

“HE IS GOING BEFORE US”

E A S T E R 2 0 1 8

Dear prelates, dear confreres, dear sisters, dear Norbertine Associates.

1 Easter way

The recently deceased Jesuit father Theo Schmidkonz, responsible for the pastoral for the priests in the diocese of Augsburg, wrote a book with the title “EASTER WAY. A way of hope and life in 14 stations”.¹ We know all the 14 stations of the Cross. His concept was to create a similar meditation centered on the mystery of the Resurrection of the Lord, also in 14 stations, beginning with the first station: “The women are going to the tomb” (Mc 16; Lc 24) and ending with the 14th station: “Stephanus and Saulus bear witness of the resurrection of Jesus” (Acts; 7; 9; 22; 26). During the days after Easter Sunday, the reader is invited to start a meditation on this way, a way of the faith and hope, “on which the life will start anew”. The way begins on the Easter morning with darkness, sadness, perplexity, confusion, helplessness, and uncertainty on this way to the tomb. But more and more the fog and mist clears up, the Easter-sun arises, and the confidence and hope are growing in the hearts of these women. Schmidkonz reminds us that very soon the disciples of Jesus were called followers of the way², of the “new way”, of the ‘Easter-way’. In the Act of the Apostles we can read how these followers were living:

“All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one’s need. Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people” (Acts 2:44-47).

There was no need and no isolation, but sharing and solidarity, “but they had everything in common” (Acts 4:32). We know these texts very well from the part of Saint Augustine’s Rule, where he starts with this example of the primitive Church: “*The community of believers was one heart and mind*” (Acts 4:32). We are aware that this life-description of the Christian community at the beginning might be idealized and stylized; in other parts of the Acts we find also controversies, problems and even quarrels. But when these followers are living and striving on their Easter way, then they become authentic, respected and effective. It is then we hear from many followers and unanimous approval. This ‘Easter-church’ was fast growing. The faith in the crucified and resurrected Lord was for many people, even also young people, the motivation to give themselves in a magnanimous dedication to the work for the evangelization and propagation of this Good News, but also in the great endeavour for the poor and suffering people. The hallmarks of these first Christians, of these Easter-formed and determined people, was their faith in a life after the death, their creed and ‘looking forward to the ‘resurrection of the dead’, their great praxis of love one another and hospitality, and their tireless solidarity for the poor and marginalized people. In the ancient world this was a contrast against a great fatalism, against a sharp class-society with many

¹ Theo Schmidkonz, Osterweg. Ein Weg der Hoffnung und des Lebens in 14 Stationen. Mit Bildern von Sieger Köder. Ostfildern 2015.

² ‘Followers of the way’: conf. Acts 9,2 “to find any men or women who belonged to the Way”.

people in slavery and dependency. Easter was the message of a hopeful future, which enables the people to engage themselves in a total dedication for others, to support the people in need, to work for a more just world, to present a perspective for a bigger aim in the future, not as an empty promise or sheer projection of unfulfilled desires, but as a certainty, based on the resurrection of the Lord:

“If there is no resurrection of the dead, then neither has Christ been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then empty, too, is our preaching; empty, too, your faith. Then we are also false witnesses to God, because we testified against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if in fact the dead are not raised ... But now Christ has been raised from the death, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For just as in Adam all die, so too in Christ shall all be brought to life” (1 Cor 15:13-15.20-21).

2 Easter testimony

The resurrection of the Lord was not an event which could be recorded or filmed. This awakening by God is located on the border of time and eternity, on the boundary of this life and the beyond, between now and hereafter. It is transcending our experience and perceptive faculty. We can only believe in these people, “who could see and hear the resurrected Lord, better to say, to them the Resurrected Lord has shown and revealed himself in his new form of existence. All the Easter stories, quite different in many details, agree in the important center point, that this man, who died on the cross, is living and existing in midst of his followers, that he is going ahead to Galilee, that he is sending these simple fishermen to go in all the world.”³ Maria of Magdala went to the apostles after her meeting with the man in the garden who had called her by her name “Mary”, proclaiming “*I have seen the Lord*” and announcing “*what he told her*” (John 20:18). It is her witness and unshakable faith that she had seen the Lord, risen from the death. It is the witness and faith of the apostles after their own meeting with the risen Lord in different places and circumstances.

In the Easter narratives of the Synoptic Gospels we find another important detail. When the three women came to the tomb, puzzling over the question, “*who will roll back the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?*” (Mc 16:3), “*two men in dazzling garments appeared to them*” (Lc 24:4) and were speaking to them: “*Why do you seek the living one among the dead?*” (v5). One or two men gave the first information about the Easter event, one or two angels, like heavenly messengers in white robes brought the incredible News: “*He is not here, but he has been raised. Remember what he said to you while he was still in Galilee, ‘that the Son of Man must be handed over to sinners and be crucified, and rise on the third day’*” (v5-6). In our tradition, these men in white are the model for our own white habit in our Order’s history. And Saint Norbert has chosen this white habit exactly to put us in the role of witnesses of the Resurrection.⁴ Our white habit is an external visible sign, but it means our internal readiness to testify, to witness the mystery of the risen Lord.

The white habit is not an extravagant clerical garment, nor is it an aesthetical choice to make one appear better dressed. Instead, it is our mandate by word and by life to give testimony to the living Lord, that he has overcome the death and opened the door to the life beyond all mortality and death. In a conference for religious, Bishop Manfred Scheuer of the diocese Linz in Austria, said: “The fellowship is a ‘thorn in the flesh’, is a provocation and correction; in this fellowship lights up the alternative of the Gospel. Sure, everybody is called to sanctity. The evangelical counsels and advices per se don’t make better, more pious or more lovingly, but they are a sign, a memory to

³ conf. Schmidkonz S. 6-7.

⁴ Das Leben des hl. Norbert (Vita A, Kap. 12). in: Hatto Kallfelz, Lebensbeschreibungen einiger Bischöfe. Darmstadt 1973, p. 491.

seek the Lord's kingdom, to give a voice, a face to the Gospel so that it will not be forgotten. In a society of germinating Jesus-oblivion the Orders and congregations are signs and living memories to the friendship with Jesus.”⁵

3 Life testimony

It was in the year 1580 when two abbots were arrested in Dublin while reciting the Divine Office, and were imprisoned in Dublin Castle. They were forced to renounce the Catholic Faith and the authority of the pope. The two abbots, Abbot John O'Mulkerin (Joannes Kieranus) *OPRAEM* from the Norbertine Lough Cé Abbey, and Abbot Gelasius O'Cullenan, abbot of the Cistercian abbey of Boyle, were subjected to torture. Their feet were scorched with fire and their extremities smashed by repeat hammer-blows. This, as well as further attempts of bribery, went without success. Both prisoners were sentenced to be hanged and quartered. They were then fettered and paraded through streets thronged with spectators. Some had come to receive the Abbots' blessings and to witness their heroic faith. Others, edified by such a constancy of the martyrs in suffering for the Faith, even returned to the Catholic Church. When the two faithful servants arrived at the place of execution, Abbot John was overcome with fear. But with great strength his companion encouraged him to persevere unto the palm of martyrdom. Assuring him in the presence of the almighty God and the Blessed Virgin Mary, Gelasius reminded him of the victorious crown which would await him before the throne of God at the moment of his death. With renewed confidence, John replied: “Willingly do I accept your word in assurance of this”. After joining together in prayer to Jesus Christ, the two religious were hanged on November 21, 1580, and while still alive they were beheaded. Later on, by the request of the martyr's families and friends, the bodies were laid to rest in a Christian burial.⁶

In a prayer for their beatification, we are told of their wonderful examples, both of loyalty to the Church and of courage in accepting the death rather than worldly honors. Their lives and deaths testify to their faith in the resurrection and in the promise of the Lord: “*Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and that of the Gospel will save it.*” (Mc 8:34-35). Abbot John was in fear after all tortures and in a deep anxiety and uncertainty. But the witness and steadfastness of his friend and companion gave him courage and a new power to overcome this weakness and this temptation. In our faith we need the testimony of others, their example by words and deeds, their encouragement by the ‘μαρτύρια’, which means confession, testimony and life-example. We can be for one another such great support and confirmation, helping to corroborate and strengthen the faith and a faithful perseverance. Our way to God is held in common; in common means in a common faith, in a common striving to live our vocation and conviction in sincere authenticity and authentic sincerity. And we can pray to these first Irish martyrs in the Elizabethan era, that we may truly follow in the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ, and that we become ever more witnesses of the Resurrection, as was intended by Saint Norbert's choice of the white habit.

4 “He is going before you to Galilee!”

We have just finished our last Definitory meeting at the very hospital Berne/Hesswijk-Abbey (March 12-14, 2018). During this meeting we visited the place of our Chapter in Rolduc, Kerkrade,

⁵ Ordenstag Oberösterreich, 14.10.2017 in Stift Kremsmünster.

⁶ Published as a prayer-memory by the postulator Ordinis.

South-Limburg, NL, and prepared with the secretary of the Chapter, abbot Denis Hendrickx, and the provisor Capituli Klaas Fongers, most of the matters for the General Chapter July 2018. All seems to be well prepared and we invite all confreres, sisters and Norbertine associates as well, to pray for a good meeting, for a confraternal exchange, for fruitful dialogues and talks. This Chapter is strongly directed to the upcoming Jubilee of the Order, “900 years of Norbertine Canons Regular presence and service in the Church”, in three years, 2021. We know that our Order was founded on Christmas day 1121 in Prémontre. This coincidence of Christmas (“*NATIVITAS DOMINI*”) and the beginning of our Order (“*NATIVITAS ORDINIS*”) sets us more under the Incarnational aspect of our faith. But we are all baptized into the death and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, who calls us to unite with Him, incarnate in us, and so to be his messengers and witnesses through our life and our living together, so that he is given to the world and to the people through us and through our being “one heart and one mind”. This word has to become flesh in us in order to “*dwell among us*” (John 1:14), so that his love and presence will overflow from out our communities to the people around us.⁷

So I wish all the confreres and sisters of our Order, as well as our Norbertine Associates and all co-operators surrounding our communities, a HAPPY EASTER feast and a blessed EASTER WAY as a community, as religious, as God-dedicated in different forms and expressions. Whatever is coming up in our Order, with this next General Chapter, or in my personal life, with the end of my term as Abbot General, we have to hear the message of this man in a white robe: “*He is going before you to Galilee!*” He is always before us, wherever we are going, looking and striving; he is before us, so that he is our future and our aim, the sense, the reason and the foundation of our life and of our living as community. He is going before us and we are followers, in his footsteps. In this confidence, trust, and in this assurance (like Abbot John has said) we will go in this Chapter, in this Jubilee Year, celebrating our past, strengthening our daily service, but looking forward, because

“HE IS GOING BEFORE US!”⁸.

Rome, Easter 2018

+ Thomas Handgrättinger *OPRAEM*
Abate Generale

⁷ Constitutions Nr. 68.

⁸ “*He is going before you to galilee!*” (Mt 28:7).