

*Thus says the Lord:
“I appear to you in this Church
as once in the burning bush.
You are the burning bush.
I am the fire.
Fire in the burning bush
I am in your flesh.
I am fire to enlighten you,
to gift you with my favor and grace
in the Church.” (St. Ambrose)*

**BENEDICTINE LIFE IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM
Will it have an Impact?**

**Sr. Irene Dabalus, OSB
Workshop of Benedictine Abbots and Prioresses
Tepeyac, Mexico – February 19-21, 2000**

Introductory remarks

When a co-sister of mine and I studied German in the winter semester of the 70's in Upper Bavaria, we used to hear Mass in a little village church every Sunday. On one such Sunday we came out of the church in our long, flowing Benedictine robes and a little German boy with blond head and blue eyes caught sight of us. He pulled his mom by the hand to show her the “sight” and cried, “Mamma! Look! One whole sister and one half sister – I have never seen in my whole life.”

What were two Benedictine nuns – Asians and Filipinas, in archaic Benedictine robes and veils – doing in Germany, studying the Teutonic language in the 1970's? It was because shortly before this, Vatican II had “struck”, like lightning strikes, and the religious world was served the new task of “reading the signs of the times.” In a sense Vatican II literally exploded in the midst of the religious life in my country as we grappled with the proclamation of the conciliar exhortation on the “Renewal of Religious Life.” What followed it was a mighty tide of change in the mode of religious living. It swept us along, bringing monastic and Benedictine life to new frontiers of renewal never dreamed of by our founders before. “Reading the signs of the times” became a moral imperative to discover the Spirit's action in the midst of many and rapid movements. In our community one of the first indications of change came with theology studies abroad for our sisters to prepare us for a magnitude of changes. Thus, my co-sister and I became part of the response to the “signs of the times” which we were enjoined to read. We were then in the 1970's.

I often compared the heights and depths of those changes to the soaring Gothic spires of medieval cathedrals like in Cologne of Germany or Orvieto of Italy. The higher the

spires rose to the skies, the deeper the foundations were dug on which their pillars stood! In those days religious communities whose pillars did not sink deep into the bedrock of a religious identity and tradition – beautiful though their facades had been – were rocked by the tremors of progressive reforms in religious thought and practice. And reforms there were in those days, claiming the classic norm of *aggiornamento* (adaptation), evoking innovative response or conservative retrenchment.

When Sr. Judith Heble first proposed to me the idea of speaking at this meeting I said, “What can a little Asian Benedictine sister say to such a powerful group as this?” She said to me: “Challenge us!” Challenge American abbots and prioresses? Why? Is it because, as Chicago based- theologian John Kobler, says the Church in the United States is in a “religious malaise afflicting US Christians”¹, so also the US Benedictine family? Or: As canon lawyer Sr. Elizabeth McDonough sounds a call “for critical assessment of current practices in the light of the manifest patterns of continuing decline in religious institutes”², so, too, Benedictines in this continent? Or: as Ignatian Spirituality Center Director John Tetlow observes of today’s search for community, “a post modern enterprise, growing from the dry bitter soil of modernity’s isolation, alienation, and severe individualism”³, so also do post modern American Benedictines? Another thought-provoking question comes from moral theologian A. Josol: “Does America think that she owns the whole earth by divine destiny? Is she the modern Babylon who because of her pride is destined to disappear from the face of the earth? I am speaking about corporate America. How much is the individual influenced by this image and are there manifestations of this mental emotional construct influencing the Benedictine behavior?”⁴

I can hardly pretend to know much about American culture, much less about its religious culture, although I grew up in a country colonised by the United States and learned thus some American-Filipino English. However, let me just share with you my experiences and questions coming from another side of the globe. I hope that a challenge or two may awaken our sense of urgency as a “Benedictine family” to rally to the hour of the Great Jubilee.

An autobiographical note

Let me weave in an autobiographical note. On entering the community of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters in Tutzing in Manila after my BA studies in the early 60’s, I just had three simple wishes: to pray, to love God and to serve Him in life-long obedience as a Benedictine. My family said, “Why can’t you pray, love and serve God here with us? You want to be buried in there? You aren’t broken-hearted, are you?” No matter – I knew that I did not want to pray, love and serve God the way my parents did. It had to be total! No holds barred! That was at 18 years of age fresh from college! We who entered then, got what we wanted – long hours of praying the Divine Office in Latin, numerous lessons in Benedictine history and spirituality, strict monastic order and discipline, obedience without delay, exercise in basic humility before superiors and elder sisters. We loved the challenge and novelty of it all.

But as I said Vatican II “struck” and with it a socio-religious transformation swept across the scene of the entire religious life in the Philippines. As a social process it was turbulent and many an identity-weak religious was drawn like straw into the vortex of change. The numbers in the exodus of priests and religious peaked in the 80’s. Still, it was an exhilarating experience to have been part of a new ecclesial age.. We who survived looked upon ourselves as the “sons and daughters” of Vatican II – that event which marked a caesura in all of Church life. We were part of an era of change in all aspects in the Church – theological, moral, spiritual, pastoral and liturgical.

How we got where we are; moving into the new millennium

The Conciliar Document on the Renewal of Religious Life (*Perfectae Caritatis*) stressed two things: a return to the sources of the inspiration of the founder and an adaptation of religious life to the changed conditions of modern living. The first thing which had to go were the religious symbols of convent life which smacked of paternalism, juridicism, clericalism and triumphalism. However, there were also other symbols to be defended. The religious habit was a battleground of religious ideologies from top to bottom – from the Vatican to the grassroots monastery. My community decided in three different General Chapters to retain it as a symbol of monastic profession and of unity in our international congregation.

Thus, after Vatican II Benedictines and religious in general shed off the trappings of medieval culture in order to adapt themselves, meaning, to speak and feel the thoughts of their age, so as not to be “an utterance in a foreign tongue.” In our priory in Manila, we joined every band wagon of new approaches in human-psycho-sexual-social-spiritual development to offset the rigid, uniform and inhumane structures of past religious disciplines. I remember keeping abreast with such seminars, as serendipity training, group dynamics, T-groups, MBTI, psycho-spiritual processing, dream interpretations, Christian Zen retreats, centering prayer, Siddha yoga courses, and in recent years, enneagram spirituality.

Sr. Doris Gottemoeller says about the great strides of renewal in the last forty years of religious life in America:

In the decades after the Second Vatican Council the winds of change propelled us through some incredibly difficult terrain: misunderstandings without; polarizations within; loss of membership; lack of resources; pastoral disappointments. Along the way we have acquired an unprecedented level of academic and professional preparation for ministry (but sometimes we confuse professional achievement with ministerial effectiveness.) We have a spirituality cultivated through individual faith journeys (but we are less sure how to integrate it into a communal experience.) we have highly developed skills in group participation (but less skill in calling forth and affirming individual leadership). Overall, compared to 20 years ago, American women religious today are more grounded in charism, more self-aware as women, more appreciative of diversity,

more aware of the interdependent causes of social ills and as committed as ever to alleviating the suffering of the poor, needy and the vulnerable.

Moreover, the processes of renewal have freed and empowered us. We have eliminated irrelevant and outmoded symbols and practices. We have grown into new theological, spiritual, educational, psychological insights.⁵

I guess that these “gains” apply less to male religious, as they had enjoyed more of these and much earlier than the women did - by reason of their theological training and positions of leadership in ministry. Unlike them, women had first to get themselves to be recognized and heard in their own right. In my country one of our religious brothers of the Christian Schools who heads a university of several thousands of students moves about in corporate business like fish in water. He was appointed head of the Ministry of Education. Another religious, a dean of the Jesuit Law School was offered a post as judge in the Supreme Court on the basis of integrity and competence. Both are impeccable in their religious commitment. One accepted the post, the other refused, both for the sake of ministry. Different approaches to the right cause! Religious life in both cases was in the limelight. It was making an impact, but on whom and for what?

In the ferment of four decades of renewal there were voices, too, in my country and elsewhere in Asia, who raised a caution against levelling ourselves off with the secular and getting side-tracked from the depth questions of identity and mission. Among us Benedictines there lingered a doubt as to whether or not we have obscured the monastic message at all: an absolute search for the Presence of the Living God.

In a similar vein the well-known FORUS papers of David Nygren and Miriam Ukeritis raised a worrying question about the future of religious life in the United States.

The meaning and promise of this Benedictine moment

Today, in the year 2000, we are crossing the threshold to the third millennium, marked by a jubilee celebration, which will last a whole year. Our workshop theme relates to this event: What impact will Benedictine life make on the third millennium? Or more humbly put: Shall we Benedictines of today make at all an impact on the third millennium? There are surely “new signs of the times” which need to be read by Benedictines today. What are they? What is the Benedictine approach to renewal in a secular contemporary world? What is the identity of monastic life in the marketplace of liberal post-modern values? Where is monastic truth a piercing light into post-modern consciousness? The same questions have been already raised in previous decades and no one has given an answer that made everybody happy. Neither shall we! However, we of our age must seek our own answers – temporary though they be – like standing before the riddle of the sphinx in ancient Greece. We face the verdict: “Answer or die.”

It seems to me that monastic Benedictine life has yet to emerge with sharper and more clear-cut contours in our secular world. Are we in the world but not like the world? Or are we in the world and like the world? To my mind the answer to this has been evolving

out of a number of birthing processes. The first birthing process took place, as I have just described, in the era of Vatican II. Now another “chrysalis” event is going on – in the post-Vatican II era or if you wish, in the pre-Vatican III era. We are again in quest of a manifest Benedictine core of virtue and power, which can be seen and felt on the multi-dimensional scene of the post-modern age. The ancient monastics – our fathers and mothers in God-seeking - went to the frontiers of the desert unshakably focused on their object of life and activity – the Absolute. Their impact was magnet-like. Drawn by the same Spirit we also focus our minds and hearts on God alone – the Meaning-Giver of our entire Benedictine existence. This is the substance of monasticism to which Benedict subscribes – “*monos*”: to go for God alone. The ancient monastics in the silence and immensity of the desert had nothing externally which could deviate their focus from God. Their struggles were internal.

On the contrary, we post-moderns swim in the flood of material goods with which media and commerce swamp the consciousness twenty-four hours a day. Is this why we seem to have such a tenuous hold on this focusing power? Are we, in fact, in danger of getting a disturbed vision? Is this why we seem to be colorless, passionless, joyless monastics in the brightly colored, hard-driven, and fun-loving generation of the century’s end? The concomitant struggles of our age lie in the battle of the inner self against doubt, insecurity, ambiguity, and meaninglessness. This situation is true not only of Benedictine life in particular, but also of consecrated life, and of Christian life in general. In this situation of post-modernity, however, we are convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work to bring order, clarity and wise experience out of our insecurities and ambiguities. For where the contradictions are sharpest, there She is most active.

Herein lies the meaning and promise of this Benedictine moment – a **kairos** of the third millennium, the rare chance to push to birth a new Benedictine existence at the frontiers of renewal. In what does this renewal consist? Let me share with you something of what is being communicated to us from the continent of Asia, the continent where I come from – the continent of living faiths, the most populous one, the poorest, too, and the least Christian of all the continents.

In India where we have a little mission at the southernmost tip of Kerala, the peoples of other religions have a stereotyped image of the Christian, of the religious person and of the Church. They are, to be sure, agog over the vast achievements of the Church and of the religious in the fields of health, education, social work. Our services in schools, hospitals, social centers and charitable institutions are a byword. Those of other faiths cannot compare with them in efficiency of management and service of quality. However, when it comes to initiation and guidance into the inner life people would rather go to a Hindu or a Buddhist master – to a man / woman of God – because of his/her purity, his/her detachment and his/her holiness of life, rather than to a priest or sister.

Case 1: In 1995 we made a visit to Rajkot/India and had an audience with the head of the Ramakrishna Temple who greeted us: “Sisters, I am always happy to meet seekers of God and lovers of God.” Then he talked to us for 30 minutes about Jesus Christ as someone highly respected in his religion. His sharing came across to me as genuine, not

contrived; benevolent, not condescending. I could not have spoken on Ramakrishna with the same spontaneity and respect.

Case 2: Catholic participants of an interreligious meeting in Nepal with a Siddha Yoga community reported on their observation: “These yogists have a mystical life; their mystical experiences are part of their daily life, not just high points. They meditate several hours daily. They are already in the 10th mansion of mysticism, while we Catholics are only in the ante-chamber.”

Case 3: A religious priest professor in an elite school for boys in India related that a group of his most talented students dropped their studies to join a Hindu guru. When he asked his boys why, they said, “We have found a man of God who can teach us to experience God.” His sad question was: “Did they not see a man of God in me?”

During the Asian Synod of Bishops in April 1998, the problematic was somehow confirmed for me. I was challenged by a line in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (No. 23) which read: **“Religious authority is based not on official position, but on the religious leader’s experience of God and his ability to communicate it to others.”**⁶ My reflection was on the role of the rich tradition of Christian mysticism in the social and religious realities of our society.

Yes, where have the treasures of the inner life of our Christian Churches gone? What has become of the magnetic force of their communion with God and with the Holy Spirit so very much in place in Asia of the living religions? Alongside their glowing works of charity, justice, peace and the care for creation, is the “burning bush” of Christian mysticism not to be found among them for those who hunger for the Absolute?

Authority and leadership in the Church can nourish communion and mission among the people of God only with this “burning bush” on their holy ground. Bishops and pastors and religious are to be guides to prayer and mentors of the interior life among their flock, not just managers and administrators of institutions.

Monasteries and convents, institutes and communities of apostolic life – are they a “burning bush” of contemplation to outbalance the flashy attractions of cinema houses and mega-malls, sports centers and holiday tours, and the fun gained through the internet?

Equality, dialogue, and partnership within the ranks of our own communities, between women and men, across cultures and nations – these big words can become real in daily life only through intimacy with God in seeking his will from moment to moment. Talking and walking with him can banish the self-sufficiency of an arrogant religiosity that is still tempted to be overly juridical, legalistic, triumphalistic and sexist even during forty years of an era of renewal and reform.

Inter-religious dialogue with women/men of other faiths who are so well-versed in centuries-old traditions of prayer impel us to share with them also our treasures of the

mystical life. Those of a Benedict, Ignatius, Catherine of Siena, Therese of Avila, Dominic, Alphonsus, and other stalwarts of Christian spirituality transcend the boundaries of culture. Houses of formation for lay and religious can start their members onto a road of serious prayer. Do our own members enjoy at least an hour of meditation and communion with the Lord daily? I must confess that it is a struggle for me to give prime time to lectio divina of at least one hour in a day full of meetings and activities.

I believe that concerns about the dignity of women, due participation of the laity in decision-making in Church bodies, solidarity with the poor, and norms for partnership between women and men gain proper perspective only against the integrity of an interior life. Then, Christianity would surely be a “burning bush” on holy ground as in the days of Pentecost. Then, it can rightly offer her treasures to Asia of the many living faiths and to the rest of the world.

The “burning bush” of Benedictine Presence

Surely, the meaning and grace of this moment is to humbly ask the question: does Benedictine life have an identifiable core in secular society – or even in the face of other religions – which makes it stand out as a “burning bush” of God-seeking for which it was born in the time of Benedict? Or does it have a diffused core, with a drifting hold on its own values as Benedictine values in the modern world? As with monasteries of old, does it have the impact of a piercing sharpness of purpose in its social environment – the pursuit of holiness and justice as the predicates of the God who calls it to existence?

The meaning and grace of this moment could be the projection of our Benedictine identity as a “burning bush of contemplative presence” in ministry, dialogue and inculturation in our age. The paramount impact of Benedictine life would be in the realm of God-values where people are hungering for transcendence, searching in their life for meaning, beauty and freedom. There where the social environment is a marketplace for the offers of myriad values, our Benedictine presence might share its treasures.

Can the Benedictine presence create an alternative culture of the Spirit to the spirit of our secular culture? By an alternative culture of the Spirit I do not mean something abstract, but something very concrete. As P. Henry says: “It must be a culture in which we do not allow ourselves to be invaded by material goods.”⁷ It must be a culture which breaks the war chain. It must be a culture which prays for peace and acts for peace. More years of chameleonic adaptation to the social and political environment will not assure it of survival, but a radical “refounding” of its own identity and message in a “culture of the Spirit” will.

Creating an alternative culture of the Spirit through

- peace and non-violence,
- the globalisation of solidarity and communion,
- and equality and partnership between men and women,

The spirit of our culture and a culture of the Spirit

The spirit of our culture is the spirit of the marketplace. It has found a new and seductive term in the process and pursuit of globalisation. Its promises are clear – to bring the blessings of material progress and human development to the farthest ends of the earth. People hanker for these blessings in order to get more – hoping to be more. We have nothing against these blessings. They are gifts from God’s Providence for which we are grateful. They are so beautiful as achievements of our intellects and hearts – the media, the internet, the factories which provide us with our necessities and luxuries. Yet, like all good and beautiful gifts, they can become our idols, the new gods of civilization, the new temples of worship.

In this culture, they are also the new evangelizers and colonisers. “Together with luxuries”, says G. Plathottam, they propagate “lifestyles and a set of values and worldviews as well.”⁸ They reverse the evangelization through the Gospel, because they invade our hearts and homes with consuming needs and promote the values of the market. However, they do not change the basic structures of those who can afford and those who cannot afford. In the last analysis, they cement relationships of inequality between rich and poor, perpetuate the war chain, and lead to social distress - in fact, to the largest scale of exploitation of women ever yet known and to more and more children on the streets.

What I see happening in our world during the last fifty years is not the inculturation of the Spirit of Christ, but the inculturation of the spirit of the age in our monasteries. The same market mentality is being ingrained into our monastic system. The same habits of consumerism grow up with us and accompany us into the monastery. Our new vocations bring these along with them. The same hank for pleasure and easy living erode our stability of mind and heart in monastic living. An evangelization **in reverse** is going on in monastic life. The blessings of material progress are indeed blessings. The curse is that, lacking a discerning and critical mind we can let them subvert our spirit of conversatio, obedience, humility and zeal for the work of God – unless we go back to the culture of the Spirit, which is our Benedictine heritage.

By **the culture of the Spirit** I mean the totality of the spiritual quest for God which finds its origin and foundation in the Gospels and makes an impact on the values and traditions of our society. How did Jesus do it? St. Paul? St. Benedict? How did they show that in the face of the *Gloria Dei*, the human is insignificant as against the total creation of God as we know it? St. Benedict invites us to set all our energies on the quest for the God of life as expressed in the Prologue of his Rule (Prol. 21): “*Clothed then with faith and the performance of good works, let us set out on this way, with the Gospel for our guide, that we may deserve to see him who has called us to his kingdom (1 Thess 2:12).*” The past and present is not ours, unless we take responsibility over the meaning of human life and culture – that meaning is the risen Jesus. If we are complacent, then we have an idol god, not the crucified and risen Lord. How can we be sure that the God we worship is the God of Jesus crucified and risen? Or is it the god of economic globalisation, a new method of colonisation of the third world? I do not mean

here to bring back the “hell and brimstone” line, but the point is to shake our complacency that we may see reality. Then, Benedictine life would have an impact on the present as it had in past history. This impact was what J. Stead brings into one image: “The monasteries had been lighthouses on islands in a dark sea.”⁹

Benedict is very concrete and specific about this “culture of the Spirit.” For the monk /sister in community, Christ is to be the personal guide, not any Eastern guru or ashram mystic. He is to be the most basic need in the life and love of the monastic, like the need for light, water, air and food, to sustain him/her in the growth of the inner life. To look to Christ in all the events of monastic life is to imitate him in his “three categories of strength: “the strength of self-mastery, the strength of action and the strength of relationship.” The ultimate following is to share in his passion and suffering and so share in his glory.

To it belong the life-long commitments of the monastic profession. From a heart that is God-seeking we promise to exercise our faith, hope and love daily in a relentless “conversatio morum.” We bind ourselves, not to our ego, but to God’s will in obedience to a superior. We put our heart to the task of day to day striving in a stability of will and purpose, in good and bad times, till death. Finally, we cultivate those “habits of the heart” which ensue in silence, sacrifice, communion with God, purity of heart, humility, zeal and love of the sick, the old, the children and the poor. In relating with confreres and fellow-sisters, we create a space of freedom where it is easy for everyone to be good and to do good because we uphold the good zeal to “forerun one another “ in showing love and reverence to everyone.

In Benedict’s time, this culture of the Spirit pervaded whatever process of intercultural exchange took place between Benedict and the world outside. With his burning quest for God he entered into all the socio-economic, political and cultural reality of his world with the leaven of the Gospel, creating energies of love and compassion for a new world culture. G. Penco can rightly say:

“Monasticism produced its own culture, because it believed in certain values, it recognized definite models, created climates and institutions, texts and literary genres that reflected some of its basic concerns. Certainly, in various movements and eras this could produce tensions and reactions, but in the end, humanitas, the integral sense of humanity, won out... Above all, it was the quest for God that favored the quest for humanity, and that promoted the ‘knowledge of self...’”¹⁰

This is social transformation according to the law of the Spirit. Thus, there emerged in the Middle Ages the model of medieval-monastic mission which B. Doppelfeld terms “mission through monasteries.” It is this culture which carried the values of the Gospel through the upheavals of the “Dark Ages” and the emergent culture of the “Middle Ages”. In modern terms, we can rightly say that Benedict’s culture of the Spirit built up his society:

- in the peace of the common life
- in solidarity and communion with society and creation

- in equality among persons (the seeds of partnership between the sexes in post-modern times?).

These are in fact the three blessings, which – in my opinion – converge with the emerging movements of post-modernity:

- action for peace and non-violence as a collaborative enterprise of all peoples and nations. (including peace with all of nature)
- building communion and solidarity in a world divided by globalized poverty and the ethnic battle of interests
- establishing equality and partnership between women and men

Let me conclude this part with an Asian note on the role of Benedictine men and women in bringing these blessings to our precarious world. There is a prose poem composed in the fourth century B.C. by the Chinese poet Sung Yu, which is called the “The Great King’s Wind and the Wind of the Common People”.

It seems that Hsiang, King of Ch’u, was feasting in his palace with Sung Yu to wait on him. A gust of wind blew in and the king bared his breast to meet it, saying: “How pleasant a thing is this wind, which I share with the common people.” Sung Yu answered: “This is the great King’s Wind. The common people cannot share it.” The king said, “Wind is a spirit of Heaven and Earth. It comes wide spread and does not choose between noble and base or between high and low. How can you say, ‘This is the King’s Wind. Where is the wind born?’”

Sung answered, “The wind is born in the ground... it rages at the mouth of the pass... It rushes in fiery anger...tearing down rocks and trees, smiting forests and grasses. But at last, abating,, it spreads abroad, seeks empty places... and so, growing gentler and clearer... falls and rises till it climbs the high walls of the castle and enters the gardens of the inner palace. It bends the flowers and leaves with its breath... It pauses in the courtyard...goes up to the Jade Hall, shakes the hanging curtains and lightly passes into the inner room. And so it becomes the Great King’s Wind.

And the king said, “You have well described it. Now tell me of the common people’s wind.” Sung said, “The common people’s wind rises from the narrow lanes and streets, carrying clouds of dust. Rushing to empty spaces it attacks the gateway, scatters the dust heap, sends the cinders flying, pokes among the foul and rotten things, till at last it enters the tiled windows and reaches the rooms of the cottage. Now this wind is heavy and turgid, oppressing man’s heart. It brings fever to his body, ulcers to his lips and dimness to his eyes. It shakes him with coughing; it kills him before his time. Such is the Wind of the Common People.”

If the Great King’s Wind should ever blow across the world of Benedictine women and men, should it not be they who will bring it to their brothers and sisters in need, sharing health and refreshment, as they truly live who they say they are – sons and daughters of the monk and Father Benedict?

A CULTURE OF PEACE AND NON-VIOLENCE - the Benedictine way

A new prayer for peace – a new action for peace

The *Pax Benedictina* is our ideal and heritage. Throughout history the biblical call to “seek peace and pursue it” has fired us Benedictines and given us the role of peace builders in eras marked by conflict and confusion. Nowadays, however, the pursuit of peace calls for some context analysis. It is to be aware of the “war chain”. In a letter dated October 1998, one of our sisters in our Angola mission cites the destruction of the life and culture of the people of Angola due to this war chain.

“Loving greetings from the Missionary Benedictine Sisters here in Kuito Bie and from the villages... Kuito was totally ruined in the 1993 civil war between MPLA and UNITA. Until now the buildings and the majority of the houses are in rubbles and few can afford to renovate them. People are inhabiting these places and look for a corner to make themselves feel at home, covering the windows with blocks made of mud. No doors, and partly no roofs! Classes are held under the trees. Hospitals are overcrowded and there are no medicines for all. Death is a daily scene... So much hunger! Children have no clothes, with bloated stomachs and are malnourished. Land mines are still very much in place in the peripheries. At present we are accommodating 101 children feeding them three times a week and twice a day with some help from Caritas...”

The misery and trauma of war can be traced back to our shores where our governments pursue military policies to secure themselves. The United States, your big and powerful country, tries to justify spending \$265 billion a year on defence by saying that it generates employment. More than jobs, what the defence industry really generates is profit for a select few. We are so entrenched in these structures and policies that we are hardly touched by them. The first step in the search for peace is the awareness of this “war chain” which is forged by our own countries. Surely this new awareness calls for a new prayer for peace and a new action for peace.

I have been reading on data about our endangered earth and human species since engaging in context analysis in the 70's, as you probably have been doing, too. The facts – they are not new to you – always clutch at one's heart with the enormity of their implications and consequences. Here to cite just a few to connect us to this reality:

- Global arms spending is 2400 times higher than expenditure on international peacekeeping...
- 110 countries still practice torture...Angola has more active landmines than people...
- The permanent members of the UN Security Council (Russia, USA, France, China and the United Kingdom) are the major sellers of weapons to African nations...
- After the Persian Gulf War with Iraq, the U.S. Air Force chief of staff said “that during the 43-day Persian Gulf War US planes flew more than 92,000 sorties and dropped 88,500 tons of bombs on Iraq and Kuwait. He said the total included 6, 250 tons of precision-guided ordnance.” Since the end of the war the truth has gradually

unfolded; the outcome, near total devastation. A relatively defenceless people had lost well over 100,000 soldiers, many of them reluctant to fight in the first place. Says J. Payne, an American Dominican, “Arrogance on a global scale; high-tech killing of ‘enemies’...”¹¹

Indeed, there is a “war chain” – covert and overt – linking east to west and north to south. It consists both of active arms production world wide to supply our wars and of those policies which make war in times of the absence of war. This “war chain” is forged internationally among countries, between rich countries among themselves, between poor countries among themselves, and among rich and poor nations. It is just all-pervasive. Yet, there is a sense in which this “war chain” starts with me as an individual. It can be traced back from the whole of humankind to each one of us personally – to our own lifestyles, values and options. For the root of war is in the individual heart – in the “originating sin” in each one of us.

The Benedictine vision of life is on a collision course with just this reality when it enjoins us to reject the “evil zeal” of the heart and reaffirm the “good zeal” (RB 72). The good zeal of St. Benedict is the beginning of a “peace chain.” It calls us to build a relationship of reverence with each other and with the whole of creation. It issues into life and translates itself into a life-giving energy for our society. Its inherent dynamism – springing from faith – frees us to trust and support each other mutually. The more we experience the trust and love we have for one another, the more there is wholeness of relationships in our community, Church and country. This restoration of wholeness in our relationships is the grace we receive from Christ’s redeeming death on the cross. In this light, praying for the grace of healing and reconciliation becomes part of the foundation of our Benedictine gift of peace to the world.

Buoyed up by prayer, we can bring heart and will to a new action for peace after the example of God Himself who in the words of St. Thomas is pure act. Thus, as Japan’s Association of Major Superiors of Women Religious are determined to do, we could:

1. *“free ourselves from mindsets that bind us, so that we can see people and situations from a different perspective and learn from them*
2. *treasure the precious gift of life, our own and others, as a gift from God , and according to our community’s charism communicate the value of life to society...*
3. *respond to do all these in solidarity with all people who are working for peace with the same understanding of peace.”*¹²

Monastic poverty for peace

A test case for the pursuit of peace among Benedictine women and men is the visibility of their vow of poverty, of an unpretentious lifestyle in a culture that is impinged upon by the realities of the lives of the poor. Oscar Arias, 1987 Nobel Peace Prize winner from Costa Rica says: “We live in a world where the richest 20 percent of the population is 60 times richer than the poorest 20 percent. This is a world where 400

multimillionaires have more wealth than half of the world's population. It is an open invitation to conflict.”¹³

Have we not heard to satiety that:

- Eighteen percent of the people live in countries with a developed technology and market economy. These are the twenty-four richest nations, and their per capita GNP stood at \$U.S. 7, 046 in 1980. Nine other developed countries, characterised by a centrally-planned economy and containing nine percent of the world's people, have an average per capita GNP of \$ 3,091. The remaining developing countries have seventy percent of the world's population and a per capita GNP of \$890 (Population Reference Bureau, 1980).¹⁴
- 40,000 children around the world are dying each day from malnutrition and disease. Yet, we have within our grasp the means to save almost half of the children under five who die daily – almost 20,000...¹⁵
- By the year 2000, more than half of the world's people will live in cities. 23 “mega cities” will have over 10 million people each... Drought, hunger, poverty, unemployment, civil wars, and destruction of the environment are causing people to move to cities...

Once more Oscar Arias says: “We need leaders who possess a clear vision, who can take on the real challenges that put the peace and security of our planet at risk: poverty, injustice, illiteracy, disease, environmental degradation, drugs... We must all become less selfish, less contentious and find within our souls the necessary compassion for the poorest people on the planet.”¹⁶ This demands a new audacity for the cause of the Gospel of life, a pioneering outreach beyond outmoded clichés. It is in fact a new spirituality whose old name is “solidarity with the poor.” More than just compassion, more than just having a heart for the poor, solidarity with them translates into action for them and on their behalf.

If we want to have something prophetic to say to a world in which the rich oppress the poor, if not personally, surely structurally, we have to be prepared to share our resources with communities and missions less well off than we are, who in fact are struggling for survival. They are hidden in the bush missions of Angola or Namibia, in the distressed communities of China and India, or in the hidden pockets of poverty in the big cities. Is there a Benedictine way of awakening the sense of urgency to respond to this reality? Is there a Benedictine way of being advocates for God's suffering people, esp. women and street children, the first victims of an era of globalisation? Is there a Benedictine way of tracking down hidden “poverties” in our big cities and letting our Benedictine “wealth” make a difference in the life of the poor?

Our **ora et labora**, I think, needs translating into conversion/transformation of the inner self and the monastery structure to meet the needs of the apostolate for peace. The *lex orandi* is really not *orandum* at all until it becomes a *lex vivendi*. The transition from word to flesh is one way of looking at reality, the other way around, flesh to word, is another. Some of our communities, our monks and sisters, are already following the *lex vivendi*, by the witness of a life lived among the poor. This is a new reality which is

really conversion in process. This has to be articulated in words. So one begins from life, since that is where the Spirit is, in creation, in exodus, in Deborah and Miriam, in Judith and Mary and Magdalen, and of course, in each one of us. We remember that God is pure act. S/he gives life first and then one begins to understand what is already there. The Spirit worked on Mary first, and then only did she sing her *Magnificat*.

It is always like that with our life and ministry with the poor. Revelation happens in the process of conversion to what is good, life-giving, life-caring and life-promoting, whatever incarnates the richness, immense goodness and unutterable beauty of the Spirit. I'm saying: articulation comes only after living the true, the good and the beautiful – after a lived witness. Only then is peace.

Somehow we have a panoramic view of the life of our sisters and monks throughout the world. Let us begin from life, where the Spirit is moving them and then understand, sift, analyse, discern life and not form dead words. I think this is the point Jesus was referring to when he said: if you do not believe in my words, believe in the deeds. Let us try to palpitate with the flutter of life among our sisters and monks in the field and our communities will become alive and sensitive to the hushed movements of the Spirit, passing softly among us. Only a praying heart is alert to her soft and feather-like presence. Always respecting our freedom she/he does not intrude, often just envelops without concealing, like the air we breathe. Then and only then might we be able to discern the growth of peace in our communities and in our world.

I am struck by what E. McDonough says: "...whatever may be the work of religious in the world, it is far less significant than their credibility in the world's eyes and that this credibility will always be threatened until they do what they profess."¹⁷ Consistency! When people in China, India, Bulgaria and Africa see and feel and experience our credibility we will keep going and we will get vocations. There is nothing like life-witness. They are in fact talking of closing shop in France, Belgium, and Holland. Vocations are up in South America and Asia.

As Benedictine leaders of peace-building -

1. What do we need to change in our own first-world lifestyle so that others can live?
2. How are the poor received / helped in our communities?

The common life for peace

Today's work for peace and non-violence has a Benedictine formula - conversion to the *coenobium* – the common life. There has never been a short cut to peace except through selfless living. Call it by any name, there can be no selflessness without some commitment to the old reality we called "sacrifice" or "self-denial." I do not now want to re-establish a martyr-spirituality, which signals some trace of masochism. Rather, it is to seek the meaning of Christian peace in the blueprint of Christ's kenosis. Leadership for peace building is committed to this.

A sense of the ethos of self-giving is the first thing caught by the candidate who presents herself/himself before our door. I recall the story of one of our Korean candidates who was awaited by the community on entrance day. When the prioress met her at the door, the young lady was fully laden with her possessions, one of which was a grand baby piano. At that moment it became clear to the prioress that the young lady would have to know: either she came to become a religious and give up the piano or to stay away and keep the piano. Of course, it was not a question of negating the musical gift that she had, but to give objects their proper place in common life. This candidate later became the prioress of her priory and until today serves as the organist of the community.

With the onset of existentialism, humanism and scientific analysis in our modern age, many blessings came to us, which liberated us from the magical thinking about religious life, from rigid and uniform structures, immature and childish obedience, and inhuman, even unhealthy monastic disciplines. We “upgraded” valid human needs and experiences, which had long been repressed and sublimated. However, all blessings are mixed and we have to look for the mix. While enjoying free choice, personal creativity and self-fulfilment - the outstanding values of the present monastic generation -, we have slid into a “**soft asceticism**”.

It is a blessing in monastic life that we may now choose our careers – first, second, third -, as we feel are in accord with our interests, go on holiday excursions for rejuvenation, form our own religious communities along career lines, go after professionalism in our work, and structure common prayer as the situation dictates. The mixed blessing is that this freedom, so much respected in the Holy Rule, can couple itself with the sickness of our age – individualism – and de-focus us from the Benedictine vision – God, participation in the kenosis of Christ, and option for the common life which calls us to common worship and service. The question is: in shifting from certain archaic and medieval malpractices to more humane ones, have we – perhaps – become more configured to the secular, more at home now with the comfortable life brought about by high technology and the attractive consumer world? In my round with the abbesses and prioresses of the Benedictine Order these past years, I sense a spiritual stirring towards getting more clarity about depth issues in our monastic life. It seems that the reform model of the past forty years after the Council, which appreciated human needs and experiences has to go through a critical self-assessment. There is again a thirst for the maturing values of silence, “self-denial” (for lack of a better term to use), and basic humility as against the soft asceticism, the other side of the blessing brought about by an overriding focus on personal fulfilment

Something of this de-focusing is true in some of our experiences with the school ministry in the Philippines. Our sisters who run schools of 3000 - 6,000 students have it from morning till evening. Unless they are rooted in the Benedictine core of values, which they professed, they would be caught in the inner contradictions of many liberal freedoms which are alien to Jesus’ Spirit.

Actually, **asceticism** - the Benedictine way - is built into the structure of the common life. Common life, if truly lived, is a critical factor in our society where individualism and aggression are nourished by the marketplace from dawn to dusk. What can be more individualistic and aggressive than the promotion of a “full stomach, full sleep and full enjoyment” globalized through media and commerce? Our conversion as monastics to common life contradicts these modern meaning-carriers when we seriously pursue St. Benedict’s formula for the good zeal: “They should be the first to show respect to the other...” (RB 72: 4). This is our lived formula for peace – the Benedictine contribution to the fight against war. Our monasteries have a multiplier effect for peace wherever we are alive with a strong sense of the Spirit’s energy of selfless love in coenobitic living.

And this is where abbots and prioresses come in – as promoters of **conversion to the common life**. Abbots and prioresses are leaders in the process of social transformation as rooted in conversion to Christ and His Church.. Can we ourselves profess to the personal experience of a conversion to the common life, how this shaped us and became a crucial part of our own history, how it affected our inner selves, inner world, and inner convictions? If monastic life has brought us real transformation, it would affect the cognitive and affective as well as the performing aspects of our persons, leading us to a protest, to a challenge of the social environment where this clashes with our deeply sought ideals, orientations and values for peace. As we can see, conversion/transformation for peace – the Benedictine way – does not go for “**soft asceticism.**” It is a conflict-laden reality of death and resurrection. The experience can of course go either way: death dissolution or death resurrection.

A culture of communion and solidarity in the Benedictine ethos

Another piece of vocabulary which signals the culture of our newly-ended millennium is “globalisation.” With the march of our existence to the drumbeat of science and technology, informatics and speed communication, we have shrunk the world into a “global village.” The many good gifts of material progress has been “globalized” by telecom for everyone to see even in the farthest nooks of undeveloped Africa and Asia. Like all good gifts they are signs of divine favour and have to be given back to God in gratefulness and worship.

However, it is the reality of “globalisation” in the economic sense, which is objectionable. Its slogan “Not just big! The biggest!” has transformed itself into a magical wand of economic successes: big capital, intercontinental mergers, chips technology, multinational goods and unlimited foreign markets. However, in its wake is the deluge of moral bankruptcy: bigger and bigger poverty quotas, unprecedented victimizing of women and children, sharpened competition and conflict between rich and poor, and a show of gun power in spheres of interest of tribes and countries.

On the opposite spectrum of this marketed globalisation, the “**communio**” model of the Church flowing from its Trinitarian source has emerged at Vatican II. I call this “communio” = (cum-unire) “together as one”, a gift of the Spirit to our world at this time

of marked disunities. Now more than ever the Benedictine way of life, a “communion” in common life, common worship, and common work, can come up to check the excesses of our contemporary culture. This holds true provided we too are not enamoured of the flash and fancy of the market.

The values of “listening” and “reverence” bring us to the core of the work for communion and solidarity. These two attitudes at the heart of the Rule of St. Benedict predispose us to it. I think of the globalisation of communion and solidarity as strengthening the three weakest links in the chain of natural and human relationships: **creation, the poor and the women.** Benedictine life in its truest cannot but be prophetic, announcing the good and denouncing the evil. Communion will then have the following characteristics: **It is creation-centred. It builds a “passionate and compassionate” alliance with the poor. It aims at equality and partnership between women and men.**

Communion is creation-centred.

The Benedictine monastery is well-known as a presence where the individual person is revered, nature and civilization flourish and the beauty of art cultivated. A creation-centred communion is very much a characteristic of a culture of the Spirit. It tilts the balance from a technological capitalism which relies on rationality – mathematical and computerized - to the passionate relation with all that there is.. For everything is included in God’s love, except sin. Without a humanizing compassion, the economics of capitalism results in disaster – the debt (death) and the ecological bomb!

- More than half of the world’s tropical forests have disappeared since 1950...
- Each year about 23,000 sq. miles of fertile land turns into desert (and there’s farm land turned into golf courses for the wealthy and covered by concrete for parking, airport runways)...
- If greenhouse gas emissions were apportioned equitably among the world’s countries (3.5 billion tons just of carbon dioxide), each Kenyan citizen would be entitled to a 1000% increase. U.S.A. citizens would have to decrease theirs by 90% per person...

We are not all active reason taking in everything, overcoming, dominating, categorizing, constructing, making. We are not all dominion; we are also passion, passive and acted upon, dependent and relying; subject to and begging from the bounty of the whole of creation. And creation is not in the mind only. It is there and has its own logic and laws not made by humans but created by God. What a message to live by: that the environment, the elements of the ocean, the trees and the air are greater than we are and are worthy of reverence. The West must learn from the East to respect the integrity of the whole of creation.

Reason alone cannot find the solution to the problem of environmental suicide - the recognition of our dependency on nature, on the environment. Lower than the angels but still the crown of creation we cannot renounce our responsibility over creation without renouncing our dignity as God’s image. The rejection of God inevitably brings with it the

destruction of the human and the environment (cf. Is 29:15-23). Without God we turn the world upside down and inevitably, instead of becoming the masters of creation, we shall be destroyed by the environment we ought to cherish. We gape in dismay at the Swiss multinational companies with their mountains of cheese thrown away, polluting creation for the sake of the golden calves. Inanimate things like power and gold are not apt medium for projecting human dignity and honour. And the paradox of it all is that only God can fill the human heart's ache for completion and fulfilment. And S/He is future.

We can ask questions of St. Benedict, our own monastic hero. What was St. Benedict's self image? Where did he situate himself in creation, in society? What was creation to him? What was the earth to him - water, air, fire, ice, snow, wheat, clothing, and so on? What was his life of poverty like? How can we communicate his life of lack of private ownership, his use of goods to satisfy needs? Can we say: promote the healing power of plants, promote fasting and prayer? Don't use paper napkins, they destroy trees? Eat vegetables and fish, but no meat? No violence to plants and animals? Creation is a reflection of God's goodness to us. Can the practice of poverty be translated into the economic sphere, community life into social life and charity and chastity into interpersonal relationships? I think that that would be the translation of Benedictine spirituality as a counterculture to globalization. My hunch, of course, is that the way out of the ecology disaster is the living of the monastic way of life. So we have to popularize St. Benedict.

As Benedictine builders of communion:

1. How can we motivate/challenge our communities (and family members, friends, students, co-workers and acquaintances) to live simply, in harmony with the earth, to be converted to a life similar to that led by St. Benedict?
2. How can our liturgies and our personal contemplation shape us into persons who radiate joy in creation, and who work for peace and justice wherever we are?

Communion is a “passionate and compassionate” alliance with the poor.

Way back in the 70's when we were struggling against the totalitarian regime of President Marcos, I went through a baptism of fire in our work with the urban poor in Manila. The poor were mostly factory workers and slum dwellers who were jobless or underemployed. My idea about helping the poor was theoretical, detached from my person, content to give them food and money to tide them over in their daily struggle to make both ends meet. Once – during Easter week on the day of the gospel of St. Thomas - a group of these workers came to the convent to dialogue with the sisters about labour conditions in their factories. The sisters just had a beautiful sharing on the doubting Thomas. Then one of the workers told us this story. There was a Chinese painter who loved dragons so much he painted them all over the place – in the rooms, ceilings, walls, floors, and doors. He painted them big and small and middle-sized. They came in all colours – red, white, blue, green, aqua, and purple. One day a friend who came to visit him asked, “Why do you paint only dragons?” He replied, “Because I love them!” Then they heard a roaring and hissing outside of the house, so loud that it filled the air with

ominous sounds. The friend looked out of the window and saw that a huge dragon was spewing fire and smoke outside. He said to the painter, “A dragon has come to see you.” On hearing this, the Chinese painter ran away in fright.

The factory worker concluded: “Sisters, you say you love the poor, the Church is a church of the poor, but when the poor come to you, you run away.” I looked into the eyes of the storyteller. There was something in those eyes – a Divine Presence. An inner barrier broke down in me. It was the moment of my conversion to the poor – concretely, to those poor. In one brief second, I sensed a call – to recognize the Divine Presence in the least of the brethren – the weakest link in the chain.

The poor person’s call to us is a call to holiness – to wholeness – to the source of all life – his/hers and ours – God. I realized that in the person of the factory worker our Lord was asking me to recognize him under a new *hermeneutic*. Like St. Thomas, the doubting apostle, I was asked to respond in a new way to an event – to believe in the Lord’s presence in the poor. Wounds, wounded hands and pierced side, suffering, pain and death are the symbols of the Risen Christ. The awareness of pain and death in the lives of the factory workers is an assertion of Christ’s redeeming action. Our protest against them is an act of faith in the Risen Christ. Our transformation in compassion and deeds is a witness to His Risen Life. Hence, the presence of Christ in the poor and our response to Him – and the poor – are like a two-edged sword – redeeming and judging. We are either evangelized by the poor or judged by them and found wanting. In my life the poor became interpreters of the Risen Christ – thanks to St. Thomas and his doubts.

The Rule of St. Benedict to me is an Easter-Rule, centred on the Christ of the Gospel (Prol 21; 50). It gives many indications of a delicate sense for the Presence, God shining in the eyes of the weak, the sick, the poor, the guest, the pilgrim and the children. One has only to look in the eyes of a brother or sister and the experience of the Presence wells forth. This - for me - explains the high plane of spiritual living which followers of the Rule embrace. Truly, a gospel call in this moment of our Benedictine history asks us to convert ourselves to communion with the poor of our times. In accepting the human dignity of each person, there must be “a focus on those who are poorest.” I now turn to the cause of women who for millennia have been made poor and kept poor in their humanity.

Communion aims at equality and partnership between women and men.

In my bid for an alternative culture of the Spirit I turn to the “**woman question**” as an arena of quality decisions. Quality, in the sense that to build communion with women in equality and partnership has crucial consequences for humankind, cutting across races, creeds and cultures. The women (and children) are some of the weakest, if not the weakest, links in the chain of communion.

Benedictine abbots and prioresses are, of course, conversant with the woman question after some forty years of a very determined feminism on the American scene. Way back in the 60's our good professor Karl Rahner called the women's movement, along with those of liberation and ecology, one of the potent "signs of our times". Without professing a feminist or activist creed, we know that the woman question impacts on the millennium we have just ushered in, because it is not only a personal question of the promotion of women's rights. It is also a social one -the dismantling of the structures of patriarchy which are unjust and sinful. For all the gains of the women's movement in the past forty years we still see the subordination, domination, oppression of, and discrimination against women in the home, at the workbench, in society and the Church. It is mightily entrenched in our structures and is a structural injustice – the sin of sexism. If there is no justice – then there is no temple, no Church, no worship, no sacrifice, no Eucharist that can bring down God's loving favour on His people.

Of course, there are as many conceptions of women's equality and partnership with men as there are peoples, tribes, and cultures. In a meeting of Benedictine monks in Germany on the topic half a year ago, the question was raised by a monk from the missions: "You mean, we may not even beat a woman anymore?" The plight of women all over the world is sufficiently documented by many Conferences of Bishops since the Synod of Bishops on the Laity in 1996. It is not a matter of lack of knowledge but of love and action. It is reminiscent of the story of a sculptor who made three statues so identical to one another you could not tell the difference. He called in a friend and said, "What do you see?" "They all look alike," he answered. Then the sculptor took a piece of thread and pushed it into the nose of the first statue. Nothing happened. He took another piece of thread, led it through one ear of the second statue until it came out of the other ear. Again, nothing happened. Then he took another piece of thread and slipped it into the mouth of the third statue. Suddenly, it started to move and walk. The thread had reached the heart! We act when our hearts are touched.

Is there a Benedictine way of responding to the "woman question?" St. Benedict speaks of hospitality in the Holy Rule to be accorded to the stranger and the poor who come into the House of God. A. Boeckmann traces the root of the word hospitality to its origin in Greek **Philo-xenia**, meaning, love for the stranger and the poor. Its equivalent in Latin is **hospes** which is friendship directed to the stranger, and the needy. In a real sense, hospitality means befriending one who is alienated and isolated from his/her culture, home, family and community, even God. H. Nouwen regards this term as one of the richest biblical expressions to help us deepen our relationship with others, recognizing their dignity and giving them a space of freedom to be. Thus, hospitality is not just the polite practice of receiving guests at the portery, serving them coffee and engaging them in conversation in a comfortable sitting room.

Benedictine hospitality appears to me to be that basic attitude, which recognises the dignity of each woman or man or child – as a beloved of God, bearing His image. In building communion between women and men in equality and partnership, one speaks nowadays of empowering women. Such would be Benedictine hospitality, affirming women in their self-esteem and "feminine genius". At the same time, it affirms the men

to full humanity, thus, facilitating the unfolding of the whole woman-man image of God in both sexes.

Benedictine hospitality, thus, leads to a healing process for women, binding up the wounds of centuries of violence against their dignity, transforming their experiences of bitterness into sweet solace. It creates space for the sacred, the contemplative, the space to be present to the “Presence”, giving women a “constant awareness of the absolute within us who is the inexhaustible source of joy, love, and energy and makes us committed but carefree” together with the men.

Such a communion between women and men would model what Benedict envisions in RB 3 on calling the brethren for counsel. It would be a communion where power is shared, that most difficult of detachments, sharing in letting go of dominance and control, so that the other may live. How about giving the Benedictine women equal participation in the Benedictine Confederation – for a starter?

Conclusion

During the last forty years Benedictine men and women have been part of these tidal-like movements for peace, justice and the wholeness of our earth, for the liberation of the poor and the empowerment of women. I am thinking, for example of “Benedictines for Peace” in the United States or the option of the Benedictines of Mexico to be on the side of the victims of Chiapas or the Benedictine effort in the Campaign against the Exploitation of Third World Women in women trafficking, prostitution, mail order brides and migrant workers in Asia. The work facing us is great and the odds against us are even greater. I would like to end this part of my presentation with the story of Evelyn Underhill on the “Tiny Birds”.

Migration is not an easy thing or a pleasant thing for a tiny bird to face. It must turn deliberately from solid land, from food, shelter, a certain measure of security, and fly across an ocean unfriendly to its life, and destitute of everything it needs. We make much of the heroism and endurance of our airmen and explorers. Perhaps someday man will rival the adventurous hope of the little wren and the chiffchaff; an ounce and a half of living courage, launching out with amazing confidence to a prospect of storms, hardship, exhaustion – perhaps starvation and death. Careful minds would hardly think the risk was worth taking. But the tiny bird, before conditions force it – not driven by fear, but drawn by Hope – commits itself with perfect confidence to that infinite ocean of air; where all familiar landmarks will vanish, and if its strength fails it must be lost. And the bird’s hope is justified. There IS summer at the other end of the perilous journey. The scrap of valiant life obeys a true instinct, when it launches on the air. It is urged from within towards a goal it can attain; and may reckon the suffering of the moment not worthy to be compared to the glory that shall be revealed.

The life force behind the Benedictine renewal can be interpreted by Evelyn Underhill’s migration of the tiny birds. The decision, which confronts the tiny chiffchaff, is one that faced the Benedictine world some forty years ago. We were spurred by an

instinct - based on our faith – to launch into the world of renewal and transformation. It was a moment of great courage. From the start it was no easy flying, like the small bird without feathers battling a might tornado. There was only one option, getting swallowed by that might power, the might of the love of Jahweh, and becoming one with it.

Today some forty years later, that initial original instinct to take wings to be free has carried them through some perilous flights on their journey to transformation, with some successful mileage to look back to. Summer is not yet. The goal has yet to be reached and pain suffered through. However, there is no turning back for the risk is worthy of the disciples of Christ in the spirit of St. Benedict in bringing about transformation –

that in all things God may be glorified!

Focusing questions:

1. **Do these priorities / experiences / concerns speak to your concrete situation? What other priorities / experiences / concerns would you identify?**
2. **What aspects of Benedictine life do you consider the most important for consecrated life at this time? What would help their growth? What obstacles would hinder their growth?**
3. **Is there a Benedictine way of promoting peace, solidarity and communion over against the aggressive realism of science and technology, globalised violence and rugged individualism of the day? How do you do this in your concrete situation?**
4. **In the face of our “celebrated and rising diversity”, how do we maintain a coherent identity?**
5. **As leaders of peace building what do we need to change in our own first-world lifestyle so that others can live?**
6. **In our Benedictine family (Confederation) what do we need to do to initiate a Cultural Revolution with regard to our understanding of the humanity of women? To exorcise the entrenched macho relationship between women and men? Not only to accept the truth of equality intellectually but also to learn to live by it, difficult as it is? To make cross-gender intercontinental dialogue on women a part of the process of building an alternative culture of Benedictine life and mission?**

¹ J. Kobler, *Catholic International*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 1999, 286.

² E. McDonough, “The Need for Self-Criticism”, in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 255.

³ J. Tetlow, “The Experience of God in Consecrated Life during the 20th Century”, in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 57, No.5, 1999, 503.

-
- ⁴ A.M.C. Josol, Moral Theology, Unpublished Manuscript, 1999, 1.
- ⁵ D. Gottemoeller, "Apostolic Religious Life: Ecclesial Identity and Mission, in *SEDOS*, Vol. 26, No. 10, 1994, 302-303.
- ⁶ Special Assembly of the Synod of bishops for Asia, *Instrumentum Laboris*, 1998, 18.
- ⁷ P. Henry and D. Swearer, *For the Sake of the World. The Spirit of Buddhist and Christian Monasticism*, Minnesota: Fortress Press, 1989,
- ⁸ G. Plathottam, Christian Mission in the Third Millennium and the Information Superhighway: Challenges for Evangelization, in *SEDOS*, Vol. 31, No. 4, 1999, 124.
- ⁹ J. Stead, *Saint Benedict. A Rule for Beginners*, New City Press, 1994,
- ¹⁰ G. Penco, The Monastic Life in the Thought of Dom Jean Leclercq, *ABR.*, 50:1, March 1999,
- ¹¹ T. Rowe, *The Boston Globe*, March 22, 1999, 14.
- ¹² *AMOR*, Oct.-Dec. 1996, 2.
- ¹³ *Newsweek*, May 19, 1997, 56.
- ¹⁴ M. A. Neal, *The Just Demands of the Poor – Essays in Socio-Theology*, New York, Paulist Press, 1987, 28.
- ¹⁵ Ad sponsored by *Children's Vigils*, in *The New York Times*, September 30, 1999.
- ¹⁶ *Newsweek*, May 19, 1997, 56.
- ¹⁷ E. McDonough, *ibid*, 255

REFERENCES

- Barron, R. *And Now I See...A Theology of Transformation*. New York: A Crossroad Book, 1998.
- Bellah, R. et al. *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*. California: University of California Press, 1985.
- Bishops' Institute for Laity on Women (BILA), *Resolutions and Recommendations*, 1995 and 1998.
- Caza, L. "Apostolic Religious Life as Spiritual Therapy for Humanity: How? Under what Conditions?" in *UISG Bulletin*, No. 110, 1999,8-26.
- Cencini, A. "New Heavens and a New Earth: Consecrated Life between Pilgrimage and Prophecy" in *UISG Bulletin*, No. 110, 1999, 27-49.
- Kobler, J. *Catholic International*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 1999, 286.
- Dall'Osto, A. *Religious Life in the United States: between Crisis and Rebirth in UISG*, No. 109 / 1999, 3-9.
- Faria, S. *Women and Men in Dynamic Partnership for Social Change in In God's Image*, Vol II, No. 4, 1992, 45-55.
- Federation of Asian Bishops Conference (FABC) Plenary Assembly 1986, 1990, and 1995.

Finke, R. "The Rewards of a Costly Religious Community" in *Review for Religious*, Vol 56, No. 4, 1997, 412-426.

Frigge, M. "Reflections of a Monastic Feminist" in *American Benedictine Review*, Vol. 50, No. 2, 1999, 121-147.

Gottemoeller, D. "Religious Life: Where Does It Fit in Today's Church?" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 57, No. 2, 1998, 146-160.

..... "Community Living: Beginning the Conversation" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 58, No. 2, 1999, 137-149.

Isenring, Z.M. Die Frau in den apostolisch-taetigen Ordensgemeinschaften. Freiburg Schweiz: Universitaetsverlag, 1995.

..... "Einholen" und "Ueberholen" der modernen Kultur. Orden und Wertewandel in *Ordenskorrespondenz*, Vol. 37, No. 2, 1996, 145-159.

John Paul II, Letter to Women, June 29, 1995.

....., *Mulieris Dignitatem*, August 15, 1998.

Mananzan, M. J. "The Challenge to Women Religious in the Third Millennium", *Conversatio*, Vol. XXIX, No. 7, 1998.

..... Benedictine Values and the Woman Question (manuscript: talk given to the General Chapter of the Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing, 1994).

McDonough, E. "The Need for Self-Criticism: Affirmative Comments" in *Review for Religious*, Vol. 58, No. 3, 1999, 251-260 (here, 255).

Moussa, H. and Taran. P. Globalisation in *Echoes. Justice, Peace and Creation News*. Vol. 12 / 1997, 5-34.

Prado, S. Asceticism, *Conversatio Morum*, Stability and Community. Anthropological Considerations of Key Elements of Monastic Life. A Manuscript. Rome: Pontifical Gregorian University, 1999.

Prior, J. M. "Apostles and Martyrs: Consecrated Life at the Bishops' Synod for Asia in *Review for Religious*, Jan.-Feb. 1999.

Russel, L. *The Future of Partnership*, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1979.

Schalueck, H. "Erinnerung und Prophetie". Ordensleben an der Schwelle zum Dritten Jahrtausend" in *Ordenskorrespondenz*. Vol 39, No. 2. 1998, 129-1433.

Wilfred, F. "Human Rights or the Rights of the Poor? Redeeming Human Rights from Contemporary Inversions" in *Sedos*. Vol. 31, No.4, 1999, 99-107

EXODUS 3:1-5; 9-12

Moses was looking after the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law, priest of Midian.
 He led his flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb,
 the mountain of God.
 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in the shape of a flame of fire,
 coming from the middle of a bush.
 Moses looked; there was the bush blazing, but it was not being burnt up.
 "I must go and look at this strange sight," Moses said,
 "and see why the bush is not burnt."
 Now the Lord saw go forward and look, and God called to him
 from the middle of the bush.
 "Moses, Moses", he said.
 "Here I am," he answered.
 "Come no nearer," he said. "Take off your shoes,
 for the place where you stand is holy ground.
 I am the God of your father," he said "the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God
 of Jacob."
 At this Moses covered his face, afraid to look at God.

And the Lord said,
 "And now the cry of the sons of Israel has come to me, and I have witnessed
 the way in which the Egyptians oppress them,
 so come, I send you to Pharaoh to bring the sons of Israel,
 my people, out of Egypt."

Questions from Brother Hermann Schalueck, OFM

1. Are we the presence of the Risen Lord in the world?
2. Are we the voice of the poor seeking to be heard in a world that is structurally unjust?
3. Are we a cry for justice that is not easily silenced?
4. Are we the signs and "sacraments" of a compassionate God?
5. Are we the alternative to greed, nationalism, consumerism, racism, upward mobility?
6. Are we peacemakers, with peace reigning first in our own hearts and in our own Institutes?
7. Are we a word of hope, a song of encouragement and hope for those who need courage?
8. Are we caretakers of our Mother the Earth?
9. Are we the gatherers of the alien, the stranger, the widow, the orphan, the migrant, the asylum-seeker, the unemployed, the forgotten?
10. Are we a sign of a reconciled Church (the question of being an international Institute...)?
11. Are we that special gift to the Church which calls it back to its initial love and discipleship? (SEDOS bulletin 1994, "Our Identity is Mission", 281-288, here 288)