

2015 CHRISTMAS LETTER

Dear Confreres, dear Sisters,

I extend to you all a Christmas greeting: ‘The grace and peace of God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ – be with you all!’

1 The “Year of Mercy.”

We are still in the “Year of Consecrated Life”, which Pope Francis proclaimed in November, 2013, to everyone’s great surprise. This particular year offers a real challenge to all religious in the Church, and concludes on 2nd February, 2016, the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. It is gratifying that this impetus of the Pope has triggered many activities and initiatives within our communities, especially in connection with the Order’s special emphasis on the Jubilee Year for the 900th Anniversary of the Conversion of St. Norbert. There was much reflection, contemplation and pondering about one’s own charism, and about renewal, both on a personal as well as a community level. Every renewal and reform in the Church, and there were many, were hoped for and prayed for and initiated, not least by the Pope himself, but they must always begin with a conversion of our personal lives. This was St. Norbert’s existential experience. This defining turning-point in St. Norbert’s life, which occurred in 1115, was intensively celebrated around the 6th June this year in Vreden and Xanten.

Yet even before this great “Year of the Order” has come to an end, there is already the beginning of the Holy Year of Mercy, an extraordinary Holy Year that officially commences with the opening of the Holy Doors in the papal basilicas of Rome. This “Jubilee of Mercy” actually joins seamlessly onto our “Year of Conversion”, both ideologically and thematically. Where true conversion takes place, we experience forgiveness and mercy; since God comes to meet us full of compassion, we have the courage to take steps towards repentance and renewal.

“But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ - by grace you have been saved” (Eph 2:4-5).

This scriptural passage summarizes the entire doctrine of redemption and salvation. God is full of mercy. His infinite love pre-empts all our efforts and aspirations and thus allows us to become saved and to be saved. In Jesus we see the face of this benevolent Father, the “Father of mercies and the God of all consolation” (2 Cor 1:3). St. Irenaeus has an interesting thought, namely, that God created man, not because he needed people, but to show us His goodness.¹ We are created out of love and redeemed and “*saved by grace*”.

¹ St. Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* IV,14,1.

2 Year of the Order – “Year of Our Order”

In this “Year of the Order” there were three international meetings of the Order, which had been held, as it were, in the light of reflection and conversion: the “International Sisters’ meeting” in Windberg (20-27.7.2015); the “International meeting of Norbertine Associates” in Teplá , CZ (22-26.7.2015) and the “International Prelates’ meeting” in Rome at Monte Cucco (20-26.9.2015). These meetings are of great importance to our decentralized Order, for they turn cohesion and unity into visible and experiential realities. In this regard, the motto for the Sisters’ meeting was aptly named “Identity and Charism”, which could also act as a *leitmotif* throughout this special year, namely, by thinking about our identity as members of the Order, by challenging and deepening our awareness of the Order’s charism in our role as Canons and Canonesses Regular. Every meeting involved meditating on our vocation as consecrated persons: what is our role, our task, our purpose in life; how do we see ourselves as brothers and sisters, as superiors (prelates), or as a domestic spiritual family (in the case of Norbertine Associates)? For the participants, these meetings were something like laboratories for live-in spirituality, with times for common prayer, meals, intensive reflection and recreation. Very noticeable was the warm hospitality in the various houses and the openness in interaction and understanding.

Here we are reminded of future meetings, the “International Meeting of Juniors” in Mananthavady, Kerala, India on 14th-25th April 2016, and the “Novice Masters and Master of Juniors Meeting” on 10th-16th July 2017 at Mondaye, Normandy, France. Then we see the coming of the next General Chapter in 2018, which will be held in Rolduc, Kerkrade, South Limburg, The Netherlands (22.07 - 04.08.2018). Before then there will be a visitation of all the houses of the Order; the short reflection “A Service in Love”², which was discussed at the Prelates’ meeting, is intended to assist with the visitations. A preparatory group has been founded to prepare the liturgy in preparation for the General Chapter. A separate preparatory committee has also been appointed for the Jubilee Year 2021 when we celebrate 900 years of the Premonstratensian Order. Here we can again quote Pope Francis, who has called the Order “to look to the past with gratitude, to live the present with passion, and to embrace the future with hope”.³

The opening of the Holy Door evokes a very expressive image within each one of us. It wants to tear apart the heavens in order to release God’s abundant mercy; it wants to create space and breadth for His grace-filled deeds and, especially, it should open our hearts to make room for God’s infinite love. The “open door” is a very meaningful symbol that represents the door to the Father’s house , which is always open to anyone who wants to turn around and return home⁴; it means that we should and could open our hearts and hands to pass on this love of God to those who, like us, are always falling into trouble; it means opening our hearts,

² Thomas Handgrätinger, „Service in Love“ – Visitations 2016-2017.

³ “Abbracciare il futuro con speranza”.

⁴ cf. ‘Parable of the Prodigal Son’ or better still ‘Parable of the Merciful Father’ (Lk 15:11-32).

stretching them wide, so that God's love can be poured into us and we can pass on this delightful and tender love to others, in a way that makes it tangible and visible:

“Hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

At the meeting of Superiors General in November this year, the outgoing president, the Jesuit Superior General Adolfo Nicolás, had a novel way of addressing the theme “Leadership and Management” in our communities. He spoke of the five “F’s”, which could be a guide for us. Leadership could be described as “focus - flexible - fast - friendly - fun”. Every leader needs a focus, a goal, a vision, an idea of how a community can live together, and the direction in which to take that community. The Superior shall, together with the confreres, formulate and implement this vision. In order to do this, he needs the flexibility to act appropriately so as to target the respective situations. But it takes a certain tenacity, sometimes even stubbornness, to pursue such an objective in the long term and not to lose sight of day-to-day business. Above all, his goal must be to be friendly (a “people person”), charming and, ultimately, to be able to “convey” with humour and kindness a certain light-heartedness and self-irony. Whoever is grounded in God and rooted in His community will radiate this joy and serenity. We should not be “bottles of vinegar”, but bubbly, refreshing water – to freely quote Pope Francis.

3 Natalitia Christi – Natalitia Ordinis

Every year at Christmas, we remember when in 1121 at Prémontré St. Norbert and about 30 companions made their vows and signed them on the altar. He had, as it were, at the same time placed before the manger both his certificate of profession and the “birth certificate” of the Order. On the day on which we annually celebrate the birth of the God-Child, we also celebrate the beginning of our Order. “*Natalitia Christi-Natalitia Ordinis*” – we find written in in Windberg under a ceiling fresco depicting the birth scene. This ‘birth’ of the Order compels us. The Incarnation is the basic mission of our religious life; it allows us to become people of God, who Himself became man; it makes us, perhaps for the first time, become truly human, and allows us to live genuine human lives and to develop into mature human persons. Incarnation to be human – isn’t this the meaning of the “fullness of Christ” when we read in Titus:

“The goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour has appeared” (Titus 3:4).

Our humanity should reflect some of this goodness, this mercy, this love of God, if we repeatedly measure ourselves against this Christ Child, this Christ, this “new Adam” who completely lives from His relationship to the Father, as well as entirely in that relationship, and who in the end goes back to the Father and wants to take all of us there as well.

As this year comes to an end, and despite the liturgical texts for Advent speaking of things dying and perishing, this Christmas nonetheless tells us that something new is about to begin, that something unheard-of is breaking forth, that God intends to do something new and great for His Son, as indeed we would do for any newborn child. Every ending is at the same time

a new beginning. This is what gives us confidence at the end of 2015, this is our hope at the end of our own lives, it is our belief that in the end God will make all things new in an undreamt-of freshness, originality, creative inspiration and vitality.⁵

4 BUON NATALE

Some days ago, while I was taking a bus through the city of Rome, the young woman sitting next to me was looking at her mobile phone studying the anatomy of a pregnant woman. When she noticed me looking and my collar, she pulled out the photograph of the last pregnancy examination and showed it to me with pride and joy. I promised to pray for her and for the new life. I will not forget her smile of gratitude. That is why I would like to conclude this Christmas letter with a prayer that was until now completely unknown to me; it is a prayer for expectant mothers to St. Norbert, and is widespread throughout the Czech Republic.⁶ I am just very sorry that I could not give this powerful prayer to that young woman:

“Saint Norbert, great and faithful servant of God, you had a special veneration for the holy and miraculous birth of our Redeemer from the purest Virgin, His Mother, who conceived and bore Him without pain and without blemish of Her virginity. That is why you founded the Order of Prémontré on the day of Our Blessed Lord’s birth.

Therefore, Saint Norbert, I humbly beg you, our special Protector, that through your intercession and grace God will assist me in my pregnancy. I also beg your special grace for my child, which I carry within me, so that through baptism he may be received into the arms of Christ’s Church, faithfully serving Our Lord for the length of his days, and may we all one day be together to share in everlasting salvation. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

And so I wish all the confreres and sisters a Happy, and especially, a Peaceful and Blessed Christmas, with much joy and peace in our hearts. May we unlock and open our hearts on the way to Bethlehem; let us take up some of that love and kindness into our hearts and communities and let it live, so that we, having become ‘expectant’ with this love, may bring it to full term, so that, in the end, it may become incarnate for the benefit of the Church and the world.

Rome, Christmas 2015

+ Thomas Handgrättinger *OPRAEM*
Abate Generale

⁵ “See, I am making all things new” (Revelation 21:5).

⁶ „Svatý Norberte, velký a věrný služebník Boží! Zvláštním způsobem jsi uctíval svaté a podivuhodné narození našeho Spasitele, kterého nejčistší Panna Maria, jeho matka, počala bez poskvrny a porušení svého panenství a porodila jej beze vší bolesti. Proto jsi i vznik svého premonstrátského řádu spojil se dnem narození Ježíše Krista.

V pokoře tě tedy prosím, svatý Norberte, jako zvláštního ochránce, aby mi (jí) Bůh dal na tvou přímluvu milost donosit a porodit tento plod života. Ať také dá svou milost, aby toto počaté dítě bylo křtem přijato do Kristovy církve a Jemu, našemu Pánu, celý život věrně sloužilo, abychom nakonec spolu dosáhli věčné spásy. Skrze Ježíše Krista, našeho Pána. Amen.“ (translated by Tomáš Höger).