#### 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 deeper to 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 What counts most are the LOVE. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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

First Session : ENCLOSURE Facilitator of the Process : Sr.Karen Joseph, Clyde, USA

In introducing the first session it was emphasised that the *focus of this meeting is* to be on the level of personal experience and not on the level of the differing canonical background of each community. Sr.Karen Joseph, who has been invited as facilitator, will be aiming at drawing out what spiritual value lies behind this element in the Rule of St.Benedict and asking about its importance for our spiritual lives as Benedictine Women.

There was an emphasis on work in groups where it was possible to get to know each other better. The question for the first group meeting was:

- 1. Please share how your particular monastery expresses "enclosure".
- 2. What is your PERSONAL experience of "enclosure"?
- 3. What are the COMMONALTIES and the DIFFERENCES shared? (write on newsprint).

At the end of the morning each group shared something about their discussion with the others. A summary of the COMMONALTIES and the DIFFERENCES was compiled and distributed.

In the afternoon there was time for personal prayer and reflection. Each was asked to search for TWO passages in Scripture and in the Rule of St.Benedict that supported Enclosure. They were also asked to find TWO passages from Scripture and from the Rule of St.Benedict that challenge enclosure.

Here are some examples of the passages that were found

Scripture quotations that support enclosure John 1:14 Word made Flesh - and pitched		<b>Quotations from the Rule that</b>
John 1:14	Word made Flesh - and pitched his tent among us	support enclosure Chap 66,, Chap 53, non vacare
2.Cor. 4:7	treasure	Chap. 4 - monastery as workshop
Matth. 6:6	Go into room and close the door and pray	
John 15	remain in my love	
Luke 10:38	Mary and Martha ,,she chose the better part"	
John 16:28ff	come from Father and return to Father	Quotations from the Rule that
Mark 6:30	come away and rest awhile	challenge enclosure
1 Cor. 7:34	unmarried woman devoted to the Lord's affairs	
		Chap 4 works of mercy
Scripture quotations that challenge enclosure		Chap 53 some sisters are very
John 15	inward and outward challenge	occupied with hospitality
Matth.!0:16	I send you as lambs amongst wolves	Chap.67 brothers on a journey
Matth.28:19	Go and preach the Gospel and baptise	
Matth. 25	What you do to the little ones you do to me.	
Matth.5:16	Let your light shine before others	

All saw the call of Christ to go apart to pray as an essential element of enclosure. A monastery is a sacred space reserved to encourage the search for God. Challenges were felt when the commandment to love and show hospitality clash with the need to withdraw to pra

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#### 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 <u>VALUE</u> of enclosure, what would be happening in that community?

and after the break:

Please write <u>ONE</u> **statement** that encompasses the <u>VALUE</u> 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?

## STRUCTURE Speaker: Abbot Richard Yeo, Downside, England

Before the morning began, M.Máire Hickey explained in a few words the aims of the day's work:

As you all know, the Women's Commission came into existence in the 1970s. It was recognised by the then Abbot Primate and by many Benedictine women, that Benedictine women's communities suffered from a lack of contact and communication among themselves, and that our nuns and sisters all over the world could profit greatly by getting to know each other, by exchanging thoughts and experiences and by supporting each other in their common The possibilities offered by our union with each other within the search for God. Confederatio Benedictina were inadequate to even begin to meet the needs. The Women's Commission in it's present form has been trying to do this since 1987. There is indeed a great deal more movement and exchange of experience among Benedictine nuns and sisters now than there was 30 years ago, I believe with great profit for our monastic lives and witness. But our structures remain very tenuous and fragile. We have talked frequently during the past few years about possible structures for Benedictine women. There seem to be many canonical hindrances, but we have never given up hope that there could be some options that would be suitable for us. Abbot Richard is acquainted with our situation, and we have asked him to advise us. That is what he is here for to-day.

Abbot Richard began by giving a paper introducing the questions involved. It is possible to order a copy of this talk from Sr.Monica Lewis OSB, Abtei St.Scholastica, D - 49413 Dinklage, Fax: 0049 4443 3670 e-mail burgdinklage@gmx.de

Abbot Richard then offered several opportunities to discuss the implications, through work in groups and a panel discussion. During the course of the day it became clearer that

- it is good to move slowly and with discernment, but also that
- the legislation for Benedictine women in the Lex Propria of 1985 is now out of date and will need adjustment.

and Abbot Richard also stressed that

• all must recognise the importance of AUTONOMY in the Benedictine Order.

It was agreed that the Moderator should give a presentation to the Abbots Congress following the Colloquium, in which she should report to them how the Abbot Primate's Commission of Benedictine Women is developing. This presentation will be published at a later date.

At the end of the afternoon all were asked if they approve of the direction in which the Commission is moving. There was overwhelming support by all, but at the same time it was underlined that much care must be taken to be sure that all monasteries feel included in this evolution, the contemplative communities, moniales with papal enclosure and moniales with constitutional enclosure, as much as

sorores with active ministries, and that therefore much dialogue will have to take place in the coming years.

Everyone agreed that any movement towards a union will respect the autonomy of each house. This is how it will be possible to be inclusive of such a great diversity of expressions of the Benedictine Charisma.

#### **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 been financed through have 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.