

# CONVERSATIO 2010



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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

When you read this editorial we have entered into the Season of Advent. Advent as you know is the season of hope. When we look at the situation of our country, we are again in a situation of hope and expectation, the same state we were right after EDSA I and EDSA II. The recent happenings such as the Hostage incident and some blunders of government officials threaten to dash our hopes again. But let us not give in to this temptation to give up so soon. We need to do something in our own areas of responsibilities to take advantage of the spaces that have opened up. Let us bring about changes in our own way of doing things, in the way we manage our institutions. In our own ways, let us fight corruption at the local level and remain steadfast in our advocacy for TRUTH, ACCOUNTABILITY and INTEGRITY.

I just came from Shanghai and China and this visit has given me a basis for hope for the Church in China. There seems to be many vocations to the seminary and to the religious life. All the priests and Sisters we met were under 40. In my last day in Shanghai, we attended the perpetual profession of 8 Sisters of the Presentation Congregation. I also visited our little community in Beijing and so far they seem to be doing well in their community life and their apostolate with children. I promised them that we will pray for their future. So could each community decide in what way they can pray for our Beijing sisters. We hope that they will be the seed for a future flowering of Benedictine vocation there.

Sincerely yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## The Nativity

*“He came to his own home and his own people did not receive him.”*

*(John 1:11)*

By: Sister M. Pauline Triviño, OSB

We are now in the second week of Advent. We sang our “Veni Domine Jesu” and we lighted the second candle on our Advent Wreath / Advent Symbol . With joyful anticipation our prayer is always: “**Come, Lord Jesus.**” And as we enter the week before Christmas, we join the Church in crying with great longing: **VENI . . . COME, DO NOT DELAY.** The “**O Antiphons**” clearly express this great longing for the Lord’s Salvation:

**“You govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. COME and show your people the way to salvation.”**

**O Sacred Lord, COME, stretch out your mighty hand to set us free.”**

**O Key of David... COME, break down the prison walls of death for those who dwell in darkness... and lead your captive people to freedom.”**

And, very touching, a cry of tenderness, **O King of all nations, the ONLY JOY OF THE HUMAN HEART, COME and save those whom you fashioned from the dust.”**

The “Birth of Jesus” means Salvation for all of us, for by his Coming we are Saved.

### **I. The Birth of Jesus**

For our reflection on the Nativity of the Lord, let us take a verse from St. John’s Gospel which is read on the Day Mass on Christmas.

**“He came to his own home and his own people did not receive him.”(Jn 1:11)**

This verse gives a very realistic approach to the meaning and theology of the coming of Jesus to our world.

#### **A. “He came to his own home...”**

**What are the facts of Jesus’ birth? What is his Origin?**

Jesus is not a mythical God whose life was played out in a timeless kingdom. He was a man whose birth and life and death were bound by the observable limits of time and place.

Donald Senior (“Portrait of Jesus”) discusses how each of the four Evangelists, each one in his own distinct way, presents the origin of Jesus. Mark begins his story on the edge of the Judean Desert where the River Jordan flows into the waste of the Dead Sea. Here Jesus listens to his cousin, St. John the Baptist, preaching the need for repentance. Jesus accepts that ritual of new life from him. Then Jesus begins his powerful ministry. By contrast, John’s Gospel goes back to the vastness of the universe before creation and time began, into the very life of God. There he locates the ultimate origin of Jesus. He is the “WORD” spoken by God. He is “the WORD that perfectly expresses God’s love, which arches into time and creation and takes flesh. “Though in different ways, both Matthew and Luke trace Jesus’ roots in the people and history of Israel. Matthew gives the genealogy of Jesus from Abraham through David, the King, and on to Joseph, the husband of Mary. Very visible here is a turbulent line of ancestry. Luke, however, locates Jesus’ origin firmly in the life and history of Israel.

Luke gives the date, place and circumstance of Jesus’ birth. Reflecting on his account gives us a better understanding of the facts of Jesus’ birth. Both Matthew and Luke affirm that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but each gets Jesus to Bethlehem in a different way. Luke’s account speaks of a Decree issued by Caesar Augustus that a census be made. So all must go to Bethlehem to register. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem to be registered for this imperial census and taxation. Matthew on the other hand had Joseph already living in Bethlehem.

In Luke’s version of the birth of Jesus, it was during Mary and Joseph’s stay in Bethlehem that Jesus is born. They could not get an inn, so Mary gave birth in a stable. Like all newborns, the child is wrapped with “strips of cloth to keep the body straight and to ensure proper growth.” A “feeding trough” served as a crib. The place is bare and simple. The first visitors who came to visit were the shepherds. Jesus’ family ties spoken about are with the poor and humble, Mary and Joseph were poor and devout Galileans who must come to register for the census in Bethlehem and with the good and pious Jews such as the humble temple priest Zachary and his wife Elizabeth.

### **Significance of the Facts of Jesus’ Birth from Luke’s Account:**

#### **1) Place and Date of Jesus’ Birth:**

In establishing that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, Luke wants to show the continuity of Jesus with the royal house of David. Luke wants to stress further “that *Caesar Augustus* is more than a date for the story of Jesus’ birth. He is an instrument of God’s will. For it is the basic conviction of Luke that emperors, governments, and laws serve the purpose of God, often without knowing it.” (Craddock)

Jesus is born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. Rohr has this theological reflection: “That the inn had no room for God might be a symbol of how God has not been received by the world. It certainly identifies Jesus and his family with the poor class.” Luke has kept the details of the account free from anything that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the earth.

## 2) The Shepherds as the first visitors:

How are the shepherds considered in the Jewish society at that time? “They were looked at as people outside the system and outside the law (‘sinners’ in their objective way of thinking). They were bandits, nonconformists, boorish and dirty folks.... Luke wants to reprimand his readers, perhaps especially the rich and the privileged ones, and chooses shepherds to make his point. He is telling them that it was the people of no regard, who were not part of the system, to whom the good news was first announced. These societal outcasts recognize what is happening and they go running into Bethlehem to find this special child.” (Rohr)

The shepherds belong to the story not only because they serve to tie Jesus to the shepherd king, David, but also because they “ belong to Luke’s guest list for the Kingdom of God: the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame.”

“It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of the one who was to become an emperor.”(Craddock). Following this pattern, Luke announces the good news of Joy and Peace at the birth, not of an emperor but of a Savior. And he declares it not within the palace halls but in the fields, to the poor and lowly shepherds the good news is first announced. Here the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled: **the poor have the good news preached to them** (Isaiah 61:1).

## 3) Cesar Augustus issued a Decree:

It is important to realize that *Augustus* is known as Emperor of Peace. He created the *PAX ROMANA*, the Roman Peace. In the mind of Luke’s contemporaries, he is associated with peace. So Luke presents Jesus as the Prince of Peace, born in the age of the Emperor of Peace.

## Conclusion:

With the exception of some basic data, there is very little convergence among the four evangelists in speaking of the origin of Jesus. But all agree in the ultimate origin of Jesus in God’s purpose. To quote Donald Senior:

“Each of the evangelists wants to affirm that Jesus’ birth was no accident of history. **God had destined Jesus from all eternity to liberate Israel.** And Jesus

was no disembodied spirit; he was firmly rooted in the history of a real people – their pain, their joy, their fidelities, their sin. Mark makes this point in linking Jesus with the prophet John at the Jordan; Matthew and Luke do it by their vivid stories of Jesus’ infancy; John does it by his eloquent statement : The Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (John 1:14)

## **B “...and his own people did not receive him .”**

Scripture scholars would refer to this phrase as a lament, more than a judgment or a condemnation. “...his own people did not receive him.” John was referring to those people in his community for whom he wrote the gospel. Any member of this community would really be grieved by “the community’s refusal to receive the Word”.

**The first part of John’s Gospel speaks of the varied forms of rejection of the Word by his own people. There were a lot of questionings, numerous controversies, frequent misunderstandings, and there were failures to understand and to act upon what was understood. These were observable behaviors of a people in a defined historical situation long ago. What we could keep in mind is that among “his own people” whether the Jews of John’s time or of Christians of all ages, including our time, there are those and there will be those “who received him not” and “who will receive him not”.**

**Though God is our creator and we are his creatures, he gives us the freedom to refuse or to accept His Word. We can choose to “know him not / accept him not”. “It is a simple statement of fact. God’s revelation in the world does not, by its mere presence in the world, compel assent.” (Marrow)**

## **II. The Birth of Jesus in our World Today**

### **A. Our World Today**

While it is true that we pray in our Advent Liturgy , COME - VENI , we are not sure whether we are truly waiting for the Lord and whether we are truly ready to welcome Him in our hearts and in our community. Our minds are cluttered with many concerns; our vision is darkened because of conflicting values. Our contemporary culture makes it hard for us to live in God’s presence, and to give him primacy in our life.

Albert Nolan in his book, **Jesus Today: a Spirituality of Radical Freedom**, talks about postmodernism that pervades the spirit and values of contemporary world. More and more people especially the young people have given certainties of the past:

religious certainties, scientific certainties, cultural certainties, political certainties and historical certainties. Everything is being questioned. People nowadays feel totally insecure. When we read the daily papers or watch TV, we hear of wars, murder, terrorism, sexual abuse, earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, etc.

There are problems of broken relationships, marital infidelities and quarrels. In order to divert attention from the worries of life, some resort to drugs, others to alcohol, others to various forms of entertainment and others to sex.

## **B. Jesus brings Light to our Darkened World**

Nolan explains that in this time of uncertainties and insecurity, people look for spirituality to give them inner strength. All human beings need and have always needed spirituality. What is strongly observed now is that many more people are becoming acutely aware of their need for spirituality. Nolan writes:

**This need or hunger is experienced in a variety of ways. Some experience it as the need for something that will give them the inner strength to cope with life, or peace of mind and freedom from feelings of fear and anxiety. Others experience it in seeing themselves falling apart and in need of something bigger than themselves to hold them together. There is also a sense of being wounded, hurt, broken, and in need of healing. Many, it seems, feel cut off and isolated from other people and from nature. They long for connection and harmony. An increasing number of people, especially young people, feel the need to be in contact with the mystery beyond what we can see, hear, smell, taste, touch or think, beyond the constraints of mechanistic materialism. Some experience the hunger for spirituality quite simply as a longing for God.**

### **a) Jesus' Spirituality**

The hunger for spirituality makes it imperative for us to know Jesus' spirituality. How familiar are we with Jesus' spirituality? We need to look at what Jesus did and taught to discover his spirituality that must have been behind his activities and teachings. Here are some points mentioned by Nolan.

- **Jesus turned the world upside down.** His Sermon on the Mount was, in a way, revolutionary. Examples:
  - 1) Blessed are the poor. This means consider yourself fortunate if you are not rich.... The rich are to be pitied because it is they who will find it difficult to live in the world of the future Kingdom where they will have to share everything.

2) Blessed are you if people hate you, exclude you, revile you and defame you. What he is saying is: forget your reputation. When people criticize you and discredit you, this could be a blessing in disguise.

- **The upside-down Kingdom:** Jesus had a different concept of the Kingdom of God because he saw God differently from emperors who lorded it over people and made their authority felt. Jesus experienced God as a loving Father, an **Abba**, who forgives his son.
- **The Reign of God would rise from below:** from the poor, the little ones, the sinners, the outcasts, the lost, etc. They would become like brothers and sisters to one another, care for one another, protect one another and share with one another.
- **The Upside-down Messiah** – Jesus did not want his disciples to call him Messiah. In the context of that time, a Messiah was served by the people. But Jesus came to serve. As Isaiah depicted it, he would be the “suffering servant”. He was **servant of the people**. This image was eloquently put forward by John in the “washing of the feet” ( Jn 13:4-16)
- The **most radical reversal** according to Nolan is this :  
Jesus was not going to be the triumphant conquering Messiah who would crush and kill Israel’s oppressors, humiliating them and making them into victims in order to liberate his people. **He would triumph by being conquered, by being arrested, beaten, humiliated, and nailed to the cross** like a rebellious slave or a common criminal – the most disgraceful and shameful death imaginable in those days.  
He was **not the victor**; he was **the victim**. And, paradoxically, this would turn out to be his greatest achievement. Truth and Justice were on the side of the victim. In fact, that is where God is to be found – on the side of the world’s victims. This is what Jesus had been saying all along.

## b) Jesus’ Mysticism

All mystics speak about an experience of union or oneness with God. In speaking of Jesus’ mysticism, we are looking into his unique oneness with God. Biblical scholars would speak of Jesus’ experience of union with God as his **abba** experience, his experience of God as his loving Father. Though words are inadequate to describe one’s “wordless, imageless “experience of union with God, we need to use words or metaphors to speak of this profound human experience.

In the Gospel accounts we read of Jesus addressing God as **abba** and he taught his disciples to do the same. It is a word which expresses intimacy. God is referred to as a loving parent who embraces, holds, and protects his or her child. And his love is warm, unconditional and totally dependable. This is clearly depicted in the Parable of

the Prodigal Son. The father rejoices at the return of his son. His spontaneous reaction is unconditional forgiveness.

As a Son so united to his Father, Jesus learned his Father's qualities by imitating him. "He learned to forgive unconditionally as his Father does. He learned to be compassionate as his Father was compassionate. ( Lk 6:36) Because his Father makes the sun shine and the rain fall on the just and the unjust, Jesus learned to love the just and the unjust, including his enemies and those who persecuted him" (Mt 5:44-45).

Clarifying the significance of this term *abba* helps us understand better Jesus' spirituality. We note that Jesus' experience of God as his *abba* was the source of his wisdom, his clarity, his confidence and his radical freedom. Without this, it is impossible to understand why and how he did the things he did.

### **III. Jesus Transforms our Heart and our World**

How are we to live Jesus' spirituality? What are the practical steps we need to take in order to live today as Jesus did in his time? How do we work towards our own transformation in Christ? Definitely, there are no short-cuts to this growth process of transforming the whole person or transforming a whole society. This will take years, many years. But the process must start and it must start with ourselves.

Of the many ways we can take toward this journey of transformation, we shall speak of some.

#### **Solitude and Silence:**

We are busy people. There is always so much to do. We are driven to work and work. Many of us complain of being overextended and stressed. And we like to think that we cannot do anything about it, because there is just so much to be done. It seems busyness has become an obsession for us today. Why this busyness? Are we afraid to have nothing to do?

The truth is that busyness distracts us from self-awareness and from awareness of the real world. It distracts us from awareness of God.

During his public life, Jesus was a very busy man. Great crowds continually followed him that sometimes, he and his disciples did not have time to eat. When they tried to go to a quiet place to rest for a while, the crowd would also follow them. And yet, Jesus must have experienced a profound need for silence and solitude that he returned as often as he could to the desert. Here "desert" does not mean a hot and sandy place with no vegetation. It means a deserted or lonely place, a quiet place. It was to such a

place that he withdrew for forty days and forty nights and ever so often in order to commune with his Father.

Following the example of Jesus, we need to create some space in our lives for silence and solitude. Modern psychologists would argue that searching for happiness only in relationships is a mistake. We need periods of solitude to discover ourselves and to search for God

Similarly, we need silence in the midst of our noisy world. Ever so often we need to disconnect from the relentless flow of words, sounds and images. And more important still, we need an inner silence that switches off the inner stream of thoughts, images, and feelings.

### **In the Present Moment**

For those of us who tend to live in the past or in the future, Thich Nhat Hanh has this message: “Life can be found only in the present moment, because the past no longer is and the future has not yet come. Life exists only in the present moment. “Knowledge of the past will help us understand the present. And planning the future is needed to help us decide what to do now. But the only thing that actually exists is the here and now, the present moment.

This means that it is in the present moment that we can meet the living God and experience his presence. God is present here and now not only in our private present moment. He is also in the lives of everyone and in the whole universe. The present moment that we need to become aware of in silence and solitude is the present moment of today’s world. We read the signs of the times in order to live in the here and now of our unfolding universe, the place where God can be found.

### **Getting to Know Oneself**

Meister Eckhart says: “No one can know God who does not first know her/himself.” Jesus speaks of the need to know oneself when he paints the picture of someone offering to take the speck out of a neighbor’s eye while ignoring the huge log of wood in his own eye. This is the case of what we call “blind spot”. We are often not honest enough to recognize our blind spots.

Getting to know oneself includes a number of things. We shall focus only on recognizing our desires for what they are; getting in touch with our feelings and our emotions like love, compassion, sadness, depression, anger, resentment and frustration and being conscious of our changing moods and our possible woundedness

from past hurts. Feelings, desires and emotions are not our enemies. What matters is that we do not allow them to control us.

Henri Nowen shares his insight on how to deal with feelings of hurt and woundedness. He says:

**The great challenge is living your wounds through, instead of thinking them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them into your silence than to talk about them.**

**The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your wounds to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them....But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down to your heart. Then you can live through them and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds.**

In what was described, we begin to discover our *true self*. Jesus said: “Take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly” (Lk 6:42). This is Jesus’ image of the *true self*, the eye without the log or any obstruction.

How do we remove the log? How do we become unselfish? First, we become conscious of the machinations and duplicity of our ego as well as the ego’s display of confidence that masks the reality of our pride, fears, anxieties, worries and insecurities. Next, we make an effort to recognize them as false images of who we are. And then we refuse to live out this false image of our self. We disassociate with it. (cf. Nolan)

This will be a long process. It will take years of quiet reflection. We will drift back again and again to our “false self” built on our false image. When we discover this, let us gently return to the journey of moving on towards our true self. However, there will be moments when we will notice signs of our true self: when we start to experience a strong desire to know the truth about ourselves, no matter how humiliating the truth may be; when we are genuinely moved with feelings of compassion for people in need; when we begin to feel grateful for the many gifts that life offers.

We should keep in mind that we cannot get to know ourselves by merely reading about human behavior. We need periods of solitude and silence to face ourselves. We may need the help of others but in the last analysis it is during these quiet moments that we can remove the log from our eye and be able to see clearly who we really are.

#### **IV. Mary: from the Crib to the Cross**

We cannot speak of the Nativity of Jesus without turning to Mary. God's work of salvation by *sending His only Son to redeem the world* was made possible through the magnanimous heart of Mary and her total availability to God, her readiness to accept what God asked from her.

When Mary and Joseph offered the Child Jesus at the Temple, Simeon, the old and just man who awaited the "consolation of Israel", took the child in his arms and **said to Mary:** "*This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed. . .and you yourself shall be pierced with a sword. . . so that the thoughts of many hearts shall be laid bare.*"

In Mary, we see the "*anawin spirituality*" . . . the spirit of total openness to God's will. As her Son grew up and as He took upon Himself the mission that the Father gave Him, Mary accepted the fact that she had to let go of her Son to be the leader of His people. She followed Him until the end, standing beneath the Cross.

**"Mary is the woman who goes inside, beyond the contradictions and absurdities, to treasure and hold the mystery until she finally embraces the paradox. As she learns to deal with the contradictions in the outer world, she can learn to deal with God's holiness. In that she calls us all to our contemplative vocation to trust and, ironically, to have absolute radical faith." (Rohr)**

We embrace the GRACE OF THE NATIVITY by making ourselves totally available to God's plan as we see it in Jesus and in His Mother.

Mary's YES was a perfectly free YES.

**I don't know what it will mean. . .**

**I don't know where it will lead . . .**


**I don't know what it will require**

**But I know God is asking it from me**


**And I say a wholehearted YES. (Rohr)**

#### **GUIDE for INDIVIDUAL PRAYER:**

Sit quietly before the Lord and say: "**Come Lord Jesus!**"

 Repeat in Lectio style the words from the Gospel according to John:

**"He came to his own home and his own people did not receive him."**

 In the presence of Jesus, go over the section of the conference that deals with the spirituality of Jesus. Ask him to transform your heart and your spirit.

- ✚ Acknowledge before the Lord the ways in which **you did not receive Him**.

### **GUIDE for SHARING:**

- ✚ Which aspects of the spirituality of Jesus appeal to you? How do you want to live this out in your individual life and in your life in community?
- ✚ Agree as a community what dimensions of Jesus' spirituality you want to adopt during the Christmas season and throughout the Lenten season.

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Hope  
Hope

Thérèse-Marie Dupagne, OSB  
Belgium

***(Hope Against All Hope)***

I do not ask you, Father, to make our lives miraculous. I do not ask you to replace reality with our dreams or that our desires cause us to forget the darkness! All I ask of you, my God, is to dare to Hope!<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adaptation of a prayer for the New Year, by Jean Debruyne, priest and poet († 2007).

## Introduction

(Abraham)

When Sr. Judith Ann asked me to speak to you, my first reaction was, “No, I’m incapable of offering a reflection worthy of the name to such a gathering.” And I still think so. The only star in the sky of my doubts is the subject. Indeed, Sr. Judith Ann had unwittingly asked me to go deeper into my heart’s song: “Hope”; and so after several days, in a moment of folly or heedlessness, I accepted. During the months that followed, I trembled and kept saying to myself, “After all, this talk is meant to stimulate group discussions, so it’s fine if it’s not thoroughly researched, if I don’t cover all aspects of the subject, if it stimulates disagreement. At least the group discussions will have a wide floor for debate, without my having told them everything ahead of time!” And it is in this spirit that I began freely to write. You have been forewarned!



(Mary Magdalene, by Berna)

My response to the question of hope is a spontaneous, joyous and irrepressible cry, the cry that the Easter morning liturgy puts on the lips of Mary Magdalene: “Christ my hope is arisen.”<sup>2</sup>

And this cry, ripened during the silence of Saturday, is intimately connected to the singing of the Lamentations during Holy Week: “It is good to **hope** in silence for the salvation of the Lord.”<sup>3</sup>

I could very well stop right here and simply send you back to the silence of your cells, to let you experience that “It is good to hope in silence for the salvation of the Lord,” that it is good to “live in hope,” in other words, to “live in Christ,” if indeed it is true that the risen Christ is my hope, that Christ is my salvation!

Can you retire for a few moments to the cell of your heart to taste and see how good it is “to hope in silence for the salvation of the Lord”?  
(Song of Taizé: Prayer of St. Theresa of Avila: “Nada te turbe”).

(St. Seraphim of Sarov)



(Gethsemani, Wolffhügen)

Hope in all circumstances, no matter what.

## Our modern plagues of Egypt



<sup>2</sup> From the sequence “Victimae Paschali Laudes”.

<sup>3</sup> Lamentations 3,26; the French translation is taken from the TOB version (an ecumenical translation)



*“Are we not facing a crisis of hope, more than a crisis of faith?” asks Adolphe Gesché<sup>4</sup>. “Youth everywhere are in crisis as they look toward their future and their loves; in certain countries, people are in crisis because they are at the mercy of massacres and endless exploitation; in our countries and elsewhere, there is the crisis of those who are excluded from basic human rights. ‘Could hope be more unstable than despair?’ This perspective of absence and emptiness is real; it can be seen in the eyes of those who, seated along the side of the road, watch us pass by. Next to a world of “expansion that shapes the great godlike adventure of humanity” lies the world of “dereliction, where our modern plagues of Egypt are rampant: hunger, confinement, torture, terror, exile, degradation, despair.”<sup>5</sup>*

(Berna)



Are these words not true for our time?

Gilles BERNHEIM, chief rabbi of France, said in an interview, “The lesson of Passover is more relevant than ever, because the greatness of ancient Egypt, founded on technology and industry, is now shared by all the developed countries, the number and wealth of which grow daily before our eyes. At the same time, the troubles caused by the global economy are devastating, with effects resembling those of ancient slavery described in the Torah. It is urgent for people today to get out of Egypt.”<sup>6</sup>

If the question of hope is currently so important in our society, our Church and our communities, is it not because so many people in our society cruelly lack hope? I do not intend to give you a detailed picture of the society in which we live, or of the Church situation in our regions, but to give you a general idea, I shall simply cite a few facts.

What about the economic and financial crisis? It is present throughout the world. It has caused the West to lose its supremacy, which is good. Let us hope that the West doesn't get it back any time soon! But this crisis also fosters a self-serving, head-in-the-sand attitude, and that is perverse!

Unemployment is rising. There is violence in schools and in the streets. Suicide is a reality we seldom talk about; yet in Belgium, more people die of suicide than of the car accidents that make the headlines.<sup>7</sup> A young 17 year old girl, apparently full of life, put an end to her days this summer. In her farewell message she left this wish: *“I want you to resist the degradation, the indifference, the negativity of our*

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<sup>4</sup> Adolphe Gesché, a great theologian († 2003), uttered these words at the opening of a colloquium held at UCL on "Wisdom, a chance for hope".

<sup>5</sup> Adolphe GESCHÉ, Paul SCOLAS, dir., *Wisdom, a Chance for Hope*, Cerf-UCL, 1998, p.7-8.

<sup>6</sup> Published in *le Figaro*, opinions gathered by Étienne de Montety 21/03/2008.

<sup>7</sup> The recognized rate is 23 per 100.000 inhabitants. (The word average is 14). And how many additional, unofficial suicides are there? It is the second leading cause of death for young people between the ages of 15 and 24! cf. <http://www.lesoir.be/actualite/belgique/societe-l-implication-des-2008-01-29-574067.shtml>.

*time. I want you especially to be you.*” Families are coming apart. Since 2007, one out of every two marriages has ended in divorce.<sup>8</sup> Staggering! What about the suffering implied by this statistic?

The crisis is also cultural. We are, as it were, at the end of one world, waiting for a new one. What will it be? For many, these changes entail anxiety and fear. We are ready to pass out information, but are we ready to enter into relationships?

In a world in which communication is emphasized, are we in communion? On all levels there is a resurgence of intolerance and racism, usually met with indifference.



Last year 137 families with 270 children were held in a detention center, some for weeks or months.<sup>9</sup> Their only crime: asking for asylum in our country! These centers are currently overcrowded, and many people who are here “illegally” live in the streets. In our countries, living in the street is hard enough in ordinary times; in winter, it is inhuman! Sometimes I am ashamed of my country!

If you look in Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, you will find that our regions of long Christian tradition are now classified among the most secularized countries. Christians are no longer the majority, no longer the decision-makers for everyone and everything. In itself, this is neither wrong, nor a catastrophe. Jesus asked us to be the leaven in the dough, not the dough itself!

In general, people aren't particularly opposed to faith; they tend rather to be indifferent, or to say, “I don't know.” Among believers, some become militant or even extremist. The future is sometimes sought in a rear-view mirror, where the “good old days” all the virtues had, and where ritualism, formalism and the institution unfortunately took precedence over personal faith.

Churches are often quite empty. A few large gatherings warm the hearts of Christians, who then discover that they are people on a journey, and not necessarily an “endangered species”, forgotten by the WWF.<sup>10</sup>

Christians no longer always know what their faith is. A poll<sup>11</sup> revealed that 35% of Christians surveyed said they didn't believe in the resurrection! Some define God as a force, an energy, and no longer as a person. Others said they were “Catholics without God”! Within the context of this survey, a 22 year-old defined his spiritual identity as follows: “As far as I am concerned, I am emotionally an atheist. Rationally, I am an agnostic. In hope, I am a believer.”

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<sup>8</sup> In 1960, there was 1 divorce for every 15 marriages. In 2007, with a rate of more than 1 divorce for every 2 marriages, Belgium has one of the highest divorce rates, along with Sweden and the Czech Republic. Source : Directorate of general statistics and economic information of the FPS Economy, published on <http://www.famiweb.be/fr/Le-pic-du-divorce-apres-3-ans>.

<sup>9</sup> I do not have the figures for the current year as I write this, but I fear that the situation has unfortunately remained the same.

<sup>10</sup> World Wildlife Fund.

<sup>11</sup> Newspaper survey in which the group “l'Avenir” (“The Future”) participated, with support from the Catholic University of Louvain in 2007. See in particular: [http://www.actu24.be/article/belgique/qui\\_est\\_votre\\_dieu\\_/4427.aspx](http://www.actu24.be/article/belgique/qui_est_votre_dieu_/4427.aspx).

Many active Church members are disappointed and discouraged, because our Church has become small, old and tired, subject to many misunderstandings, even within.

But not everything is negative. In this survey, one word emerged as a beacon: “responsibility”. *I, as a human being, am responsible for others, for all other humans. My wife, my children, my fellow citizens, the citizens of the whole world are my neighbor. The child who is dying of starvation is my neighbor.*<sup>12</sup>

*(ruins, Abbey of Villers)*



In our region we are 26 communities of Benedictine women; several of these communities have left their monasteries and gone together to rest homes for the elderly. The average age of our communities continues to climb, and there are few vocations. Between the two editions of the Catalogus, we lost ¼ of our monastic population! I understand why census-taking was a sin in the Old Testament<sup>13</sup>: it means relying on your own strength and also inviting the temptation of discouragement. Can we experience the decline of our communities as a Passover and Easter mystery? *Unless the grain dies...*<sup>14</sup> Remember, this isn't the first time in history that monasteries have disappeared from our region. Our country has many monastic ruins. This is one! But between reading a page of history and living it, there is a paschal abyss that only Christ, our hope, can help us cross. And it is noteworthy that in the past, monasteries often disappeared because of persecution. Today we are disappearing for lack of vocations. Indifference is more fatal to us than persecution.

In the face of all this, I could now enumerate all the good and beautiful things that are happening in our regions: the effectiveness of NGO's<sup>15</sup> in creating more solidarity in the world, an awareness of the need to preserve the environment, pastoral work to help the poorest take charge of their lives, the courage of aging communities who continue to offer hospitality, a sympathetic ear, and witness to the Risen Christ, the increasing attention given to creating communion between our communities...

### **Putting One's Hope in God**

I suggest that we come back to several of these situations, and that each of us ask herself what Benedict proposes. How can we sustain our hope in everyday life?

*(cross from Hurtebise)*

As I've already said, and I'll say it again with Benedict, hope, for me, means “putting one's hope in God.”<sup>16</sup> As long as we anchor our hope elsewhere, we'll be terribly vulnerable. Hope in our achievements? Our plans? Our strengths? No! Our achievements, our plans, our strengths can light stars in our night, but they can't make the darkness go away. They might even increase the darkness with the night of pride and self-congratulation!



<sup>12</sup> Noted by Edmond Blattchen, in reading the results of this survey.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, 2 Sam. 24.

<sup>14</sup> John 12:24.

<sup>15</sup> Non-Governmental Organizations.

<sup>16</sup> RB 4,41.

“Putting one's hope in God” requires vigilance. When hope weakens, I know where to go to find the dysfunctions. If I don't regularly strengthen hope by living in His presence, by community and personal prayer, by lectio, it unravels and withers. It is in the depth of my relationship to God that my hope is quickened, even if it is night, even if this relationship is one of faith rather than vision, even if it demands a trusting abandon. It is a matter of “hoping against hope”.<sup>17</sup>



“O Crux Ave Spes Unica”, carved on so many crucifixes in our countryside, is very deeply etched in my life. Engraved as a way to open the night of this world, as a way of piercing the veil of the present, allowing a glimpse of that Which Is To Come! Hope is not to be found in just any extension of the present; it is rather an openness to the One who comes! Adolphe Gesché says, “*Hope is like that space which defies the always-too-short immediacy of the present; it allows us to write our history; it opens a way to projects fostering life, it corrects the past and allows one to change course, it sustains the courage to be, and transforms us from beings of pure neediness to beings capable of giving.*”<sup>18</sup> This space is paschal!

And Robert Scholtus, priest, writes, “*Spontaneously we see life from our own vantage point, our questions, our fears, whereas the Ascension is a call to leave, beginning with our own end, which is the eternal beginning of God. It is a call to let us be envisaged by Him who is henceforth without a visage. Feverishly, we try to shed light on our future and that of the world, as if we had forgotten that since Easter, light comes from the Future, that since the Ascension, it is the horizon towards which we are walking that lights our path, like the beams of light falling from baroque cupolas to illuminate the sanctuary. We advance into the night, lighting our paths with the torches of fortune, but if we were to lift our eyes, perhaps we would see that a hidden brightness from heaven already surrounds us. If Jesus has disappeared from our sight, it is to introduce us into the sovereignty of his presence: because God has filled him with his fullness, he is with us every day until the end of the world, and henceforth, as St. Paul says, our life is hidden with Christ in God.*”<sup>19</sup>

We must live in hope, our eyes fixed on the Lord who comes from elsewhere, and yet also from here! From now on, might we not find our strength to hope in the invitation proposed by Benedict: “to live always and everywhere in the presence of God?”<sup>20</sup>

### **Can I hold on to this hope in the midst of ambient individualism?**



Individualism is increasing in our society, and it is a source of despair. Does not the attitude of “every man for himself” disfigure our humanity at its deepest level? Is it not simply death-dealing, suicidal? Do not the numerous and growing forms of sectarianism proceed from the same stance, which refuses otherness, the face of the other, and looks in a mirror for what is identical to itself?

What can counteract this tendency, this self-serving individualism? Does our faith not lead us to follow a path resolutely open to otherness?

<sup>17</sup> Romans 4:18.

<sup>18</sup> Adolphe GESCHE & Paul SCOLAS, *op.cit.* p. 7.

<sup>19</sup> Robert SCHOLTUS, *La traversée des apparences*, (Crossing Appearances) Paris, Cerf, 1997, p.17-18.

<sup>20</sup> RB 4,49 ; 7,10 ; 19,1.6.

Constant concern for another is not an abandonment or a crushing of oneself, as certain currents of thought would have us fear. Concern for one's neighbor, in provoking openness within oneself, a breach that can cost us, is a veritable path of growth and discovery. *No Man is an Island*, title of a work by Thomas Merton, is a quote from a meditation by the poet, John Donne<sup>21</sup>. Is not wanting to live for oneself a path toward self-disfigurement? Choosing oneself as the center of the universe may well lead to a sad and stunted existence; at the same time, we recognize that humans are beings of communion, relationship and sharing.

In the light of these observations, an exhortation of St. Benedict encourages us: "*Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he lead us all together to everlasting life.*"<sup>22</sup> This is the opposite of an individualistic religion. Is not the life of fraternal love in community that Benedict proposes a path of hope, a rebuttal of the slogan, "Every man for himself"? The Christian faith that opens up a space for relationship with the Completely Other, different from fusion, the Christian faith that invites us to build communion, could it not open a path of hope for you? It is together, in communion, that we are called to Life!"

When I entered the monastery, I wanted to give my life to Christ. I wanted to love him with all my being. I believe that my desire was sincere. But God's response was equally sincere: he gave me sisters to love day by day, and now, in my pastoral mission, he gives them to me again in a more specific sense. I am increasingly challenged in our daily life by the necessity of living in communion, not only in (our monastic) community, but also with other communities, in the Church and in society.



We are members of the Body of Christ. Benedict, in wanting to establish the very strong race of cenobites, asks us to live this communion as reality. Is not our community life an offer of hope?

### **Holding fast to hope, in the face of sectarianism and fanaticism**



If individualism is a modern plague of our Egypt, it is clear that sectarianism is a direct corollary of individualism. Is not sectarianism the form that individualism takes when it is lived by a group?

In fact, there is a risk involved when we create a group: that of wanting our group to be a reassuring place, and of building a wall, a protective and secure barrier between our group and the rest of humanity. A perverted enclosure! Does not fear of confrontation, of conflict lead to an unwillingness to think for ourselves, to an abandonment of all responsibility into the hands of a guru? He'll think for us, take on all our responsibilities. Dare we say it...Does this not sometimes suit certain superiors?

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<sup>21</sup> No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or thine own were. Any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee." John Donne (d. 1624)

<sup>22</sup> RB 72,11-12.

Look at our monastic life: the community circle cannot be closed in on itself. It can only be an anchorage point for an opening to the universal: a universal composed of an infinity of very unique individuals, deeply bound together by their common humanity. If the community is turned in on itself, it can enclose itself in a practice, a religion, a sectarian life that will quickly exude stuffiness, exclusion, rejection, dogmatism, and the arrogance of knowing better than everyone else.

Saint Benedict asks us to provide for openness even in the way we organize the community. May a brother always be there, ready to open to whoever knocks at the door.<sup>23</sup> Guests should never be lacking.<sup>24</sup> This welcome should not be limited to the offer of a space for retreat, reflection or hospitality for whoever asks. A welcoming community is necessarily marked by the passage of her guests; it is challenged and called to conversion.

Benedict makes an interesting observation on this subject: if a monk from another community is visiting the community, and if, *with the humility born of charity, draws attention to a certain point and makes a reasonable criticism, the abbot shall ask himself clearly whether the Lord has not sent him specifically for this reason.*<sup>25</sup> I like this statement. It is an invitation to allow oneself to be challenged by a stranger, by another.

Should we not cultivate everything that comes to make a breach in our “self-sufficiency,” in our “individualism,” in our sectarian temptations? In this sense, every path of dialogue should be for us a source of hope, of good news!

In this way we can welcome with great joy the work of Monastic Interreligious Dialogue and the encounters at Assisi initiated by John-Paul II.<sup>26</sup> Gabriel Ringlet, for a long time vice-rector of the University of Louvain, writes: *The rapprochement between religions is indispensable, vital, not only for religions, but for the future of peace in the world. I dare to go this far. I'm convinced of it: peace between religions can play a very constructive role in the general level of peace. The more religions can talk to one another, respect one another and welcome one another's elements of truth, the more positive the effect on their relationships for today's men and women. I suggest that each religion find its rare pearl, its “seed of fire,” as an orthodox friend puts it. Each religion – Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, etc. - has a specificity. The question is: how can we offer one another the best of ourselves?*<sup>27</sup> Do we think about these things? Are we ready to share our “seeds of fire”? Sharing is giving and receiving!

Another form of openness can be experienced during the liturgy itself. Can one, even for a moment, praise the God of the Universe, Father of all people, if one is turned in on oneself? The celebration of the liturgy opens our hearts to the dimensions of the world. Its community dimension is of primary importance. What a marvel, this dialogue between the priest and the people gathered together:



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<sup>23</sup> RB 66.

<sup>24</sup> RB 53.

<sup>25</sup> RB 61,4.

<sup>26</sup> The first of these encounters took place on October 27, 1986.

<sup>27</sup> Gabriel RINGLET, *La foi de grand papa a disparu (Grandpa's faith has disappeared)*, in *Actu.be* December 20, 2008.

- *Let us pray together, as we offer the sacrifice of the whole Church*  
- *For the glory of God and the salvation of the world!*<sup>28</sup>

As long as we can express this wish with all our hearts, we can hope that a universal communion will win out over excessive individualism. We can cultivate this hope and expel sectarianism and all of its temptations.

(*Music : Mozart l'Egyptien, "Al maghfera"*)<sup>29</sup>



Another dialogue that nourishes our hope is that between cultures. I shall take only one example, but a fabulous one! After the attacks of September 11, 2001, certain people tried to spread hate between peoples, religions and cultures. A message of hope emerged through music. Two orchestras, one from the East and the other from the West, build a bridge between Mozart and the world of Egypt. Listen to “Mozart the Egyptian,” especially in the piece “Al maghfera” or “Forgiveness”: It combines the “Qui tollis” from the Mass in C by Mozart with a Sufi incantation, a Coptic prayer, and a Greek prayer. This passage is a wonderful source of hope. In the ostinato rhythm, played by all the instruments, listen to the heartbeat of our God!

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<sup>28</sup> Translation from the French edition of the Roman Missal. The English translation reproduces the Latin “for our good and the good of all his Church.”: - Orâte, fratres : ut meum ac vestrum sacrificium acceptabile fiat apud Deum Patrem omnipoténtem. - Suscípiat Dóminus sacrificium de mánibus tuis ad laudem et glóriam nóminis sui, ad utilitátem quoque nostram totiúsque Ecclésiae suae sanctae.

<sup>29</sup> Hughes of Courson (1949- ) also created an oratorio (Yam) played by 150 musicians, Jews and Palestinians. He released the first volume of Mozart the Egyptian in 1998; the second, even more explicit, is extracted from this piece and is dated 2005. For these two volumes of Mozart the Egyptian, he worked in collaboration with Ahmed el Maghraby and collected 202 singers and musicians, Arab and Conventual, East and West