

Address to the General Chapter

July 26, 2006

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Daylesford Abbey

Father Abbot General, Delegates to the General Chapter, Sisters and
Brothers:

Thank you for the invitation to attend this Chapter as an observer; it is a rare privilege for which I'm grateful and honored. I bring you greetings from the English-speaking delegates to the First International Meeting of Associates of our Order held last summer in the Abbey of Mondaye. I carry the message they have instructed me to deliver, as well as some thoughts of my own.

I want to reflect with you on the significance of the Mondaye meeting. Brothers and sisters (called participanten, tertiaries, associates, oblats oblates) from many of the Norbertine houses (though not from the southern hemisphere, a felt absence, but a hope for the future), came together with their Professed brothers for the first time. Yes, a first time – but one that felt

more like a family reunion, with immediate welcoming of one another, as those with shared ancestors and a common history. There seemed no need for small talk; we were able at once to begin to work together.

Now, how did that come about? I submit that the Holy Spirit was at work, calling us back to our roots where Norbert's first followers were lay men and women.

“Perfectae Caritatis” , proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on October 28, 1965, stated that “It redounds to the good of the Church that institutes have their own particular characteristics and work. Therefore let their founders’ spirit and special aims they set before them as well as their sound traditions – all of which make up the patrimony of each institute – be faithfully held in honor.”¹

The history of our foundation is part of our patrimony. Our coming together at Mondaye echoed across the centuries the times of Norbert. It was, for me, a tiny vision of what might be, should we be open to change and to the adage that “Changes can succeed only when rooted in tradition..”

And I wondered: What is the Spirit saying to the Order of Premontre?

Your confrere and my brother, Ivo Cleiren, Prior of Tongerlo, brought to our meeting an extremely helpful paper with references to the participation of lay men and women in Norbert's time and after. He drew particular attention to the

¹ “Perfectae Caritatis”: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life. Proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI, October 28, 1965. Boston, MA, St. Paul Editions, p. 6

work of Bruno Krings. Discussed in this article are various levels of participation with the Order in the Middle Ages, men and women connected to the Order though not always vowed.² So there is ample evidence that lay men and women were associated with the Order's earliest days. Is it any wonder that the group gathered at Mondaye felt these connections?

What is the Spirit saying today?

Forty of the 58 participants at Mondaye have sent to you their recommendations for a more formal identification of lay associates by the Order. We ask for appointment of a vicar for general oversight and guidance of Associates, and a statement of parameters for the Order's vision and expectations of the role of Associates. With these first steps, several others could follow, for example, regularly scheduled international gatherings of Associates, an international Associates' newsletter, an Associate link on the Premonstratensian website. These are foundational for the professed /lay dialogue already in progress in many canonries.³

And this dialogue is now taking place beyond the Premonstratensian Order.

The Report of the Chair of our meeting (Andrew Ciferri, O.Praem., Praeses,

² Krings, Bruno: "Laien im Kloster und seinem Umfeld im Mittelalter", pp.33-46, in: Hospitalitas en de aanwezigheid van leken in de middeleeuise premonstratenzer kloosters. Werkgroep Norbertijner Geschiedenis in de Nederlanden, Averbode, 2002.

³ Message to the General Chapter from 40 Participants in the First International Meeting of Norbertine Associates held in the Abbey of Mondaye, 30 June-4 July, 2005 (M23-E/1).

VICSO) points out “Our meeting took place one month after the third international gathering of Cistercian associates, and in the same month that the Augustinians reported on the special commission they established to prepare their forthcoming International Congress for the Laity. The first World Congress for Benedictine Oblates took place in Rome three months after our gathering. Pope Benedict XVI is a Benedictine oblate. These events of other religious communities give us a sense of being part of a larger movement in the Church.”⁴

I believe that our short experience at Mondaye is solid evidence that the Spirit is at work here and elsewhere, that there is hope for the future despite the opposing evidence of diminishment in Western Europe and North America. The future belongs to the Lord! No one can say what it will look like. But here we have evidence that there are numbers of lay men and women, ready and willing to find ways of adding to and reinforcing Norbertine communities with their gifts. Here we are called to hope.

And we have a cloud of witnesses. Paul reminds us that “Hope is not hope if its object is seen; how is it possible for one to hope for what he sees? And hoping for what we cannot see means to wait for it with patient endurance.” John of the Cross prays thus: “You will not delay if I do not fail to hope.”⁵

⁴ Ciferri, A.D., O.Praem, Praeses, VICSO: Report to the Premonstratensian Order on the First International Meeting of Norbertine Associates. (M23-E/1.)

⁵ Matthew, Iain, OCD: *The Impact of God: Soundings from St. John of the Cross*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1995, p. 153.

The future certainly belongs to the Lord, but does the Lord sometimes not give us little hints here and there of what might be, if we have faith? That stance of faith our Daylesford pilgrims found when visiting our Grandmother Abbey of Berne in 1999, seeing a plaque affixed to the Abbey's new building, and coming away inspired by its statement:

“Ut Qui Vivant Posterī Sciant
Hic Vere Claescit
Fides in Futurum”

Or

That those who come after us may know
That here, truly, faith in the future
Shone out.”

Fides in Futurum!

Thank you.

