

“WAKING UP TO THE ETERNAL”¹

Easter Letter of the Abbot General, 2016

‘Year of the Order’

Pope Francis concluded the „Year of Consecrated Life“ with great ceremony on the 2nd of February in Saint Peter’s Basilica. Because of the great number of religious, we could only follow the ceremony on a large screen set up outside in St Peter’s Square. At the end of the ceremony the Pope left the Basilica to greet and thank the thousands of religious gathered outside. He called out to us: “Continue working, continue praying” – and with a bit of a wink – “continue growing older, but age like fine wine!”

The entire year was a challenge to all consecrated persons to wake themselves up, to shake off their lethargy and passivity and to take up their prophetic role to urgently wake up the world. Great expectations were formulated and hopes raised. Now it is up to us to put that in the context of last year’s celebration of the “900th Anniversary of the Conversion of St Norbert” (28th May 1115 in Vreden), which we commemorated in the Order. In addition, we can only be grateful for the many initiatives our houses generated. The Pope wants to bring awareness of consecrated persons back into focus. He is aware of the various concerns and needs, but he does not give in to a lachrymose attitude; instead, he urges us to “live in the present with passion and to embrace the future with hope.” What matters is not quantity but quality, not numbers and size, but an authentic witness of our lives and our commitment to the poor in any shape or form.

‘Year of Mercy’

In the meantime, we have now entered the ‘Year of Mercy’ that actually connects seamlessly to the Order’s ‘Year of Conversion’ 2015. Being able to convert oneself is a great grace; and the benevolent Father is waiting full of mercy for the son who turns back, who returns home, that is, for us (cf. Lk 15:11-32). Last year Pope Francis called together young religious from around the world and when speaking to them about “witness and fidelity” he told them that it is always necessary to “rekindle² the fire of love for Christ and keep that fire constantly burning, so that, being faithful to a regulated life according to Christ’s vision, and organised according to a program for an ‘organic life’, you will have time for yourselves, for others and for God.” That sounds very much like a ‘shaped’ life, or like the ‘*vita regular*’ we try to live as canons *regular*. The canons adopted a rule for themselves and they definitively pledged to live according to that rule, which was the Rule of St. Augustine, in order to give shape and form to their communal life, and to banish such divergent tendencies as individualism and “self-referencing”³; by living that way they focussed “*anima una et cor unum in Deum*” on a

¹ From the book title: Eugen Baer, *Aufwachen zum Ewigen. Friedrich Weinrebs Gedanken zur Umkehr*. Weiler 2004.

² See also Heinrich Bedford Strohm-s book, “*Funkenflug - Glauben neu entfachen*.”

³ Pope Francis’ address to Young Consecrated Persons, 2015: “Flee the temptation towards narcissism., resist closing yourself up in egoistic interests, avoid persisting in personal ambitions and projects.”

fraternal, common search for God. Moreover, it was a spiritual renewal that announced “our trust in Him to let His grace work in us, as Mary opened herself to this grace.” As religious we live according to the rationale of giving and giving oneself away, in evangelical freedom – this is the meaning of obedience; to have nothing of one’s own as a rule of life – this is the meaning of poverty; to live with an undivided heart for Christ and others – this is the meaning of chastity. In this sense, “we should bear fruit, we must be fathers and mothers and not ‘zitelli’⁴. We are not religious for ourselves but for others!”

‘900 Years Order of Prémontré’

With great strides we are heading towards the next General Chapter to be held in 2018 at Rolduc. It will have the theme “*Nativitas Christi – Nativitas Ordinis*” and will set the agenda for the great Jubilee of the Order in 2021. The Order began at Christmas, 1121, when St Norbert and his companions placed the documents of their profession on the altar of the abbey church at Prémontré. In August a specially appointed Jubilee preparatory group will meet for the first time at Averbode, to gather initial ideas and to make concrete plans at an Order level. Using its own Commission, great efforts have been made in the Order to rewrite the Constitutions, thereby drawing more on our own tradition. A liturgy group developed the liturgical foundations for future Order meetings, particularly for the General Chapter. An International Exhibition is planned for the great Jubilee Year and this will be held in Strahov, Magdeburg and Park. The Generalate is preparing for this anniversary with its own home page with links to the Jubilee Year. This Easter letter could be the starting shot to get the media campaign underway. In the future, all the news and activities of the Order, and particularly all the plans and projects around the Jubilee Year of 2021, will be available on the home page. The Hungarian Circary, which is under the responsibility of Sr. Katalin, has assigned a particular theme to each of the six years until the Jubilee (2016-2021): 2015 Conversion, 2016 Pastoral Care, 2017 Liturgy, 2018 Social Activities, 2019 Reconciliation in our Communities, 2020 the Family that is the Order, 2021 the Founding of the Order. This idea could be picked up by every Canonry and Circary and converted according to their own circumstances. How can we approach this as a Circary? Who in the Circary could be held responsible to coordinate the work? What can we do as a community, as an abbey or as a priory? Which of the confreres or sisters is free to take on this task?

‘Spiritual Renewal’

Of course there is more than just external activities. It would be more important to initiate the Jubilee Year with a “spiritual renewal”⁵, to foster a new understanding of our roots and to re-develop a desire for pioneer work and creativity.⁶ It would be important to actively work on a monastery development plan and, for instance, to seek advice from outside. Our monasteries and abbeys stand for durability and stability in an unstable, rapidly changing world. They need to be anchors and homes for people, especially in these times of superficiality and lack of orientation. With the fast pace of life around us, our homes will be havens of self-

⁴ Here having the sense of spinsters/bachelors, fruitless and sterile!

⁵ Preface of Lent.

⁶ cf. Paul’s question: “Where is then your blessedness?” Gal 4:15.

discovery, even of “slowing down”, as it were, in order to create inner strength and to be “different places” that can offer a stable orientation. Our monasteries have a great power to renew themselves; the fight against shallow materialism is a constant challenge. Today there is a great longing for a successful form of community life. So we should make every effort to develop our monasteries by eliminating dormant resources, by taking the future into our own hands and to courageously reflect on our own values, qualities and unique features:

- As the Norbertine Order, we are an integral and independent part of the Church, and have democratic structures. Our monasteries have an autonomy of self-government and self-determination in the overall context of the Church. How do we manage this tension between ‘exemption’ and pastoral cooperation?

- Each of our houses understands itself as “a church” and “the Church”, which is built on Christ and centred in the Lord and localized in a specific, growing place. How connected are we to the local people?

- Our Order is represented worldwide in all continents and anchored in different cultures. To what extent can this cultural diversity and colouring be both an opportunity and a challenge?

- Our Order evolved from the “Gregorian Reform” of the 12th century and heralded a reform among the canons and priests. “Life in community on our way to God” was the key. What does this mean for us, for our formation, for a ‘life-long formation’ and, as a community, to what are we committing ourselves, or what are we striving for?

- Each house is responsible for recruiting and forming their own juniors. Would it not be desirable to concentrate on having several Order-run houses of studies, for instance, in Rome, Park, Chicago, or in Bangalore?

- “Premonstratensians are born pastors!” Given the need in our dioceses and parishes, we can offer young Christians a human, conclusive model of life based on priestly and pastoral works, because of our combined life of lived community and active pastoral ministry.

“Waking up to the Eternal”

Shortly after Easter, the Order’s young people will get together in Mananthavady at the first international meeting of the Order⁷ in India, which has as its motto the very contemporary theme “Liberated by God’s Mercy.” It is really gratifying that young confreres from Europe and beyond will come to India to take part in this meeting in order to be Premonstratensians, and to let themselves enquire into and be enriched by the Indian culture and way of life. Our faith contains a liberating message founded on the Father’s mercy, who constantly affirms: “For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk 15:24-32), and in the resurrection of the Son, who was killed on the cross, but is now raised to eternal life in God. These are actually all paschal thoughts and inspirations, that life is victorious over death, that hope is stronger than despair and anxiety, and that love can overcome many things.⁸ This paschal “wake-up call” coincides with the Pope’s intentions, namely, that as religious we need to wake ourselves up, and then wake up the world (what a double demand!). We need to turn ourselves around in order to find our way back to a “life in

⁷ “International Juniors’ Meeting – 2016” in Mananthavady, April 15-20, 2016.

⁸ *cf.* Song of Love 1 Cor 13:1-13; here v. 7 “Love endures all things.”

abundance” (Jn 10:10) so that we may then announce this “Word of eternal life”⁹ to others with credibility, more by our lives as “redeemed people” than as “redeemed communities” with many words and programmes on paper.

And so I wish all the confreres and sisters a happy and blessed Easter, and on Easter morning may we all truly “wake up to the eternal” with the resurrected Lord; in the spirit of this fundamental Paschal truth and looking towards the splendid horizon of eternity, may we live and reanimate our common life, our “regulated” life, that is, our life organised according to a rule, as “woken up” Christians, as watching religious, as autonomous canons.

Rome, Easter 2016

+ Thomas Handgrättinger *OPraem*
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⁹ cf. Jn 6:68: “You have the words of eternal life.”