

12TH GENERAL CHAPTER 2012

September 20 – October 25, 2012

Rome

Conference by Sr. Irene Dabalus, OSB



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“SUSTAINING MOMENTUM” IN THE CONGREGATION THROUGH CONVERSATIO MORUM AND A NEW EVANGELIZATION”

Mother Angela Strobel set us on the path of a “new” journey when she announced the theme of the 12th General Chapter in her letter of September 20, 2011. “There is a great awareness of the need of truly living our *Conversatio Morum* to nourish the source for a New Evangelization.” The theme is taken from the book of the Prophet Ezekiel 47:9c.

**“Wherever the Stream flows,
it will bring Life.”**
Conversatio Morum and New Evangelization

Mother Angela’s words are fantastic in calling us back to the deepest desire of each one for depth living. She is seeing something - a holding vision of monastic life growing and sharing itself through our Congregation to the world. The holding vision is not only for our form of monastic life to expand in territory and numbers but to continue taking root, flowering and bearing fruit in a new evangelization of peoples and cultures in the spirit of St. Benedict. Thus, it is time again to look at ourselves as in a mirror gathered in the General Chapter and find out if our image is still faithful to what has filled us with joy and amazement from our beginnings – the vocation to be missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing.

I see this vision as having enfolded itself in our monastic communities world-wide for the last 127 years, thus my conference:

***“Sustaining momentum in our missionary Benedictine life”
until today, now with a focus on “conversatio and new evangelization”.***

“The transmission of culture has long been a primary part of the Benedictine mission to the Church and to the world at large. It continues to be so today,” says Ezekiel Lotz, monk of Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon (“*Quicquid Agunt Homines*,: The Benedictine Cultural Mission to a Postmodern World, ABR 63:1 – March 2012, 75).

“By remaining attentive to the fundamental missionary methodology proposed by Gregory the Great, contemporary Benedictines can broach the following questions: What should be the attitude that contemporary Benedictines hold and exhibit as members and evangelizers of contemporary culture? How can they prepare themselves for the actual encounter in the field with the others by drawing on a long tradition of listening to and engaging with men and women from different lands, who possess different ways of thinking and acting? And finally, what can Benedictines cull from a well-established and well-respected Western secular-humanist postmodern culture and then employ in an exchange with men and women encountered in the now truly global mission of the third millennium?” (ibid, 76-77)

Already in 1958, English Catholic cultural historian Christopher Dawson locates the place of Benedictine cultural mission in standing up to the modern world in confrontation and engagement with its secularity as in the past (Gregory the Great, the monastic school, Newman and Arnold). So Dawson: “We cannot separate ourselves from the society in which we live, but we can bring back to that society the consciousness of that spiritual element which is the life of the soul of true culture.” (Ibid, 80)

This is the holding vision which captures our excitement as Missionary Benedictines in 2012 – the sparkling faith that we can birth forth a “new” stewardship towards civilization and culture during this age of post-

modernity. Ezekiel Lotz sees this as the call to Benedictines to continue being “*creators, leaders, models and archetypes*” in the centuries to come, standing as they do on the rich heritage of wisdom of St. Benedict which has survived 1500 years of growth and development in different climes and cultures.

I see this “growth and development” in our own Missionary Benedictine tradition since our founding years until the present.

THE ORIGINAL MOMENTUM

It fills me with delight and amazement to recall once again the dream of one man, Fr. Andreas Amrhein, which launched the original momentum in the birth of our Congregation. Through 127 years the Congregation has carried the vision and tradition of missionary Benedictine life, first in Europe, then in Africa, on to Latin America and Asia in an ever-widening sweep.

What was it like to create momentum for the Congregation vision of missionary Benedictine life and to maintain this momentum in creative tension? A publication called “Momentum in Ministry” by J. Smith and D. Church observes that momentum is “mass in motion.” In the natural world when an object of mass is moving then it has momentum. “*Momentum occurs when a force that is greater than the resistance to the object is applied.*” (J. Smith and D. Church, “*Momentum in Ministry*”, e-Book version, 25)

GATHERING MOMENTUM

“Just as momentum works in the natural world, momentum works in our ministries and spiritual lives. Whether it is a job or a ministry we must realize that it takes a concentrated effort or force to create that job or ministry” (25) I believe that this also happened in our history. It took some decades for our multi-cultural and intercultural communities to swing into the vision of an international congregation. In our 127 years we have indeed sustained our momentum towards firming up our monastic life and structures, erstwhile embracing the creative tension of crossing missionary frontiers wherever the Church called us to plant the seeds of Gospel truth and love.

I would like to believe that much has been achieved by our congregation due to three characteristics that can be deduced from our history up to the present – namely,

- INNOVATION
- COMMUNITY FORMATION
- ANIMATION

The Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing had, first of all, the Gospel audacity:

- **to innovate relentlessly** in making monasticism and mission a twin-reality according to the ideal of the founder, Fr. Andreas Amrhein. During the past 127 years we Tutzing sisters have entered varied fields of initiative to firm up the monastic tradition and mission work in our international congregation, far and near, beginning with Europe, then moving out to Africa, Asia, North America and Latin America. Though only a handful represent our force, we have been into difficult areas, such as China, Bulgaria, Uganda, India and Angola. In Asia, the home of ancient cultures and living faiths, our monastic presence and evangelizing work have faithfully served the gradual unfolding of Christian communities, struggling to survive as a minority presence in politically conflictual environments, such India and China. In some places, such as my country, the Philippines, which is a predominantly Catholic country, religious growth has gone more or less unhampered as vocations continue to find their way to our communities, albeit not as numerically strong as before. This is due to the scourge of poverty which has hindered vocations, especially those of women, in pursuing the monastic tradition. In my case in Tagaytay, our Holy Rule

studies over five years now have left their mark on both men and women monastics who have gone through the “school of the Rule” through exegesis and the reading of the primary sources of the Rule.

Then,

- **to pursue single-mindedly the formation of young growing monastic communities**, especially in difficult situations, such as in Angola, Argentina, Bulgaria, China, India, and Uganda. Both financial and personnel resources have been placed at the forefront of new foundations and their development needs.

And finally

- **to animate our monastics** – individually and collectively - to go for an imaginative but reality-oriented approach to renewal in a Church “in ferment”, and in a “world in upheaval”. I can cite the visionary efforts of past General Chapters in grounding the members of the Congregation on the Benedictine *Lectio* and the preferential option for the poor as the two pillars for renewal in a post-modern world in ferment.

SPEEDING UP MOMENTUM

Now a General Chapter 2012 is again on the time track for us. Again, it means a **kairos** at this stage of the journey - the unique opportunity to increase momentum for monastic and evangelizing growth wherever the Lord wants us to sow his Gospel seeds of truth and love – in both old and new fields alike.

So - what is our Congregation’s contribution to monastic and missionary renewal in the marketplace of liberal post-modern values? I am interested in giving our General Chapter 2012 a big challenge as it enters into the second half of this century, because our congregation is such a quality institution with a moral power to bring about a paradigm change in monastic and missionary living worldwide.

If we again revert to the reality of “momentum” as the strength and the speed of a body in motion, then we can deduce that the world around us has its own momentum in terms of vision and direction. More often than not, its momentum runs counter to our avowed vision and sets it in reverse. We can think, for example, of life situations in our “threatened world” which truly impinge on our own reality and lead to the question: How can we secure our momentum in a world “in upheaval”, in a “Church in ferment”?

These situations include the dramatic events going on around us in their threatening and inexorable march towards a predictable moral downgrade. In the words of Sven Giegold, the “Green Representative” to the Europe-Parliament, the multiple “crises” which face us today can be reduced to these three:

- the climatic and resource crisis (devastation of creation, climate change and destruction of the multiplicity of species and resources),
- the justice crisis (growth of social inequality, the basic social rights are ever more difficult to ensure),
- the economic and financial crisis (global markets but no global economic politics, lacking control of global undesirable development, among others due to problems of distribution). (Notes from an assembly of the German Catholic Mission Council on the theme “Prophetic Church” held in “Haus am Dom”, Augsburg, January, 2011).

S. Giegold is convinced that this world situation cannot be dealt with by piecemeal action on the part of good and influential individuals but only by common and internationally orchestrated action directed towards a change of paradigms in Church and society. He believes that “all these crises have their common origin in the paradigm of ‘growth’ which permeates all global thinking like a measuring instrument for progress and development and for ‘more, more, more’ of money, consumption, gain, and technological advancement.”

MOMENTUM IN REVERSE

If *“momentum occurs when a force that is greater than the resistance to the object is applied, it can also work in a reverse, negative manner* (D. Church and J. Smith, 26). Thus, we can imagine two scenarios happening to us in the still remaining decades of this millennium. We can either exert enough force to offset the momentum created by opposing forces and sustain our work for the concerns of the Church in the next half century. Or our momentum can be cancelled out by the counterforce of a runaway world economy and its paradigm of a value-free competition. Such counterforce can also be found in our very own monastic communities and in our individual members succumbing to activism, career-mindedness and globalized superficiality in a false drive for “growth”, economic security and professional competition.

And here is where I would like to throw a big challenge at our General Chapter for our work of shaping the unfolding future of our monastic communities in all the countries where we live and evangelize.

To begin with, our Congregation, like every moving mass, must have a force greater than the resistance against it. It must be single-minded in its innovative drive

- **To effect a paradigm change**

1. That includes a scientific grasp of the economic world in which we live and its dynamics, including the model of a society that aspires to community and the human values of affection and care.
2. That includes a manner of using goods which extracts from the environment what is needed and not more than what is needed so that in justice others too may live.
3. That includes the practical will to use energy which is renewable energy in our age, as well as the political will to exercise our global responsibility to bring about a “conscious and fair ecological purchase and consumption” in accord with the dignity of all human beings and their humane working conditions .

- **To achieve credibility and relevance for monastic life**

1. That includes intensive renewal in BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY.
 - Root spirituality in an in-depth study of the Word of God and the Rule
 - Re-imagine the fundamentals of monastic life and its expression in today’s world.
 - Build life around the liturgy – Eucharist and Opus Dei and Lectio Divina as the source of the energy and power of the “new evangelization”.
2. That includes inculturating the profession of stability, conversatio and obedience
 - Balance culture and the life of poverty, celibacy and obedience.
 - Critique the-not-so-simple life style of communities set amidst a population of poor people on a subsistence minimum in developing countries.

- **To set the direction towards promoting a multicultural/intercultural cenobitic formation in monastic communities.**

1. That includes a sound theology.
 - Ground the formandees in biblical exegesis, fundamental theology and pastoral practice.
 - Develop their historical consciousness.
2. That includes a deep spirituality.
 - Steep them in contemplative mindfulness.
 - Give them skills in the three “Ds” of dialogue, discernment and disponibility for service.
 - Lead them to spiritual wholeness and global awareness.
3. That includes formation for a life of **communio**.

- Direct them to the **conviction of their call to the coenobium.**
- Show them **communio** as Benedictine in substance as well as the appropriate and urgent response to globalized “economism”, fundamentalism, and hedonism rampant in our day.

PRACTICAL TASKS WITHIN OUR REACH

Lest we be overwhelmed by the mammoth tasks facing us in the world for the future of monasticism, the same S. Giegold cited earlier encourages us to look for *“key projects, good possible starts and credible consequent action in order to strengthen the motivation for initiatives”* of social and spiritual transformation. We have to turn to practical tasks within our reach in order to avoid being swallowed up in a vortex of change. These practical tasks include modest initiatives which – if they remain consistent and keep to the direction of living the values of the Gospel and our Rule – can bring about a paradigm change.

Such a practical task was handed over to me when I was mandated to set up a Benedictine Institute for Liturgical and Spiritual Formation in Tagaytay. This was challenging, because I dreamed of sharing the riches of our charism “ad intra”, among the different Benedictine communities in the Philippines, and “ad extra”, in the area of the local Church where the laity are hungry for such sharing. It was easy to enthuse some OSB facilitators, mostly among our sisters to hold weekend seminars with a Benedictine flavor on the themes of prayer, liturgy, lectio Divina, the Eucharist, the woman question, women worship, eco-justice and feminism, Mary in our life, healing and forgiveness and such a wide canvass more of life-inspiring topics. When I started four years ago, our visitors came mostly from our schools. Now my dream has become a reality. We have interfaced with the “local Church” and amazingly, with the poor sectors of the parishes: lay ministers, volunteer catechists, parish youth, church workers, and mandated organizations. At present I subsidize these courses, since they are not well-to-do and would not be able to afford accommodations in a retreat center, such as ours. One comment in this ministry warms my heart: “Now I know St. Benedict and he is a wonderful guide for my life.” There have been more such comments through the years in this ministry. The Lord has gifted us with this ministry and as long as he does not withdraw this gift we shall continue to pray and work that the wisdom of St. Benedict touch the hearts of our people through this formation of the heart.

Of course, the jewel in the crown of our Benedictine spiritual formation in this Institute is the yearly RB Study Weeks of two to four weeks of serious engagement with the Rule mentioned earlier. On the average some 40 nuns, monks, and sisters, both Cistercians and Benedictines joined us in this study over the last four years. Twice it was held with Sr. Aquinata Boeckmann as professor, once with Sr. Margaret Malone from Australia, and in the initial phase with myself and some local formators on the primary sources of the Rule. The nuns and sisters were often heard to say: “If we had only learned more about the Holy Rule in our younger days!” meaning that the wisdom of the Rule never fails to attract young and old of any age or country.

It is safe to presume that many initiatives similar to ours in Tagaytay are being carried out in the different priories of the Congregation. These have not been brought to our awareness in all their breadth, height, length and depth on any pulpit.

To be sure, Benedictines in my country and wherever they thrive in other Asian countries, including Australia, have always brought with them a quality of excellence in education and formation. Such an education for life is handed down in the schools and social institutions they run, needless to say, with professional competence and high standards. In my country, we have 13 schools ranging from grades to college, teaching some 40,000 students within their halls. The “hallmarks of our Benedictine education” are visible in our work and those of our students. I myself grew up with our German Benedictine sisters and unconsciously drank of the wisdom of the Rule for my life. Nowadays, the values of the Rule of Benedict are openly taught in the classroom so that even the little kids end their classes with the classic phrase: “that in all things God may be glorified!” Or in the tradition of true Benedictine education, they do their “lectio divina” in the classrooms of the school with their

teachers! What a treasure for life in a country that is poor in economics and world politics, but rich in the values of the Gospel and Rule. Whether it is in catechetics, barrio adult programs or basic ecclesial communities, the Benedictine touch is there as a trademark. It is present within the matrix of the liturgy, the Word of God and the welcoming community.

The Philippines is of course only a tiny drop in the continent of the many living religions and cultures that is Asia. Although we are the only Christian country in the Far East and the only Catholic one far and wide, we hobnob directly with Islam in the south of the islands. There our Muslim brothers and sisters have been fighting for their autonomy as a Muslim land down the ages. Certainly, in this highly divided and depressed situation of living together, our Benedictine vision of peace and hospitality is a much needed element. I remember giving a talk on Christology to a Christian assembly in a Muslim village in the South only to find that women populated the area, their men were absent. They lived in the hills in battle gear. It was a most uneasy atmosphere, but the feeling of communion was present because there was mutual respect for each other among us with the womenfolk there. Our presence as Benedictines in an inter-religious dialogue with our Muslim brothers and sisters is minimal at present, but the awareness is certainly growing. God grant that one day we might locate ourselves there, not as proselytizers but as sharers of a life under God as his children, albeit sharing the same land though bearing a culture one different from the other.

Thus, the tasks for the Missionary Benedictines of Tutz in Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia are countless where the “ora et labora” is a style of life, hospitality always a way of evangelization, and “communio” a countervailing force against the degradation of human dignity, eco-feminist wholeness and Godliness.

CONCLUSION

I make my own the words of Donato Ogliari, OSB (“Beyond Survival: What Future for the Monastic Presence in the West”, ABR 61:2 – June 2010, 157) as the challenge for the Congregation to fan its zeal in the work of aligning priorities in its vision of monastic-missionary fruitfulness.

“In order to avoid being totally unprepared, we must watch attentively and not let ourselves be submerged under the weight of difficulty, sadness, discouragement and fear. If that should happen, we would be like those without hope (see Eph 2:12). But for the person who has placed the God of Christ Jesus, the Risen One, in the center of her life, there is no option of ceasing, even for an instant, to long for the light even when we seem to be surrounded by darkness. A healthy and necessary realism in the face of the dangers we face ought not to diminish or fade the beauty of our vocation and the generosity of our response. In the face of such a daily obligation, it is not danger... that wins out, because what stands before us and what the Lord still reserves for us (“to live”), is always much more than “survival.”

In conclusion I would like to reiterate what I once said before persons endowed with authority as you are in this General Chapter. It is important that our gaze take in a broad sweep of reality that goes beyond our own institutions. Let us open up to the bigger frame of the outside world “ad gentes” and “inter gentes” and gain a vision and perspective that stretch our imagination beyond our proximate goals to the frontiers of the universe, to the universal Kingdom of God.

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