

The Missionary Benedictine Sisters and the beginnings of the CIB
(Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum) ¹

Sr. Aquinata Böckmann, OSB

Our congregation had been aggregated to the Benedictine Confederation since 1965, according to the Proper Law of the Confederation, that those monasteries or congregations could be aggregated according to the following criteria: 1) if the Rule of Benedict in their spirituality is very significant, 2) if community life is an important basis, and 3) if the Opus Dei is an essential part of their life. The aggregation took place under Abbot Primate Benno Gut, who was a good friend of our community.

In 1973 Benedictine Nuns and Sisters were practically two separate groups, and the knowledge of each other was low. Sr. Aquinata remembers that in a French abbey, giving talks about RB, one member of the community asked candidly: “But you (as congregation) live also the Rule a little bit?” This was a sort of eye opener, how little information came from the Sisters to the Nuns and surely vice versa.

The fact that Sr. Aquinata had a task in this contribution of our congregation to the development of the CIB was due to the wide vision of M. Gertrud and then M. Edeltrud, and those who followed. M. Gertrud wanted Sr. Aquinata to have the doctorate in theology, and in 1973 proposed that she would teach at St. Anselmo. And this happened; Abbot Primate Weakland was very positive. So she was the first woman in this task, which she considered always as a service of the congregation to the confederation. As such, she was elected in some commissions and committees and could serve still in a more concrete way.

Since the Abbot’s Congress in 1973, the first time, a commission for Benedictine Nuns, and one for Benedictine Sisters (each one comprising 7 members) were invited to the Abbots’ Congress at St. Anselmo as observers. These commissions, when thinking about their aims formulated more or less: to facilitate communications, to provide an advisory board in matters pertaining to Nuns and Sisters, and later: as a potential instrument of fostering unity of Nuns and Sisters OSB. In the commission of Sisters, there were as far as remembered 3 (or 4) Benedictines from USA, the Prioress General of Vanves: M. Bénigne, and of Loppem: M. Colombe together with our M. Gertrud. This gave for the last three the first opportunities to meet among themselves as “Missionary Benedictine” Sisters. (Those of Vanves and Loppem had dropped the word “missionary” as in French it has the “smell” of colonialism). These contacts made us as Missionary Benedictine Sisters see more clearly our charism. At a later meeting among the three, it came up, that M. Colombe wanted her Sisters to become Nuns; they had asked the Congregation for Religious, but

¹ In the next pages you will not find just historical data, but it is so to say a lived experience, which I was privileged to have with these beginnings. I was generally present in commissions as a translator between the different languages, later as delegate of AIM. Also in this regard, the coming pages are not official documents.

our Prioress General (already M. Edeltrud) and M. Bénigne were of the opinion that we are Benedictines, and that this is more important.

M. Gertrud also brought other members to our house, like M. Cecilia from Bertholdstein (representative of the German Nuns); it seemed the two made friendship. But also Sr. Joan Chittister was several times in our house, casa Santo Spirito. Abbot Primate Rembert Weakland was a friend of our house and came several times; generally at the same time he gave us a piano concert. M. Gertrud esteemed him very much. It seems the two were of the same broad vision, which Vatican II had brought to Religious Life. He also led our recollection days during our General Chapter 1976 before the election. And he was so to say, the reference point after the election of Sr. Maria Froning and the discernment afterwards, until she resigned and M. Gertrud took over again.

With the newly elected Abbot Primate Victor Dammertz, we had so to say a “brother” (St. Ottilien Congregation) at St. Anselmo. The new election did not go ahead without difficulties. It seemed that the Holy See mixed in directly. After the election of Abbot Primate and the resignation of Abbot Rembert, the latter one visited the commissions of Benedictine women (who had the rooms at Sta Rosa on the Aventine); he was quite cheerful.

1980 during the Benedictine year a big international Congress on RB in Italy, Norcia – Subiaco – Montecassino was planned. For the preparatory commission he named also Sr. Aquinata as one of the members, - the only woman there, together with many experts on RB. This shows his will to have women share and cooperate in the projects of S. Anselmo.

In the years 1979 following, one could say: until 1990 still the information on the side of the Benedictines (monks and Nuns) about Benedictine Sisters was deficient. At a long stretch our Congregation was more acknowledged among the abbesses. Through the support of superiors and the community, Sr. Aquinata could give seminars and retreats on the Rule of S. Benedict in many monasteries – also of Nuns – in all parts of the world. Doing so she always emphasized that this was done as a missionary Benedictine Sister. The first seminar in Rio de Janeiro 1979 is still in her mind. For the long entrance procession for Vespers, there were the Abbots, the abbesses, the monks, the Nuns and at the very end the Sisters (mainly from our congregation), and some even asked if we were oblates. After several seminars on the RB in Rio, the Abbot of this monastery remarked that our Congregation had gained credit among them and in the Benedictine world. Nevertheless for one of my books, in French translation, without my knowing, they had written: Sr. Aquinata Böckmann, “moniale” de Tutzing, although I always had emphasized that I am a Sister.

In 1981 the commission for Sisters met in our house (with M. Gertrud). They referred to the Benedictine Year 1980. And they noted an increasing desire of a meeting with Nuns and Sisters. In 1982 it was noted, that this ideal could not yet be realized.

Abbot Primate Victor was very concerned about the women in the Confederation. It was also he who cared for a women student’s home “Sta Lioba” in the building of the Cistercian monks on the Aventine, where it existed from 1982 until 1997. He named Sr. Aquinata,

with the consent of M. Edeltrud, as responsible Sister for this community (and she would go there once a week). He was sometimes misunderstood; however from near one could feel that he had taken it as a commitment to be concerned about the Nuns and Sisters OSB. It was providential that he was a canonist and knew well the Congregation for Religious at the Vatican.

The two commissions of Nuns and Sisters continued and were also asked to actively cooperate in view of the Proper Law of the Confederation, and of the Abbot's Congresses. (Once Sr. Aquinata was even called into a committee to help prepare the Abbot's Congress.) The two commissions, who had been at the Abbots' Congress, were never called by the Abbot Primate to meet outside the Congress; this began only in 1983. All the meetings (with rare exceptions) took place in our house, via dei Bevilacqua. The Sisters' meeting brought up the question of identity. M. Edeltrud compared in one meeting our Status with those of the monks. They are so different – each monastery from the other – and yet all of them form the confederation. As Benedictine Sisters we live like the monks, who also have schools. In this meeting the members expressed the idea that it would be important for women OSB to meet together (Nuns and Sisters).

1984 was the next Abbots' Congress, which had as observers still the two commissions for Nuns and those for Sisters. In these meetings the idea of a common symposium came up. The aim would be to know each other better, to ponder together on the role of Benedictine women today.

The chairperson was Sr. Joan Chittister in these days. She resigned when she realized that her presence was not accepted by a majority of the Nuns; M. Edeltrud succeeded her. The commission saw as goal of a joint coming together: a better mutual understanding, - finding common elements in the life of Benedictine women (Nuns and Sisters) - better communication between them, and exploring how the different groups live their Benedictine life.

An Executive Committee was formed which comprised: Sr. Joan Chittister, M. Ildegarde Sutto (Abbess of Citerna), M. Bénige Moreau (Vanves) and M. Edeltrud as chairperson.

In the years of the 80's and following we worked towards a Benedictine Symposium, to strengthen our identity. Resistance came from the Congregation for Religious and many (?) Abbesses. The Sisters who were double in number would may be water down the Benedictine charism? This opinion was still voiced in the preparation of the first catalogus for Benedictine women (before it came out in 2000), where an Italian abbess was very strong on the idea, that Nuns and Sisters should not be enumerated together in the same catalogus. The Nuns could be contaminated by the Sisters. This opinion could be heard sometimes.

Here follows a quotation of the meeting of the Executive committee May 25, 1986: "In January 1985 Abbot Primate wrote an official letter to Cardinal Hamer, Prefect of SCRIS, and handed the letter (about the common international symposium) personally to him on January 19, 1985. To date (May 25, 1986), he has not yet received an answer to this letter. The letter per se did not call for an answer: it was an information – not asking

permission but requesting approval – regarding the projected meeting of Benedictine Women, Nuns and Sisters, in September 1987. Cardinal Hamer told Abbot Primate that he would study the case ...”. On December 15, 1985, Abbot Primate asked Fr. Richard (P.S. at that time Fr. Richard Yeo was secretary of Abbot Primate) to inquire at SCRIS about this letter. The secretary of Cardinal Hamer promised to leave a note on the Cardinal’s desk; the office for the Nuns had not received the letter by that time. Since then, nothing has been heard of from the office of Cardinal Hamer.”

“Sr. Joan’s circular letter of May 19 1985, to the abbesses, presidents of congregations, prioresses, etc. informing them of the meeting scheduled for September 1987, evoked some enthusiastic responses; others were hesitant about it, particularly a number of Italian abbesses ... During the Synod of Bishops in December 1985, Cardinal Mayer (who had been secretary of SCRIS) had addressed Abbot Primate regarding this meeting and told him that he himself would not be in favor of such a meeting.”

“Among the Nuns it seems that the opinion prevailed that Benedictine Sisters (without strict enclosure) are not real Benedictines, and that the Benedictine Nuns and Sisters are so different, that they could not meet on common ground at a joint assembly”.

As for our Congregation, we owe very much to M. Gertrud and to M. Edeltrud who had no inferiority complex at all of being Sisters, but they strongly emphasized that we are Missionary Benedictine Sisters; and they could transmit this strong identity to others. This was really important in these years.

Abbot Primate had to deal with this question between Nuns and Sisters, also in regards to Sta Lioba, which entailed the living together of the two branches OSB. It seemed to be rather clever, that he himself invited Cardinal Mayer to come and visit us. The two, together with Sr. Aquinata, met already at St. Anselmo and then went to Sta Lioba and talked about the goals of such a student’s home. Cardinal Mayer felt at ease with us in the little apartment, asked questions and was very interested.

Still, when the Holy Father visited St. Anselmo in 1986, Abbot Primate had to tell us, inhabitants of Sta Lioba, to stay behind in the Church and not to show up as Nuns and Sisters. It would be wiser like this. Only when the Holy Father greeted the professors of St. Anselmo did Sr. Aquinata walk to the front. The Swiss guards wanted to prevent her, but her colleagues at the front said: “No, she belongs to us”. Nevertheless, the Holy Father was rather astonished to find a Benedictine Sister among the professors. It can still be seen on a foto. But Abbot Victor explained to him, that more than 10 years she had been a professor at St. Anselmo. On the next fotos one sees the Holy Father much more friendly ... These two events just show the difficulty existing in the years 1980ff about Nuns and Sisters OSB. From her experiences and many dialogues Sr. Aquinata got the idea, that the Sisters inspired a sort of fear to many abbesses, because of their strong opinions, good formation and some extreme forms of feminism; the last was also the point of Cardinal Mayer, who talked to Sr. Aquinata several times about the situation of women in the confederation.

In these circumstances the commissions wanted to prepare for a common symposium: 17-24 October 1987. Abbot Primate foreseeing the difficulties with the SCRIS named it officially "Symposium for Benedictine Sisters", but he invited at least 15 Nuns, and there were some more than 35-40 General superiors OSB (from Congregations and Federations). The overall theme was about the importance of the Benedictine Rule in our lives. The different days were devoted to the themes: prayer, community, authority, formation and the future of the Benedictine women. Always there were one main conference and two short conferences to the same topics but from a different cultural background, and in the afternoons we had language groups and plenary sessions! The Conferences were given by Nuns and Sisters, and from the contents one could really not distinguish if these words came from a Nun or a Sister. All this took place in our house, casa Santo Spirito. The Sisters of the community readily made the common refectory available and served wherever there was need. All of us had the same office (Latin – Italian) as we have it in 2015, only in smaller booklets. For the French speaking group we had prepared the same books in French and English, and we had some in German - English. The participation in the liturgy was really good, and our Church gave enough space to all the participants. A quotation by Agatha Rohtert (in her book: "A vision comes true") reads: "The Nuns marveled at the Benedictine liturgy of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing". Today it might seem one-sided, but at that point of time in the eyes of the Nuns we were credible through our liturgical celebrations. It was an important step that from the beginning of the international Symposia we did not adopt the Latin only (as the monks at the Abbot's Congress), but more the vernacular with all the problems of producing translations. The same fact as in 1987 occurred in the next symposium 1993, when there was still some strong reticence of some abbesses towards the Sisters. In St. Anselmo, our scola sung with the assembly the Vespers of September 14 in Latin. One abbess said, she would never have thought that we as Sisters were capable of this. And it became a starting point for her to be interested in the Sisters and to acknowledge them.

At this time the European and other OSB's felt that the feminism in USA was too strong, and so there was especially in the beginning some reticence. One American superior had even said during the symposium of 1987: "There is always a man standing between God and us". Surely nobody of her co-superiors would say this today. There were strong reactions to this sentence. Some of the participants even wanted to officially apologize for this statement. As one immediate consequence in the following Vespers, Abbot Primate did not want to intone the "Our Father". He said with some humour, and smilingly, that he did not want to be between God and the women. Finally we succeeded to talk about it calmly. (Mainly during the Symposium 1993).

All in all one could often hear: it was like a new Pentecost. And really it was a new light coming up and shining on our way as Benedictine women. As Missionary Benedictine Sisters we may thank God that we could be instrumental to all of these happenings in our house. And our community provided a propitious environment for this symposium. Abbot Primate had asked monks as translators from St. Anselmo. It was good for them to witness this event.

After the Abbot's Congress in 1988 the women's commissions discussed with Abbot Primate the representation of the women's communities in the Confederation, especially in the Abbot Primate's Commissions. As there was in between a much closer cooperation among Benedictine women generally at the national and regional levels, it became clear that it would make sense to have a broader commission at the level of the Confederation, in which all Benedictine women were represented. This commission would be organized along geographical lines, so that all the communities would be represented in some way. It was talked of 17 regions worldwide, and the Abbot Primate would appoint 3 further participants. At the same time statutes were drawn up (as complement to the Proper Law of the Confederation). Finally (in 1988) the two commissions merged into one. (This event took place also in our house, via dei Bevilacqua 60). So the commission could pursue better the goal "to be an instrument for the fostering of unity among all Benedictine Women." The Synod of Presidents had agreed to this project of the Abbot Primate. There were now 20-22 Benedictine women in one commission to advise the Abbot Primate and to represent the Benedictine women at the Abbot's congress. The first time they met in our house (as generally also the committee and the other commissions had met in our house), one could feel the great joy of being together. And one abbess exclaimed with a loud voice: "we are one now, we are one".

Some quotations and opinions voiced during these meetings follow: "All monastic life is contemplative", we should rather distinguish cloistered and non-cloistered Benedictine life. All of us want to be contemplative. All communities have also places where they "proclaim the Good News". The Benedictine values were enumerated as an answer to the needs of the times: community, monastic profession, humility, obedience, peace, listening, prayer, hospitality, work, also enclosure in different forms.

When Abbot Jerome Theisen in 1992 took over (as Abbot Primate), he admonished the commission: "not to look at first for a juridical structure, and to go ahead step by step, to find out what is possible and acceptable, to move forward without causing provocation that can be harmful for the future".

Practically from 1990 on the commission for Benedictine Women began to prepare another symposium, this time of Nuns and Sisters. It was to be on Monastic Profession, where all of us felt united. The Planning committee had the meetings in our house, before the Symposium and also afterwards. The 1993 Symposium was held at St. Anselmo. Before, one member wanted those Symposia always in a different place (some said in order to be more independent, to be understood: SCRIS). Sr. Aquinata gave reasons for St. Anselmo, especially the link with the confederation. The decision of the commission for this place seems to have been the right decision which pointed to the future.

The American Benedictines thought it also important to have a Logo, and among the different drawings they presented, we chose the one, we have now.

The 1993 Symposium brought the Benedictine world of Women more together. As all of us have the same monastic profession, this theme was chosen. There was still some reticence towards the American Benedictine Sisters, so a group of Nuns (mainly from

southern Europe) invited Sr. Joan Chittister (and others?) to explain about their lives. And she was listened to attentively, making a growing understanding possible.

All of us felt one in underlining the Monastic Professions with its different elements. Sr. Anselm Hammerling in the beginning spoke passionately about the importance of mutual confidence without mistrust and without fear. Nuns and Sisters are equally daughters of St. Benedict. By being united, Benedictine women could give their own contribution towards unity in the Church and the world. Again every day we had a main conference with two supplementary statements coming from different cultural backgrounds.

As the Synod on Consecrated Life at the Vatican was coming up, the participants realized that no representative for the Benedictine Woman worldwide was present at this synod. So the plenary commissioned (under prayer) two delegates to go to the Vatican and to ask the preparatory commission of this Synod for the favor to have one representative of the Benedictine Women. And Pope John Paul II appointed later M. Edeltrud. She could participate a lot, also in the “circuli minores” (language groups) of the Bishops and could give her contributions.

1995 Abbot Primate Jerome Theisen died; the commission met again 1996 during the Abbot's Congress at “mondo migliore” (it was only once that this Congress was held outside St. Anselmo). This was the first time that during the congress Benedictine women were invited to give supplementary conferences to the main talks (our M. Irene Dabalus, M. Maire Hickey, and M. Vera Lucia, Bahia). M. Edeltrud could present to the Abbots a short history about the women in the confederation. It is in our archives (Missionary Benedictine Sisters, Rome). During this Abbots' congress Marcel Rooney was elected. The commission realized that practically Mother Edeltrud was the dialogue partner of the Abbot primate, she had presided the commissions, but otherwise there was no person of authority foreseen. When M. Edeltrud resigned in 1996 as “head” of the commission, it was time to define the status of some president or moderator. So in 1996 the commission voted for having a “moderator” (M. Maire Hickey), and they also planned another symposium 1998 with the theme of “experience of God in the Benedictine spirituality”.

When M. Edeltrud could no longer go on to work for the commission of Benedictine Women, her successor, M. Maire Hickey gave her very much praise in an official report to the German abbesses and superiors OSB. In English translation: “She contributed so much to the development of the commission and the symposiums throughout 12 years. With enormous generosity she offered two times all resources of her congregation, so that through the international symposia the networking of the Benedictine women could be developed. The hospitable house at the Via dei Bevilacqua did not only receive us (commissions), but also more than 50 persons for the first international symposium and in the course of the years, many times the secretaries, the representatives, the participants of the commissions. When we needed speakers, secretaries, translators, guest-Sisters, helpers in the kitchen or at table, Sisters who prepared the Liturgies, Sisters for administration, Sisters for the Finances – the Missionary Benedictines of Tutzing, made all of them available to the commissions and symposia with the maximum Sisterly love as if it were normal (Selbstverständlichkeit). Without this homely place for our “landing” in Rome,

the Symposia could not have taken place and the commission could not have developed as it happened.

To all of this we have to add the personal contribution of M. Edeltrud: Through her strength in faith, her vision and her friendliness she always again and again encouraged us, to believe that things that are not yet existing, could become reality. Through her experience of life in the Church and in the Order, she knew to guarantee with wisdom a moderate tempo of development. So she could succeed to bring the commission of Benedictine women from all continents to a common conviction. We have the confidence that this fundament of Vision and Wisdom, which M. Edeltrud in a great part laid down, will forcefully still guide the commission in the work that still has to be done.”

M. Edeltrud had to begin the new foundation in India. Yet the commission of the Benedictine women continued to meet in our house. They completed their statutes within the Proper Law of the confederation. In the first drafts one participant is “a Superior General of a large international Congregation who is not member of a national or regional association”. This concerned especially our Prioress General. Due to difficulties to express it in a more general form, so that it would be understandable, the special Statutes have now the norm that such a person “is coopted”, which occurs generally with our Prioress General. The commission later voiced the idea to have a secretariat for the Benedictine Women. As secretary M. Edeltrud was mentioned, but she declined, and also from the part of our house it was said, that we could not offer the place for such a secretariat. So slowly the commission moved to other places.

All in all, let us be thankful that we could cooperate to a large extent to the beginnings of CIB.