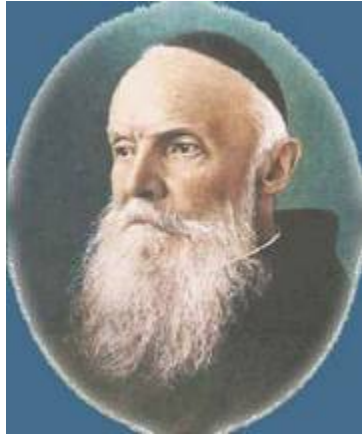


S T A T I O C O N F E R E N C E
ON THE FOUNDATION OF THE CONGREGATION
By Sr. M. Irene Dabalus OSB – Manila Prioray



On September 24, 2009, the Congregation celebrates its **125th Jubilee of foundation**. Once again it is a chance to remember the roots of our congregation, trace its unfolding and look at the full blossoming tree with gratitude and delight. Through all the vicissitudes of the decades, we have weathered mighty and small storms with God's loving hand at our side. In the words of M. Angela : "All our prayers, reflection, activities and celebrations will aim at our renewed taking over of the **founding grace** given to Father Andreas and our foremothers. Therefore we chose the theme from the Gospel of John, 1,16 :

"From His fullness we have all received, grace upon grace!"

HISTORICAL NOTES

It is but fitting to focus our gaze again on the man who started it all. Fr. Andreas Amrhein, the founder of the congregation – St. Ottilien and Tutzing – clung to a dream and never doubted that this dream was what God wanted. He visualized a foundation in which monastic calling and missionary endeavor would "compenetrate" each other and bring new light in "lands which do not yet know Christ." This was our "founding grace."

We know his story, the brave journey of one man crossing the lines of demarcation between a revered Benedictine tradition of the German Abbey of Beuron and an uncertain and obscure monastic-missionary beginning in the forsaken cloister of Reichenbach. As all beginnings in the history of the Church, his were laced with pain and suffering, both from internal strife and external opposition, until his institute was recognized by Pope Leo XIII on June 29, 1884. We know how his own story was marked by a personal failure for which he paid with separation and exclusion from his institute and the monks he had loved so much.

Thus, the words of Fernao Pessoa, a Portuguese poet, rightly fit the story of his life and his foundation:

GOD WANTS IT - MAN DREAMS - THE WORK IS BORN!

Today we can look at his legacy as the blessing of a loving Providence against all odds. The congregation has spread far and wide throughout the five continents, with ours as a “twin” to the congregation of St. Ottilien. Having inherited the very essence of his dream and vision, we Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing prize our double calling as monastics and missionaries with all the challenges and profound tensions which such a life brings. We lay claim to those ideals emblazoned in all of our documents:

- To be a monastic and a missionary.
- To live in accordance with the Rule of St. Benedict under a superior and in mission
- To combine the common life of a “monk” with missioning to active apostolic ministry.

(adapted from the history of the congregation by Sr. Bernita Walter OSB, *Sustained by God’s Faithfulness*).

Mother Birgitta Korff – “foundress” of Tutzing?



Alongside Fr. Andreas Amrhein another name appears who is intimately bound with our unfolding history as Missionary Benedictine Sisters of Tutzing. She is Mother Birgitta Korff, a native of Northern Germany, who as our first superior-general left the stamp of her own spirituality on the young congregation for twenty-five years. Sr. Caridad Barrion used to say with

passion that it was Mother Birgitta who “founded” Tutzing in its most difficult years. However, all accolade was given to our founder Fr. Andreas Amrhein as the originator of our charism when Sr. Katharina Scheyns left us. I would like to “recognize” Mother Birgitta here, because she has not been – to my estimation – consciously featured and acknowledged in our feasts as the one who steered the ship of the congregation in the difficult years of transition from the mission site in Emming to Tutzing.

Who was Mother Birgitta?

Mother Birgitta was born on January 25, 1868, at Mülheim on the Möhne River, in the diocese of Paderborn, according to the necrology written by M. Angela Boedecker. In baptism she received the name of Gertrud. Having lost her father in early childhood, she learned unshakeable trust in God from her widowed mother. This mother trained her and her other brothers and sisters in exact and prompt obedience. Mother Birgitta could thus say in later years: “I didn’t have to learn obedience in the monastery; I had learned it at home.” Gertrud Korff had a keen sense of God’s call for her and entered St. Ottilien on August 2, 1889. This was just half a year after our first missionaries sacrificed their lives at the mission in Pugu /East Africa in January 1889.

What was she like as a person? The necrology recalls: “To her companions in the novitiate she became a shining model from the very first day. She was noted especially for her great

conscientiousness, joyful obedience and unassuming manner. On May 26, 1890, the feast of Christ's Ascension, she received the holy habit and the name of Maria Birgitta. On the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29, 1892, she was allowed to consecrate herself forever to her divine Bridegroom."

Her early years saw her:

- entrusted with the weighty charge of the kitchen in the first years of the foundation which demanded of her "prudence and a spirit of sacrifice."
- developing her musical talents at the harmonium and the singing of the chant with her gentle and full voice.
- leading the second group of missionaries for Africa in 1894.
- becoming prioress in Dar es Salaam and later in the new foundation in Lukuledi with all the privations and trials of pioneer work, especially in the face of lack of water..
- getting elected unanimously to head the entire congregation on September 17, 1895.
- accepting during her 25-year term the profession of 320 sisters, 266 of whom served in the missions.

What characterized her office and accomplishments?

Here I copy profusely from the necrologist who attempts this character sketch.

"Mother Birgitta was a "strong woman" indeed, probably one of the strongest pillars on which God built our congregation as it exists today. The secret of this exceptional strength and firmness was the total God-orientation of her striving. Whenever the Benedictine ideals were at stake—the fitting praise of God, the family and congregational spirit, or the maintaining of monastic discipline and extension of God's Kingdom on earth—she knew no wavering, no hesitation, and no human respect. She was equally clear in her testing of religious vocations.

In governing her ever-growing monastic family, our spiritual mother of so many children benefited greatly from her native practical sense. Verse after verse of the "Golden Alphabet" could be applied to her untiring, well-planned and joyous work.

The third ideal of the "strong woman," charity, which Pius X so fittingly called "motherliness in the wider sense," can be seen as expressed in Mother Birgitta's life by her great missionary zeal during her service in East Africa, during her years at the head of the congregation, and also in the evening of her life, her last ten years. Our foreign mission was her dear vineyard, to which all her thoughts and cares, her prayer and suffering was devoted. As long as she was still able, she typed laboriously, with one finger of her gout-swollen hand, her letters to the mission. And when her voice was barely audible, she still spoke, dictating her messages to individual communities and sisters.

During World War I, she sent 86 of her daughters to nurse the wounded and sick heroes, inspiring them to fulfill this Samaritan's service in the noblest possible manner. "Serve each soldier with great respect, as though he were your own brother!" This motto, and the Mother's blessing, prayer and sacrifice together with God's grace gave all of them strength and support amid manifold difficulties and dangers; not one of them, not even a postulant, failed to remain faithful to her vocation in this critical time and situation.

We will always remember the spiritual works of mercy to which our good Mother Birgitta devoted herself zealously all her life. She instructed the ignorant, counseled the wavering, and guided the confused into the right path. "She opened her mouth to speak wisdom" and was ever eager to lead us, by her instruction and the faithfully offered conferences on Sundays and feast days, to the fountains of eternal life and true interiority, zealous fulfillment of duties, and sacrificial enthusiasm for our vocation. She loved to draw on the rich treasury of the liturgy for doing so. Shortly before her death, Mother Prioress in the name of all of us asked her for some words of farewell. She whispered with great effort: "Observe the silence; it is the basis of the interior life—practice sisterly charity; it is not yet fully done—humility--love of sacrifice, love of sacrifice, love of sacrifice."

Now we still need to look at the fear of God, the fifth ideal of the "strong woman," in the life of our dear deceased Mother, working to perfect her own soul. Just as Mother Birgitta always called those entrusted to her to sanctification of self, to truly seeking God in the spirit of St. Benedict, as their first task, so she also gave us the best example in this respect.

Though she had been trained from her youth in prompt obedience and her strong Westphalian nature easily accepted this "courage turned inward," her religious life still was rich in situations where the practice of this virtue cost heavy sacrifices for her. She always referred to accepting the election in 1895 as the greatest and most difficult sacrifice of her life. At her voluntary resignation in December 1920, she said during a chapter meeting: "It was not because of being tired of my office that I took this step, but for the welfare of our dear congregation. I was not moved by anyone. What I did was done in obedience to the dear God, who inspired me to do so. I trust that in laying down my office I am just as much fulfilling God's will as I did when accepting the election, when I only and solely considered the will of God. I accepted the office in obedience to God, though it was exceedingly hard for me, and now I lay it down, again in obedience to God, even though it hurts me very much to loosen the sacred bonds which unite us."

Mother Birgitta zealously treasured the "precious good of obedience" with the double weapon that Christ himself placed into our hands when said, "Watch and pray!" Mother Birgitta daily devoted a considerable amount of time to spiritual reading and regular Eucharistic visits.

Mother Birgitta had a special regard for nocturnal prayer. In 1899 she obtained permission for the Motherhouse for solemn observance of First Fridays by exposition of

the Blessed Sacrament by day and by night, and in 1917 she initiated that we atone and pray in this manner for the needs of Church and our country each Friday.

Mother Birgitta was no exception to the human right of having faults. "To be human means to struggle," and each one of us witnessed how persistently she struggled. It happened that her choleric temperament caused her to excess zeal. But true to her motto, "Failings against love must be repaired by humility and love," she would, with a very natural simplicity and without finding excuses, acknowledge her failings and ask forgiveness.

"Grateful love had been the true sun in her long years of suffering. Visiting her sick companions, she kept encouraging them to be grateful and never tired of listing our great advantages as fortunate dwellers in a convent compared to God's other sick children out in the world."

She now lies buried in the crypt of the Maria-Hilf-Convent in Tutzing (Maria Hilf means Mary, help!) where many of her daughters had preceded her. She was laid to rest at around 9 a.m on May 24, the patronal feast of the Maria-Hilf-Convent, with Fr. Archabbot Norbert Weber officiating. "The mercies of the Lord I will sing forever!" sounded out the psalm at her funeral.

Like many a forgotten foundress she has not been properly chronicled with all that she had done for the congregation in the 25 years of her office. However, one thing stands out among such chosen spiritual leaders: their steadfast spirit of prayer and their life of sacrifice for the others.

OUR JUBILEE CHALLENGE

The meaning and promise of this 125th year of our foundation

Today, in the year 2009, we are again crossing the threshold to another 25 years, marked by a jubilee celebration which will last a whole year. What impact will Benedictine life in our Priory make in the coming 25 years? Or more humbly put: Shall we Missionary Benedictines today have a choice as to what legacy to leave behind us? What is the Missionary Benedictine approach to renewal in our secular contemporary Philippines? What is the identity of our monastic life in the marketplace of liberal post-modern values? Where is missionary-monastic truth a piercing light into our society? In education? In political action? In social advocacy? In the coenobium?

It seems to me that our missionary-monastic life has yet to emerge with sharper contours in the world we live in. Are we in the world but not like the world? Or are we in the world and like the world? We are again in quest of a manifest Benedictine core of virtue and power, which can be seen and felt in the "clamor" of the sisters for a radical renewal, one that goes to the roots. 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 want to set 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 misdirected and disturbed in our contemplative priority with the work-driven and fun-loving generation of our new century? In this situation of post-modernity, however, we are convinced that the Holy Spirit is at work to bring order 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 – the **kairos** of our 125th year of foundation – , the rare chance to push to birth a new Benedictine existence at the frontiers of renewal. It is barely three years after our centennial as a priory and yet, there is this clamor of radical renewal. In what does this renewal consist?

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 religious 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. Those of other faiths cannot compare with them in efficiency and 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 a sister. Might this be an indication of going back to the roots?

PRESENT ACTUALIZATION

Our Congregation Jubilee is for us like a “Reflection on the Mirror”

The reflection is ourselves. The mirror is the series of activities and events since our last election chapter at the beginning of the third millennium. These events and activities projected to us an image of who we are. Looking at the mirror is an attempt to capture a deeper understanding of where we are now and to grasp some implications of the challenges we are facing at the moment that will be haunting us for sometime.

Where We Are Now

We are now into the first year after our election chapter and of our 11th Manila priory chapter held in January 2009 and April 2009 respectively. Since that time we have been holding renewal days in every community to start a process of “radical renewal.” “I have a strong hunch that now we are beginning to feel an incipient fire in our belly.” What has aroused us? We are beginning to be aroused by a number of events. Let me make a summary review of the events we went through. The Preparatory Commission for the 11th Priory Chapter of the Manila Priory sent out study guides and questionnaires for the communities to reflect on for the election chapter.

- The communities went into cluster retreats from September-October 2008 with a discernment process guided by Sr. Mary Macdonald.
- The formators-superiors’ retreat also went through the same process.
- In the election chapter of January 2009, M. Mary John was re-elected as prioress,

- Subsequent superior-formators' meetings defined the implementation of the mandate for radical renewal of the priory to be the task of the Priory Government in the immediate future.

The Priolympics and the election chapter were joy-filled events. They came and went. What was significant was that we felt the “sting of the Spirit”. We felt the power of the Priory as an instrument of the Spirit to still be capable of rousing us to faith and fidelity. The priory chapter stirred strong emotions among us. It mandated a radical renewal of the priory in its 11-point message, summarized by M. Mary John’s closing remarks in three paramount concerns for renewal and deepening:

- Our distinctive Benedictine monastic culture,
- Practice of simplicity of life style,
- and our option for the poor. (Social orientation of the apostolate)

At the present moment

This is our mirror and in this is our reflection. Might there be a lack of passion in the way our mandate is being implemented? Are we invigorated while participating in meetings but tend to ignore or forget what was seemingly resolved with enthusiasm while together? With all the gatherings and sessions carried out by the Priory Government and the superiors, has there been a change in the day-to-day life of the sisters and the communities? The actual decisions and recommendations are good, but are we slow or even “dragging” in living them out seriously?

I end this reflection of ourselves and the mirroring of our activities by reverting to the sonnet which probably Sr. Irmengard Bachen wrote at the passing away of Mother Birgitta. It contains the reflection of her witness as light and fervor. The mirror of her activities was given above. This great woman continues to challenge us in our search for our own identity in the new age that has begun.



In Memory of Mother Birgitta

*You were destined to give us light and fervor,
 Like the Easter candle in the house of God.
 And though your radiance is extinguished here on earth,
 It burns all the more brightly above.
 The radiance of God’s glory must not cease:
 Eternal light is surrounded by a chorus
 Of endless jubilation: glory, honor, praise!
 Light, love and praise is the goal of all being.
 You, who now have gone into eternal light,
 Do not forget your children in the land of shadows
 And fan our desire for God into flame,
 Let us prove ourselves in all you gave to us
 And every hour gird ourselves with the robe of light
 Already here on earth, preparing like you, for
 transfiguration!*