



BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO
Curia dell'Abate Primate

Lent 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, Saint Benedict, and Saint Scholastica,

Greetings of Lenten peace, faith, hope, and support in these uncertain times. Strong confidence in God's inscrutable ways calls us to walk the path to Easter. In the midst of these times when we see a light beginning to shine with the roll-out of the vaccine to all parts of the world, we both give thanks for what has been happening, and we pray for a just and right distribution of these healing remedies. Let us remain strong in following the instructions given by the governments, the health professionals, and the Church leadership which calls for continued care, protection, and proper protocols. It is clear, we will not be moving back to life as it was; there will be a *new normal* which will only develop with time, patience, practical wisdom, spiritual insight, sacrifice, generous service toward the needy, and a deeper sense of care for one another. One of the graces that has come from this pandemic has been the awareness of how this situation has touched the lives of all of us. The effects of the pandemic have marked our lives in uniquely different ways. Yet what has united us is that as brothers and sisters in the human family, children of God, and as members of the Body of Christ we are all striving to move forward. Our experiences are so vastly different, but we are unified in our endeavoring to find the way forward, and to see how this will open for us in time, in grace, and in hope. In the recent visit of Pope Francis to Iraq, his words to continue working toward peace, mutual care for one another, and a world that shows tolerance and mutual acceptance speak loudly to our hope of moving forward with confidence.

The significant news that touches the lives of the Abbots and Conventual Priors of the Confederation is that the Abbots' Congress for September 2021 is postponed again. It was clear to the members of the Permanent Council of the Synod of Abbot Presidents, and for this meeting also including Father Mauritius Wilde (Prior of Sant'Anselmo) and Abbot Placid Solari (Abbot Moderator of the Congress) that the international nature of the Congress in the midst of the present pandemic would not allow easy access into Italy, while also observing all the regulations of the government. However, there will be a Synod of Abbot Presidents here at Sant'Anselmo with an arrival date of Monday, 6 September 2021, and a conclusion date to the meetings on Friday, 10 September 2021. While plans remain somewhat fluid as we await the manner in which life in Italy will continue to unfold for us with the pandemic, we will keep in communication.

With regard to the Covid-19 virus, here at Sant'Anselmo we were able to stay negative for eleven months. Three residents at Sant'Anselmo became positive, and were immediately confined

to isolation and quarantine. After three weeks, they were tested negative. Meanwhile, everyone here was tested, and all were negative. Gratefully, we are able to do testing in the house. Members of the Faculty and staff are presently being vaccinated.

Registration for those intending to come to Sant'Anselmo as residents next year has begun. It is best to do it early for students so that sufficient time can be given for language school preparation and the acquisition of a visa. Also, the dates for the Leadership and the Rule of Saint Benedict have been changed in order to allow for more to attend. The program will begin on 12 September and conclude on 24 September 2021.

A change in personnel in recent weeks has been the return of Sister Antje Eichhorn to her monastic community in Dinklage, Germany. She has been working in the Curia of the Abbot Primate since September 2017. During this time of the pandemic, there has been less need for her expertise in translating letters into German and French. Though in this recent time, she has assisted our Choirmaster, Father David Foster (Downside Abbey) in the renewal of some of our books used for the Liturgy of the Hours. We are grateful to Abbess Franziska Lukas of Dinklage for allowing Sister Antje to be with us these years. We thank Sister Antje for her fine work and assistance in various projects among us. We wish her well as she returns to her community.

In the Ateneo, Father Fernando Rivas (Abbey of Luján in Argentina) has been elected the new Dean of the Faculty of Theology and appointed Vice-Rector of the Ateneo, holding his current position as Coordinator of the Monastic Institute. In the Faculty of Philosophy, Professor Andrea De Santis serves as Pro-Dean until the election of a new Dean of Philosophy in May 2021. Classes continue in all our programs both in presence and on-line.

There are a few spiritual thoughts that have come to mind in recent weeks to offer for your reflection. In the *Farewell Discourse* of Jesus in the Johannine Gospel, he says, "Peace I leave with you. My peace is my gift to you, and I do not give it to you as the world gives it. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not be afraid" (14:27). In the Greek text of these few words, there is a sense in which Jesus is bequeathing something significant to his followers, a gift of profound import, a bequest of divine consequence. Today we can think of *peace* as an absence of anxiety, conflict, or worry. As a Jew, Jesus knew that *peace/shalom* touched on the total well-being of a person – body, soul, and spirit. These words of Jesus to his disciples came at that moment when he was about to enter into his paschal offering to the One he called *Abba*. It was to be a total offering of himself. We note in this Gospel text that it is not simply peace that Jesus gives his followers, but an emphasis on "my" peace. Jesus' own peace would possess a character deeper and more profound because his disciples would also share in his mission. We might even call it a *peace in the midst of paschal living*, a peace that comes with the gift of self in a moment of personal self-offering, with a movement from challenge to blessing. And yet, this special peace is able to bring joy, inner comfort, and strength in the midst of anguish and distress. But we see how deeply Jesus looked at his life and its meaning for others; he was able to see what others, especially his own disciples, were unable to see and understanding fully. Only with time and spiritual wisdom would this make sense to them, and to us.

In this passage, we find the ever so brief and powerful expression that appears on the lips of Jesus more than any other expression: “Do not be afraid.” As Jesus prepares to enter into his passing-over, he gives his disciples and us a gift of the spiritual life: Do not be afraid. In accepting the evolving plan of God, Jesus shows us the path to glory, to victory, and to a peace that this world cannot give. This is something so important for us to hold on in any variety of situations that come our way. Could Jesus have already seen this in the rich tradition of his ancestors in the Laments of the Psalter? I believe so. Even when we read the painful words of the Laments in the Psalms, notice how there is a word of hope, a call to courage, and a belief that God’s providential care will “win the day” amid life’s challenges. On my desk, I keep a card with the words my doctor from the United States sent to me: Remain calm; stay strong; carry on. I think these words reflect in a contemporary way the words of Jesus to his disciples.

This gift of Jesus’ peace forces us to seek out God’s mysterious and inscrutable ways, to understand that faith and trust in God’s providential care for us take us to new levels of meaning and significance of *peace*. Jesus would certainly have a sense of how the leaders of his time were threatened by his teaching, and also his strong following from among the people. This is how Jesus encourages his disciples, and also us, as we face the uncertain future that will roll-out in the coming weeks, months, and even years. Economic, social, and national rebuilding will all take time, effort, and patience. I hope this can be a word of encouragement to the Benedictine men and women, knowing that our willingness to remain faithful will bear rich fruit in times to come. Paschal living calls for great courage and faith, and its fruits are already growing within us.

Jesus emphasizes that the *peace* which he gives is not “as the world gives it,” that is to say, not an immediate feeling of well-being and fulfillment. Rather we note how Jesus speaks here as he bestows his own peace upon his closest friends. The peace of Jesus is not something that comes without a price, a price of surrender to the unfolding plan of God in his life, and also in our lives. The Dominican preacher, Father Bede Jarrett, uses an expression which describes this Scriptural passage so well, and speaks to us today: “Jesus looked at his life intensely.” The peace that comes from following Jesus comes with the price of following him, remaining close to him, trusting him, believing in his unique yet salvific path to glory. We know that “paying the price” for finding this peace enables us to live in hope, a divine gift that comes at a price, and whose rewards are eternal, even now.

The conclusion to Chapter 4 of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* on the “Tools of Good Works,” reminds us that we must never despair of God’s mercy (*RB* 4:74). This speaks to this passage of the Gospel according to John. Jesus’ teaching about peace (and we note that this is the first time this word appears in the Fourth Gospel) is not sugar-coated. It calls us to faithful endurance, to hope in what God will accomplish through difficult times, and how it will end in God’s unique expression of *peace*, a kind of well-being that touches every part of our existence. And because the unfolding of this peace is part of a divine plan, its unfolding will be unique, accomplished in God’s time, and offering us a teaching that is for the good of our eternal soul. Patient waiting is not an easy task. We live in an age of immediate results, and instantaneous gratification of our needs and wants. That is not how the spiritual life unfolds. Rather, in God’s time, divine grace unfolds in a perfect way that leaves us in wonder at the wisdom of God’s plan, touched by heavenly perfection.

Several times in reciting Psalm 46 (45), the text has spoken to me of how important it is in praying the Psalter for each of us to use its imagery to speak to our present situation, both our sorrows and our joys, our struggles and our hopes. As the basic thrust of the text tells of life-altering events – the earth shaking, the seas in tumult, nations at war – this potently speaks to our present situation of the pandemic and world situation. Yet what becomes the powerful element for our faith is the repeated refrain: “The Lord of hosts is *with us*; the God of Jacob is our stronghold” (vv. 4b, 8 12). Again and again, the refrain tells us – be hopeful! Then in the midst of these descriptions of mountains quaking, nations at war, parts of the earth left desolate, comes the voice of God which says, “Be still and know that I am God, exalted over nations, exalted over the earth” [Ps 46(45):11]. God is with us and is more powerful than any destructive force among us. That simple phrase, “Be still and know that I am God” can serve as a mantra for daily reminding us to remain hopeful, to move into the future with trust, and to keep searching for the voice of God in these challenging times.

My brothers and sisters, the challenge of this pandemic cannot be lived in vain. What have we learned from this time? What is the good that we have found hidden in the sadness of these times? What are some of the paths forward that we have considered as we look to the future? I invite all of our communities to consider these three questions, and to share your communities’ thoughts with me. I would consider it an important spiritual exercise to reflect together on these questions, and I can, in turn, make them available to the members of our Benedictine Order and our Oblates. We can inspire one another with our reflections. Please, I ask you to take these questions seriously, to send them to me, and to allow me to bring together paths forward for us to consider as the whole Benedictine Order. And you may also add other questions that arise from your discussions, and other perspectives that could be helpful as we move forward together.

My prayers accompany all of you each day, as I also ask a remembrance in your prayers. May God guide us forward with deep faith, genuine hope, and generous charity, as witnesses to God’s presence in our midst, “bringing us all together to everlasting life” (RB 72:12).

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Abate Gregory". The signature is written in black ink on a white background.

Abbot Primate Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.