

**Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum Conference Meeting  
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Report given by Sister Paul Galland, OSB, Region 17**

How do we live, in the monasteries of region 17 of the Communion Internationalis Benedictinarum (CIB)? We live in solidarity among us, in truth and authenticity in the Benedictine way of life, as well as with reverence for the earth and for all people in a commitment to justice and peace.

I am a bit intimidated and very moved to be speaking in front of the delegates of Benedictine women from across the whole world. At the same time, I am grateful that you have accepted our invitation to come to be with us here in West Africa. In the name of the Benedictine women of West Africa, *I thank you for your love, you who make such an effort*, as St Paul says to Thessalonians.

I have been asked to speak about how we, in the monasteries of our region, try to live these three goals of solidarity, authenticity and reverence as set by the CIB symposium for the four years between 2010 and 2014.

I have to admit that it is difficult to give an answer because I have received only a little bit of information. So I will try to answer from what I know of the monasteries of West Africa, and in particular from my own monastery. I hope I will not misrepresent the reality of our monasteries and, if so, I ask the members of those monasteries to please excuse me if they do not recognize themselves. I also ask your indulgence if my point of view is a bit limited.

## **SOLIDARITY**

### **Solidarity among communities**

The call to leave one's country and to come to live the monastic charism in a place that perhaps has a complex history, a culture that is changing, or sometimes not changing, and a church where evangelization is still very new. Such a call may be a challenge.

We can move forward only by being aware that this work is not only our own. It is a work which needs to be supported by the experience of communities who are already mature and where the monastic charism has been internalized and has become a valid way of life.

*When we know our limits that is where the bonds of solidarity are born.*  
(Quotation of Rev. Louis Cochou).

This solidarity among Benedictine women in West Africa has already come a long way during the period from 1962 to 1970. With deep feeling, we read again in the bulletin n° 74 of AIM (2002) the words of Mother Jean-Baptiste Choupot (at that time, the prioress of Toffo) and Mother Françoise de Brantes, foundress of Keur-Guilaye (Senegal) speaking about the great value that lies in sisters meeting one another and in building personal relationships:

*From 1977 on, at the impetus of M. Charles Helie, prioress of Toffo, a new association of the monasteries of Benedictine nuns in West Africa was born. After many changes and much correspondence, as well as a meeting held in Abidjan in 1979, this project was presented and, then, it was approved in 1980. This association is very important. The goal is to express and to build monastic unity and collaboration through the exchange of information and services, especially in the areas of formation, to exchange experiences and study topics of interest to all, and to offer help to the new foundations. As part of this association, the abbesses and prioresses of the seven monasteries (Bouake, Koubri, Dzogbegan, Toffo, Keur Guilaye, Sadori, and Friguiagbe) in the association held meetings every four years with the delegates from their monasteries to probe more deeply into a specific topic. They also met every two years in a more informal manner.*

Meanwhile, we live happily in solidarity with one another. For example, when a sister comes to spend time in a community, or another sister is sent for part of her formation, we have a new opportunity to accompany one another. It is important that the younger communities, who are asking for assistance, or who are looking for new insights, be asked to explain where it is that they need help. They need to live with, but not to become, consumers of the unique and precious strength of the other community (ies).

Taking part in important events of the life of another community is significant for both communities. Recently, the blessing of M. Marie-Espérance, as abbess of Keur Guilaye (2th July), has strengthened the fraternal bonds among the communities.

We care about both the formal and the informal bonds within the association, which has existed for some thirty years, which allow us to see ourselves as a family. In this family, each community keeps its own identity and brings to the other its own unique richness in a real and living communion.

One fruit of the association is an institute, which has existed for some years, for young professed sisters. It is greatly appreciated and gives practical tools and methods that allow us to structure a life of lectio divina. This formation period lasts three years with two sessions each year. The “tutors” follow the young professed in their own work. The monks also participate in this program.

The formators of these young people in the novitiate feel also, that they can experiment with sharing their own experiences and their own questions. They work together on important topics pertinent to the actual formation process. Masters and mistresses of novices meet together every three years.

#### The broader sense of solidarity

Solidarity goes beyond the circle of our monasteries. Solidarity allows us to be concerned with the diversity of queries within the Church and also beyond. “*We know where the church is, what we don’t know is where she is not*”.

Some examples are: Solidarity with our oblates, in their specific way of life in the world based on the spirit of the Rule of St Benedict and lived in relation to a community of Benedictine women and their commitment to a community, helps us on our own way of conversion; the community of deaconesses of Bafut (Cameroun) asked several times, that we accept young sisters in 3 communities to strengthen the roots of their own religious life; novices from apostolic congregations have spent time in our monastic novitiates in order to learn how to structure their own way of life; even, a bishop asked one monastery to receive a priest in difficulties, into a nuns' community, in order that he might be helped by them.

### Solidarity in the community

Solidarity builds the body of the community in daily life through the joys of helping one another, the joy of feasts celebrated together, and the solidarity among the members in preparation for the feast.

The way we seek forgiveness of one another each evening is also very significant. In this, we recall the Mandatum (as on Holy Thursday) and the chapter on love which follows in John's gospel.

An important dimension in Africa is solidarity with the family of each sister.

*In Africa customs and traditions build strong bonds of solidarity among persons and develop in each one an emphasis that leads them to strong social realities. (Soeur Marie Catherine Kingbo, f.s.c.m.)*

Therefore, it is necessary to find the right way to enter into the African customs and traditions as well as to understand the richness of solidarity among the members of a family. The risk of forcing conditions on any given sister in one circumstance or another is recognized.

At the same time, communal solidarity can only be built when it is integrated with fairness into the strong sense of familial solidarity.

We can quote Fr Roger Hounbedji, O.P. (The Radical Reality of Religious Life in the African Context),

*In the African context, a truly fraternal communion among the members of a congregation necessarily includes this familial dimension as a foundation for mutual trust. This family spirit manifests itself not only among the members of the religious community but also extends to the families of each religious. This is a sign that those who are committed in religious life are indeed brothers and sisters and that they feel supported by one another.*

Each community has to find the appropriate way: sharing news and prayers, visits and gifts when it is necessary, material help when it is needed. If this mutual trust among the sisters grows well, it will lead each sister to freedom. This freedom will allow her to walk in that preference for Christ within the life of the community and will be a sign of fraternity in Christ.

## **THE AUTHENTICITY OF OUR LIFE AND OF OUR PRACTICE OF THE RULE**

**In each era, the authenticity of our Benedictine life and of our practice of the Rule must be searched out and verified. Some periods of history call for more and it may be that we are in such a period now. The Church, for the past 20 years, in giving more and more attention to religious life, wakes us up and encourages us. The society around us is also encouraged, through the Church's research, writings, and even her digressions, which, at times, provoke us. The tremendous amount of violence which shakes our countries and our people leads to other important realities, that of our love and of our way of life.**

**Among our monasteries here in West Africa, some are celebrating or will soon celebrate their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. It is for each community an occasion to review its manner of living the gospel in the school of Saint Benedict to renew again its consciousness of what has been received, what is being lived out, and what it wants to transmit to the future. It is also an occasion to think about the questions that are being asked of us. The present context is very different from the context of the 1960s. I think that each community, in one way or another, has begun its review of its own life and has done so in a fruitful way.**

**It is also, in many cases, the time to pass on the torch, up until now carried by the older European sisters, to the younger African sisters: This is an opportune time to affirm the purity of the monastic heritage, being passed on with the best of inculturation.**

**The canonical visits, in principle, have been good ways to affirm and renew the fidelity of the life of our community. It seems that, little by little, they have become less relevant and a bit formal. For some years now, the canonical visitations have been special moments in our community life: most of the time they are prepared individually or in community with questions adapted to the situation of the community; then, they are taken up again, in the final report, which offers guidance for the following years. Moreover, there are usually two or more visitors (men or women), and this is a good opportunity for exchange with the sisters. It also allows the visitors to expand their point of view. The canonical visitation becomes a moment that truly gives us the opportunity to grow in the authenticity of our own life.**

**The Word of God is always the light that guides the truth of our life. For some time now, in some monasteries, the sharing of the Gospel takes an important place as a source of life for the community gathered round the Word of God. We became aware of the fact that we were not talking among ourselves about the Word of God and that was a real void in our efforts to build a Christian community life. In order to make this situation more concrete, I will give you an example: the community is divided up into 3 groups of 6 or 7 sisters; the 3 groups meet at the same time, one hour after vespers, in 3 different places in the cloister so we will not disturb the other groups, but we are still together. The sharing takes place once every two weeks and is always preceded by some personal preparation a few days before, during times of lectio divina. We advise each one to begin the preparation by writing the text. We continued these times of sharing for one whole year and, then, we did not want to stop them.**

**Our openness to this approach has also motivated us to seek out the truth of our life. Because in this way we receive as we listen well to others – the young and the not so young- who are searching for a sense of meaning and of relation to the scriptures in their own lives. We try to help others, not only by listening, and personal conversations but also by engaging in more structured dialogue, particularly around Christmas and Easter. At these times, we can offer some teaching. Most often we begin in relationship to the liturgy, through a sharing of our work, and of course, in our liturgical prayer.**

**We want also to bring forth some realities that test our search for authenticity in the monastic life, and, all the more so, because this monastic life is young in our countries and it is important that it be set up in a way as correct as is possible.**

**Apostolic religious life is already well implanted in the local church of West Africa. It is not the same for monastic life which is much less rooted and sometimes very small. We are not lacking in requests from our families, friends, and even from the church. Often they understand poorly or not at all the reasons why we do not respond to all their requests (particularly about the participation in various feasts, festivals, funerals, etc.) as the sisters from apostolic communities do.**

**Concretely, cell phones, are a real challenge for our communities, especially in relation not only to the questions of separation from and relation to the world but also in relation to the fact that they are community property and that people develop a dependence on them etc. Concretely: who may have a cell phone in our communities? Because the cell phone is a gift and is the easiest way to communicate, the questions arise of how we might use it in community: length of the calls, appropriate time for the calls, frequency of the calls, reasons for the calls, etc. The internet, at least in my community, is less used or is not accessible, because the connections are more difficult and often very slow. The formators in novitiate have already thought about this, but each community has to manage these questions.**

**It seems also necessary to say that in the countries of West Africa particularly, you are in the presence of another search for authenticity, an African authenticity in the way we live and in the way we celebrate etc. The desire for authenticity is not always in full harmony with the search for monastic authenticity, especially when it is immersed in the cultural values which are not those of the Gospel. e.g. the search for power, too great a value put on tribal and ethnic bonds, etc. To persevere in an authentic monastic way requires more courage and true discernment, because these communities do not live in as supportive an environment as do our European communities (by “supportive environment” I mean both the buildings and the long tradition in which our European communities live). Here, on the contrary, we have to create our own surroundings in an environment which, as things go, is often very close to the people. This often involves requests, unexpected things, and interruptions. But at the same time, we are lucky to recognize that the heart of authentic monastic life is not so much in the observances, even if they are the tradition and are good**

and necessary, as it is in perseverance through a life of conversion to love, in the way of Jesus Christ, in a fraternal community which wants to be built on listening to the word of God and to the celebration of the mystery of Christ. It is for these reasons that there needs to be some distance from the world.

## **REVERENCE THAT WE MUST GIVE TO THE EARTH, AND REVERENCE FOR THE DIGNITY OF EVERY PERSON IN A COMMITMENT TO JUSTICE AND PEACE**

### **Reverence for the earth**

I am tempted to say that, in the context of this society, this preoccupation is but secondary. It seems to me that one of the evils of our society is our failure to care for things, for buildings, and even for the environment. Our first concern is to find food for ourselves and for the people and to take care of the earth. Reverence for the earth involves the future. We need to solve so many problems right now that it is difficult to see beyond the present moment.

The communities of monks surely have a very important role in promoting sustainable development to assure the future of the earth. What we are doing, as nuns, is more modest, and is more often within the enclosure of the monastery.

Of course, I believe that we are sensitive enough to questions about the environment, about sustainable development, about climate change, etc. thanks to conferences and lectures. Even if we do not commit ourselves in any explicit way to these questions, it seems to me that a Benedictine community in its daily life respects and safeguards the earth and all of creation. It is part of our way of life. The following text, from Cîteaux, speaks about the Cistercian experience – and it seems to me to be relevant to our Benedictine way of life:

*The Cistercian experience conveys a spirituality of place, a way of living together in harmony on the earth. The Cistercian monastic monk lives in the world as a guest. To be a guest is to be received in the house of Another. The guest knows that he is passing through. He handles with reverence what is only given for a time. In presence of God, he prays and works, in solidarity with his own time, with past generations and with those who will come in the future...*

Some aspects of our life, as guest, speak to our reverence for the earth:

Our vow of stability calls us to build our monastery as a place of convivial life, where it is a happy place to live, so that we will be able to pass that tradition on to those who will come after us.

We try to take care of our grounds, planting them with flowers, not leaving our land uncultivated. We also look after our buildings. All this is quite different from the world

surrounding us, and often brings us admiration from our visitors. But it is very much a part of our daily effort to care for the earth, not just something spontaneous. We are careful not to waste and careful to keep things clean. We take care of all things.

In the cultivation of our lands, we do not usually use chemical fertilizers, we use the compost that we make, thanks to our careful disposal of the food we do not eat and the things we need to throw away.

**Reverence due to the dignity of all people:**

Maybe this kind of reverence begins with the reverence we give to each other. With reason, we have become extremely sensitive: reverence to each person as a unique individual, reverence for her weaknesses, her limits as well as for her richness as a person, with the risk of falling more or less easily into a trap where one says “I want to be respected.”

Aggressiveness, as well as hard or authoritarian words, mocking or even harmful words are seen as a lack of reverence or as difficulties to be accepted, even though such interpretations were not the original intent of the person. In the world around us, people are often difficult and they lack careful attention to others and we are of this world.

Beyond the community, there is another reality that is very close to us – that of our workers and all the people who are working in our houses and for us. More and more, we must give careful attention to that which is ours, the place we live, e.g. the cloakroom, the places where we sleep, etc., the schedules and the length of the work day, the offering of a dignified salary, the provision for times of retreat / vacation, as well as the way of speaking to others, of showing interest in their lives and in their families. It is not enough to simply respect the legislation about work, we must also have reverence for the workers, thanking them and letting them know that they are appreciated.

Reverence concerns also all the people whom we receive at our door. Most of them are poor and come to ask for help. They also deserve an attitude of reverence, even those whom we know are cheating us, those who come continually and those who annoy us, etc. We must nurture reverence in the way we offer help to others, showing an interest in each person, talking with him/her before offering money. When we are giving money, as much as we can, we must try to encourage the involvement of this person and to avoid treating this person as one who is being helped. But at the same time, some European donors are giving us so many conditions attached to their gifts, e.g. a good paper on the project, a detailed budget... and so on), so much so that the person being helped feels that she/he is not really being respected as a person. The person cannot respond to all those conditions. To respect the other, we all have to try to adapt to his/her potential. We also need the courage to give a negative answer to some requests even though these are justified and real, because we must also need to have reverence for our community life, which cannot become a social service center. The children, also, as visitors, have to be respected and they are many. Christmas

is their day and they know it. After the morning Mass, some sisters bring them around the crib in the church to explain, to pray, to sing, and afterwards to give them cookies and sweets.

The reverence that we have for our suppliers and for our customers, in the city, is also important: The boss of a store where we are going for our needs, recently thanked a sister because, as she was coming into the shop at the beginning of the prayers and the shopkeeper was Muslim, she went away, and came back later, and also because she speaks always in a very kindly way with them. They have found that she was respectful of them in their own religion.

Our liturgical celebrations are also a place where reverence for God and others is manifested in our thoughts and in our attitudes. It is not unusual for the priests to say to us “...in your house, for the liturgy, everything is clean and in order...” This is not always the case in their parishes. The respect that they receive in our houses may also be for them, a call to give everything, liturgical or otherwise, the reverence it is due.

#### In a commitment to justice and peace

We pray often for justice and peace, for reconciliation in the world, but sometimes, in our communities, a concrete commitment to work for this is asking us to go beyond ourselves in faith. The crises and the violence that often shake and disrupt our countries, also touch our communities. Sometimes they even infect our communities in West Africa. WE experience that the first struggle for justice and peace is, for us, in each of our hearts. We have to overcome judgments, prejudices, injuries, or resentments, to go further and to look at each person as a brother, a sister, a child of God as we are. We also are challenged by the words of the Eucharistic prayer for reconciliation:

*It is thanks to you, O Lord, if the desire for reconciliation with others replaces our choice for war, if the thirst for vengeance is replaced by forgiveness, if love triumphs over hatred.*

The commitment for justice and peace may find its root in our vow of conversion: to adopt the way of God, we commit our self to become open to one another, to discover how the other sees the world, to mutually enrich our cultures, in the conviction that our belonging to Christ is stronger and greater than any culture.

I conclude these reflections by recognizing, as did M. Henriette in her last paper, that the three values of solidarity, authenticity and reverence, are really “*constructive values in our communities*”, at the time that we are all, in our African context. Yes, “God is guiding our stories and to all, God gives bread.” (Ps 135: 25)