



Commission of Benedictine Women
A Commission of the Abbot Primate

NEWSLETTER

Nr.2 - September 2000

COLLOQUIUM 2000

Fifty Benedictine abbesses and prioresses representing the 19 regions throughout the world where Benedictine communities have been founded, met from 28th - 30th August 2000 in Sant'Anselmo, Rome, to discuss questions of common interest and to promote co-operation and mutual support on an international scale. This Newsletter will be bringing items about the meeting which should be of interest for all communities of Benedictine women.

GREETINGS OF ABBOT PRIMATE MARCEL ROONEY OSB

Abbot Primate Marcel greeted the assembly warmly. He stressed the importance of the abbesses and prioresses of his Commission meeting together and getting to know each other better. This leads to personal growth and a deeper understanding of life. He hoped that this Colloquium would lead to deeper understanding about the differences between each Benedictine house. One of the special marks of the Benedictine Order is the AUTONOMY of each house. It leads to different ways of living the Rule and makes it possible that these differences can stand side by side as an enrichment to one-another. During the Colloquium much of the discussion will be on things that seem to be external, but it is important not to forget that externals are there to build up LOVE. What counts most are the structures of our hearts, leading to love of God and our neighbour. This is the essence of what the discussions of this week will

be all about. The new Catalogus is a contribution to the efforts of Benedictine women all over the world to grow from knowledge to love and from love to witness. This is very much needed in the Church today.

GREETING OF THE MODERATOR OF ABBOT PRIMATE'S COMMISSION M.MÁIRE HICKEY OSB

It is a great joy to me to welcome all of you here this morning to the opening of our meeting of the extended Commission of Benedictine Women. This meeting is a Colloquium – not a Congress or a Symposium with long presentations and lectures. We are here to communicate with each other, to share our monastic experience with each other, and to encourage each other in our common search for authentic ways of living the vocation to Benedictine monastic spirituality for women in the 21st century.

**The strength of diversity in the
Benedictine tradition**

from M.Máire Hickey's opening address

At our meetings over the years and through contacts with each other and even visits in each others monasteries we have been joyfully discovering the strength of our shared Benedictine spirituality. In the past it had often maybe been hidden under the external diversity of our different styles of life. **Under external diversity in structure in the different congregations and federations, in our ways of dressing, in the kinds of work we do, in our form of community life, in the degree of our adaptation to the culture we live in, we have been discovering a profound unity in our desire to consecrate our lives totally to God and His service, in a particular community, with the Gospel as our guide and the Rule of St. Benedict as our Handbook for the ordering of our daily lives.** We have been discovering our unity in the way we all as Benedictines are trying to be listening people, our ears open and sensitive for God's word in the Sacred Scriptures, and in the way we try to live in the presence of God in every situation, with the celebration of the liturgy at fixed times during the day as the most powerful recognition of and response to His presence in our midst. **We are learning to recognise how a deep spiritual union between us all can strengthen our witness in the Church and the world and make Benedictine life attractive and convincing for women seeking the way in which to live out their vocations.** We are learning a great deal from each other about the richness of our rule and about how the Holy Spirit can use its flexibility to create a witness of Christian life in many different situations at different times all over the world.

The choice of ENCLOSURE as the theme for this meeting

from M.Máire Hickey's opening address

One aspect of our lives about which we have up to now had difficulty in really learning from each other is Enclosure. **An essential aspect of every monk's life, male or female, is the necessity of some kind of separation from the world. We need a space in which**

we are learning to live the values of the Gospel, which are not those of the world. Our vocation requires a space in which we can grow in self-knowledge and in prayer, space to live and worship with our community and to take our share in the tasks of community life, bearing each other's burdens and sharing with each other the joys of being risen in Christ. Our Rule gives us some general guidelines about living in enclosure. And since the 13th century there has been legislation from the Church about the enclosure that all religious are obliged to keep. Legislation for men has been different from that for women, and there are different varieties of legislation for women leading different forms of religious life.

The ways in which Benedictine women live this aspect of the monastic life are externally extraordinarily different. Up to now, we have not shared very much about this subject.

**Enclosure,
if it is being lived in freedom of
spirit and in depth,
is part of the touchstone of
monastic life.**

The way in which a monk, a sister or a nun lives his or her kind of enclosure, keeping loving and sensitive watch over the space into which God has called her and that therefore belongs only to Him, is of the essence of the monastic heart. We have been a little afraid that our way of living Enclosure, maybe very precious to ourselves, might not be understood by others. It can be painful if we are for some reasons having difficulty in recognising the way others may be living it, or if we have fears that others may not recognise, may trivialise or deprecate our own way of doing it. Whenever the subject came up at any of our meetings in the past, it somehow did not lead us on into a deepening understanding of each other and a new appreciation of our own manner of living enclosure.

Because from year to year our desire to understand and learn from each other has been growing, we took the decision to face this sensitive subject this year, full of confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. So we are making Enclosure the theme of our Jubilee Colloquium.

August 28th Closing of the theme : ENCLOSURE

Again group work was at the centre of this morning. The work of the groups was passed on to the others by means of large posters put up in the cloisters after the first session, by a short report to the assembly at the end of the morning and by a summary of the results of each group distributed to everyone. The question dealt with was:

What is the underlying VALUE of enclosure?
and
If a monastic community was truly living the VALUE of enclosure, what would be happening in that community?

and after the break:

*Please write ONE **statement** that encompasses the VALUE of enclosure for Benedictine women based on all you have heard in our discussions.*

Sr.Karen Joseph summed up those reports with the comment that everyone had mentioned the following three areas:

- A. Living the VALUE of enclosure leads to seeking God and living with oneself (habitare secum) with God in Christ.**
- B. Living the VALUE of enclosure leads to growing self-knowledge opening up an arena of combat in the desert of prayer**
- C. Living the VALUE of enclosure leads to presence in the community and to deeper availability for service, to be servants to one-another.**

M.Máire also made a short summary:
Living in enclosure is seen by all of us indeed as a most valuable means to the end we are living towards – union with God in the coming of His Kingdom.

Benedict's paints a picture of the monastery as the workshop in which we learn to use the tools of the spiritual life. He speaks of hard work, the toil of learning, the patience and humility required. We all love this workshop and want to be in it and stay in it and to keep learning. ...

We often spoke of "Enclosure of the heart"- that inner space of Christ-centredness to which we are all called. We all recognise that this goes with us whether we are in the monastery or outside of it, and that many of the tensions involved in staying in the workshop of the monastery are resolved only through our growing in Christcentredness, in letting him take over more and more of our deepest inner space.

We all recognise the tension involved in living in enclosure – tensions between care and vigilance over the inner space, signified by the cell, on the one hand and hospitality on the other; or between enclosure and care for our parents or others in need. We recognise the need to know what is happening outside of the enclosure. Benedict sees what is going on in the world when he tells the monks to guard their hearts. We need to know some – indeed maybe much – of what happens in the world and what we need to know must not become our inner space....

We are agreed that we want to live in that relationship to the "outside world" sketched out by Benedict, adapted in different ways for our situation to-day and for our different cultures. A Benedictine Community commits itself to this "monastic enclosure". It's own constitutions put this into practice. In cases of doubt the authority of the Abbess and Council decides about individual issues.

Perhaps it is good to ask ourselves at this point whether we see each others way of living enclosure with respect? Can we learn from each other? Let us ask ourselves: What have I learned for myself? and: What have I learnt for my Community?

NEWS ITEMS

**MANY CULTURES - ONE
SPIRITUALITY
The impact of St.Louis, USA, 1999**

At the meeting of the Commission many of the members expressed the importance of the meeting in St.Louis. It became clear that much had changed for the members of the Commission by sharing the experience of being a part of Benedictine life and liturgy in a new setting. One abbess commented that during those visits they got to know more about each other than they had done over many years together on the Commission because for the first time they were taking time to listen to each other. It was asked, how this experience could continue. It was suggested that one way is to relive such experiences by speaking about them, thus renewing the memory and nourishing gratitude, and through that looking for a perspective for the future.

It is planned to have the next Commission meeting in Nairobi, Kenya, from 3rd - 12th November 2001.

There have been several changes of membership:

Region 2: M.Maria-Lurdes Solé i Comañes of Barcelona has gone out of office. She automatically ceases to be a member of the Commission. A new election will be taking place soon.

Region 6: To relieve the moderator for her work, Region 6 now has another representative, M.Lucia Wagner of Kommunität Venio in Munich, Germany.

Region 14: M.Waldetrudis Cartalla, Quezon City, Philippines, has gone out of office. A new election is due.

Region 16: M. Clothilde Sanyika, Songea, Tanzania, has gone out of office. M.Inviolata Anton Omari has taken her place on the Commission. M.Shukrani Mkonde, is the new substitute



Financial report

Until now the meetings of the Commission have been financed through large donations that have been solicited from various sources. This has been a great help for getting going but it is no long-term solution. It will be necessary to build up an independant financial structure for the Commission. For this purpose three representatives of the Commission, M.Erika Van de Cauter (Schotenhof, Region 5. Benelux), Sr.Colleen Haggerty (Federation of St.Benedict, St.Joseph, Region 9. USA and Canada) and M.Lucia Wagner (Komunität Venio, Munich, Region 6. Germany, Austria Switzerland and Scandinavia), have been asked to meet with the Executive Committee to talk about making suggestions towards finding some future policy.



Election of Moderator due in 2001.

According to the statutes of the Commission the Moderator is elected for four years. This means that an election of a new Moderator is due in 2001 at the meeting in Nairobi.



**Next Symposium
September 4 - 11, 2002
Sant'Anselmo, Rome.**

What theme?

At the meeting on August 31st the members of the Commission were asked which theme they would like to take at the next Symposium. There was a strong wish to ask about (1) passing on our Benedictine values **as women** to the new millenium and (2) taking note of **the cultural dimension** - ie. different expressions in different cultures and traditions.

Two suggestions surfaced, on which the Symposium could focus. These were equally favoured: **RB:72 „Good Zeal“ and „Hospitality“** The Executive Committee will be making detailed decisions at their meeting in November.