on the relationships between the founding communities and their sisters on other continents.

Is there a balanced reciprocity in all sectors when sisters come from other continents to live in a French monastery? Only they could tell – but we may humbly hope that life in a community where different cultures intersect opens up the possibility that the sisters construct a place of intercultural exchange in a time when the world tries to solve the challenge of our ever more international way of life.