

MESSAGE OF ABBOT GENERAL JOS WOUTERS - Christmas 2021

On the occasion of Christmas during this 900 – years jubilee of our Order, we cannot but recall the first canonical profession of the followers of Saint Norbert in Prémontré on Christmas day 1121. The coincidence of the celebration of the birth of Jesus and the first profession of Saint Norbert and his disciples was used gradually more and more to reflect on the significance of our profession. In many houses of canonries of our Order we can admire representations of the nativity scene, combined with the representation of this very first profession. In the abbey church of Windberg, the text: "Nativitas Christi - Nativitas Ordinis" is written in a ceiling fresco.

In the description of the life of Saint Norbert, the spirituality of the first Premonstratensians is summarized by the second generation followers of Norbert in one short sentence: "They wanted to follow the Sacred Scriptures and to have Christ as their leader." (Chapter 12 of the Vita A)

This simple phrase reveals a dynamic spiritual program. It shows a profound desire to unify prayer, life and action, totally focused on a living contact with Jesus who more and more is considered as the true initiator of the "apostolic life".

In the evolution of the spirituality of canons regular we see how the attention moves from the descriptions of the primitive church, that are at the background of the Rule of Saint Augustine, towards the Gospel, which becomes a rule of life. Canons regular of the Ordo Novus, as the Premonstratensians are, sought to live the Gospel in a radical way. The story about the first profession on Christmas day shows that this quest caused much discussion and uncertainty, so that Saint Norbert had to reassure his followers: "Father Norbert encouraged them and assured that those who wished to remain with him could never go wrong if they put into practice the profession they made according to the Gospels, the Words of the Apostles and the Rule of St. Augustine." The sequence of the terms is significant. To make an explicit profession "according to the Gospels" was something new. The followers of Saint Norbert aspired to reconnect the canonical tradition with its first source.

Through the Gospel our first sisters and brothers found themselves in the company of Jesus and Mary, whom they considered as their teachers. The attention for the mysteries of the Incarnation of the Divine Word finds its origin in the desire to follow Jesus, to be with Him from the very beginning of his life on earth. The presence of the first Premonstratensians at the nativity scene, is a vivid expression of this desire.

The scenery shows a remarkable synthesis of mystic devotion and practice. The followers of Norbert do not only piously behold the newborn Jesus. They also renounce the symbols of their mundane position within society. The first act of those who desire to follow Jesus

literally is an ex-pression of a commitment to be truly human, without frills. To follow Him means to accept our hu-man condition as He did and not to take refuge in worldly constructed fake identities. I think this is the fundamental meaning of the vow of poverty, which was so dear to our first Mothers and Fa-thers. An important consequence of this vow is the desire to be first of all a brother or sister of our fellows, before becoming a teacher, a chief, a guide or a shepherd. The desire to be servants as He was should animate our whole existence.

It is clear that this “mystical – practical” attitude requires a continual conversion, attention and dedication, an attitude I implore as the most fundamental gift of this jubilee. Also our commu-nities and all of us individually are continually to be reconnected with the Gospel as the living source.

In this sense, the words of Abbot General Norbert Calmels at the end of the General Chapter of 1968 are still stunningly actual: “Our task is not finished. Our precise, harsh, risky task of not distorting our Order or making it a shriveled congregation, but to re-establish it, to establish it, to bring it to light, to preserve it, to defend it, to preserve it by allowing it to look ahead, is not over. We will have to stand guard in front of the decisions taken to allow them to grow, to flourish, to spread, to multiply.” (NORBERT CALMELS, Journal d’un chapitre, Forcalquier, 1970, p.180.)

As an expression of this desire to conversion it would be beneficial to recall our canonical profession on Christmas day and to renew it, as was proposed during the definitory of March 2021. I therefore share the prayer redacted by first definator, Abbot Hermann-Josef of Windberg.

Lord our God

In Jesus Christ your Divine Word has become human in the womb of Mary, in order to show us the way to You, the way of love and dedication.

Look on us who like St. Norbert and his companions have been called by You to live according to the Gospel and the way of life of the apostles.

Kindle our love for You and grant us to persevere on the path we eagerly have taken with patience, trust and perseverance.

We ask this through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

(Prayer of Abbot Hermann Josef Kugler for the renewal of profession on Christmas 2021)

United to all of you in prayer,
† Jos Wouters, abbot - general