

# CONVERSATIO 2007



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St. Scholastica's Priory  
Manila

Dear Sisters,

The first reading and the Gospel of the first Sunday of September is about humility. It is a tricky—thing this virtue of humility, because if one is not careful one can unwittingly be guilty of “humility with a hook” which as you know is to seemingly make deprecatory remark about oneself expecting the hearers to insist on the opposite. In the Gospel, when Jesus says go to the last seat and most probably the host will invite you to the first seats, he is not saying go to the last seat IN ORDER that the host will invite you to the first seat. You go to the last seat because you genuinely believe that there are other people more important than you. (Strangely, in the Philippines, nobody wants to get the front seat in assemblies or conferences and I doubt very much if it is humility that is the reason for this.) Another strange thing about it is that one cannot truly be humble unless one has something one can be proud of! Think about that. In other words one has to have a really healthy self-esteem to truly be humble, otherwise any form of abasement is subservience, servility, or character weakness. Humility is a clear-sighted assessment of oneself—of one’s strengths and weaknesses. And if all our giftedness comes from God, how then can we boast of them as if they were our own? When we have this self-knowledge, then we know that sitting in front or at the back does not have anything to do with what we are so we become genuinely indifferent to it. Then we will also not be overly sensitive about people’s regard or perception of us. Then we will not have the urge to prove ourselves right, to be acknowledged, to be honored. So maybe, another word for humility is clear-sighted knowledge of ourselves.

Lovingly yours,



Sister Mary John Mananzan, OSB

# STATIO CONFERENCE

## OUR MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY

by Sister Pia Lansang, OSB

### I. “PROCLAIM”: WYD in Manila

In 1995 the World Youth Day (WYD) was held in the Philippines. The memorable event is still vivid in my mind. *The setting:* the Luneta Grand Stand in Manila. *The opening scene:* Pope John Paul II in the midst of hundreds of thousands of young (and not so young) people from all over the world. *The action:* animated cheering, clapping, singing and praying; and myriads of small golden flags held aloft, swaying gracefully in the wind. A veritable mass of humanity gathered together in the name of Christ, proclaiming and celebrating our Christian faith.

I still remember that beautiful song on this occasion, “Tell the World of His Love”, composed by *Trina Bellamide*. Its gentle and haunting melody and accompanying “choreography” matched the enthusiastic spirit of the crowd. Later, in our own SSC grounds, administrators, teachers, staff and students would sing the same song. Everybody held hands at liturgical celebrations, “dancing” together and singing these words --



<i>For God so loved the world, He gave us His only Son Jesus Christ our Savior, His most precious One,</i>	<i>He has sent us His message of love, And sends those who hear To bring the message to everyone In a voice loud and clear.</i>
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*Refrain:*

*Let us tell the world of His love  
The greatest love the world has known.  
Search the world for those who have walked astray.  
And lead them home.....*

*Walk every step, every mile, every road*

*And tell the world, tell the world of His love!*

The WYD: -- So much joy and vigor; such energy, enthusiasm and fervor! What great zeal to proclaim God’s love to one another and to the world! This same “WYD-passion” was evident in Rome and other places prior to the Manila event. It was repeated recently in Cologne, Germany in 2005. And it will surely repeat itself next year, at the WYD 2008 in Sydney, Australia.

While many of us can no longer compete with the physical exuberance of youth, I do see something in that WYD enthusiasm and dynamism. There is “that fire” that I long to re-ignite in my heart for our call to mission today. This month being September, we commemorate again the foundation of our congregation of Missionary Benedictine Sisters 122 years ago (September

14<sup>th</sup>) and the foundation of our Manila Priory 101 years ago (Sept. 24). Perhaps something of that ardor and intensity of WYD could characterize our collective resolve

### **TO DEEPEN OUR MISSIONARY BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY,**

which is the first of the Four *Direction Statements* given by the General Chapter of 2006 (*cf. Message, p. 10*). The goal is to re-discover our unique vocation of combining Benedictine monastic ideals with missionary service. (*cf. Proclaim 2007, p. 8*).

In line with the theme of our 2006 General Chapter, “*Consecrated for Mission*,” this *Statio* conference will focus more on some of the missionary dimensions of our Benedictine spirituality. Our own recent Manila Priory Chapter of 2007 states

*Unlike the purely apostolic congregations, we put emphasis on choir prayer, lectio divina, communal life, and communal apostolate. Unlike other Benedictine communities, we do not confine our ministry within our walls but respond to the call of mission even to the ends of the earth (“Proclaim 2007”, p. 8).*

Our founder, Fr. Amrhein and our first missionaries, as well as the subsequent pioneers who were sent to various countries of the world, were deeply imbued with our monastic ideals combined with missionary zeal.

How do we, today, re-awaken this zest and spirit for mission while responding, first and foremost, to the “*summons to a deep interior renewal*” (AG VI, 35)? How does our liturgy, choir prayer, and *lectio* strengthen our commitment to Christ and the mission of the Church today? And how does this monastic-Benedictine spirituality animate our particular apostolates that we may proclaim the Gospel more effectively in our times?

## **II. THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD AND MISSION**

Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation “*Ecclesia in Asia*” (EIA) says:

*“The more a Christian community is rooted in the experience of God which flows from a living faith, the more credibly it will be able to proclaim to others the fulfillment of God’s Kingdom in Jesus Christ”. This will result from*

*\*faithfully listening to the word of God;*

*\*prayer and contemplation;*

*\*celebrating the mystery of Jesus in the sacraments, esp. the Eucharis;*

*\*giving example of true communion of life and integrity of love (EIA # 23).*

Love -- the love of God and neighbor -- tops the list of tools of good works of Benedict (RB 4:1-2). The first letter of John clearly describes the inseparable love of God and neighbor. *For those who do not love a sister or brother, whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen (1 Jn 4:20b)*. God can be experienced in love and service, and those who abide in love dwell in God and God in them (1Jn 10:4b).

It is God's Love that impels Benedict's disciples to walk the narrow road and to pursue the fullness of life, and to live in community under a Rule and a Superior. God's love will motivate the monastic to a life of prayer and contemplation, *Lectio Divina*, mindfulness, obedience, and so on (cf. RB 5:10-13); 7:67-69).

### ***Contemplation and Action***

Mission is to be considered as both contemplative action and active contemplation. It is easy to see how the most active of missionaries are often those who, at the same time, are deeply steeped in prayer and contemplation. Prayer, as our primary mission as Benedictines, has a powerful missionary dimension in that it can embrace all of humanity in its brokenness. Seeing the human suffering all around us with God's eyes moves us to acts of compassion. Through prayer we become God's instruments of His grace and healing. How do you see "contemplation and action" in relation to our Benedictine *Ora et Labora*? Can you draw some concrete parallelisms between the two?

### ***Seeking God, The Benedictine's Lifelong Mission***

A most central aspect of our Missionary Benedictine vocation is our lifelong task of SEEKING GOD. Our quest for God is a *universal* quest which is so real even today, in our highly technological age. How does this universal human quest fit in today's world with all its scientific advances and material gains, awash with consumer goods and comfort? How is our vocation of Seeking God, the only permanent value, generate a counterculture to such values as gross pre-occupation with wealth, prestige, power, etc.? What situations in our society today speak to us of the reality of the hunger for God, even in the secularized milieu of the highly developed world? How about our own lives? Have we as Benedictines committed to a God-oriented life (theocentric) found true peace, contentment and joy in God?

## **III. OUR BENEDICTINE VALUES**

One time, during a Retreat on "Benedictine Values", a participant came up to me and said:

*"Now I understand what a writer once said. Learning the Benedictine Values is like taking a sip of wine. But since there are so many, you can get intoxicated."*

One could also look at it this way. Through years of striving to live the Benedictine values, they gradually mature in our values become more precious. When we ourselves have so become *the wine* transformed "our wine" invigorate our share the wine of our warmth lost and abandoned? How can the darkened corners of the Christ to the poor and needy?



"wineskins." And like wine, these as time goes by, like vintage wine. internalized these values, we for God's own purposes. How can missionary work? How do we and hospitality with the lonely, the the wine of our love bring cheer to world, revealing the presence of

How can our Benedictine values bring to others that distinctive taste for Christ and His Kingdom? How can these values become a more potent means to preaching the Good News of salvation in all the aspects of our apostolates? How do we find effective ways of sharing our Benedictine spirituality and values with our mission partners? How can these Benedictine values influence their work as leaders, parents, community organizers, and so on?

What actually makes our Benedictine values so precious? Benedictine values are Scripture-based and as such, they teach us how to live a good Christian life. Like signposts, these values direct us on our way to God. And while we continue to struggle with the discipline of Benedict, these values challenge the human spirit towards reaching the fullness of our human potential.

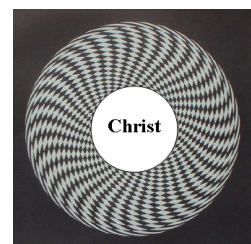
Our Priory Chapter 2007 identifies a total of 13 of the core Benedictine values in our chapter document (*“Proclaim”, pp. 10-11*), with an assignment to the communities to study these values, considering 1) our times; 2) our being missionary; and 3) our particular apostolate.

The reflections presented here will focus only on four of our Benedictine Values, namely, 1) *Christ-Centeredness*, 2) *Ora et Labora*, 3) *Community*, and 4) *Conversatio Morum*. The study intended for our communities will presumably have to deal a bit more extensively with each of our Benedictine values.

There are two articles which specially inspired me in my reflections: 1) the “Ten Hallmarks of Benedictine Education” drawn up in 2006 by *The Association of Benedictine Schools* in the U.S., and 2) A Talk by *C. Strange* to a college institution in Ohio, entitled “A Benedictine Spirituality and Engagement.” Both papers deal with Benedictine values specifically in relation to the educational apostolate. However, this conference goes beyond the context of our schools. It has to be noted that our own schools in the Philippines have, over the years, been incorporating the Benedictine values in the formation of teachers and students. Benedictine values are a well appreciated topic for school seminars, workshops and Recollections.

**1. Christ-Centeredness** (*“They prefer nothing whatever to Christ”, RB 72,9; “the love of Christ must come before all else,” RB 4:21*)

To Benedict Christ is not just one of the core values. He is the VALUE par excellence. Christ, as the center, is the pivotal point of my life. *RB 4:21* says “*Christ’s love must come before all else.*” And out of love for Christ the disciple will observe good habits and will delight in virtue (*cf. RB 7:67-69*).



When Christ is at the center of our lives things fall into place: our prayer, activities, and our apostolate. It is in Christ that we gain the proper perspective of what we do. *Christ is the beginning and end of all I do.* From Christ, the center, flows all direction, meaning, and substance in my life. From Christ comes my strength and the effectivity of my mission. My entire life is committed to Christ. With Paul we can say “*For me to live is Christ.*”

Over lunchtime, one Sister was sharing with me about how our late Sr. Caridad Barrion, OSB (who had a creative gift for getting her point across) would say to the young ones in the Novitiate “Small things” you are “*big-ging!*” I think it’s all about keeping the proper

perspective, and learning to focus on what's truly big and important. The other way around, we should not be “*small-ing*” the “big things”. So, if there is anything that should loom biggest in our lives as consecrated women, it is Christ and our relationship with him.

### *Some Implications for Mission*

How does our community manifest its Christ-Centeredness? How do I personally manifest Christ-centeredness in my life? How does *Christ's ideal of love and service* become a reality in our own lives, and in the lives of all we work with? How do we, as a *School of the Lord's Service*, concretize this Christ-Centeredness in our daily life and become a community of loving service in our society?

*\*\*Note:* At the end of this article I am sharing with you the late Abbot Willibrord van Rompay, OSB's Characteristics of *A Christ-Centered Monastic* which are based on the RB. He also gives us the characteristics of a *Christ-Centered Community*. However, the latter is actually only a summary of *RB 72 (The Good Zeal)*, so there's no need to print that text here. The question to ask is how our lives as Christ-centered monastics and as Christ-centered communities create an impact on our individual communities. What Christlike habits and behavior do we have that people today would immediately recognize in us the marks of a Christ-centered community?

### *The Christ-Experience*

The apostles' experience of Christ was from “up close.” They “knew” him; spoke, ate, and worked with him. They shared his life and mission. Yet one day these disciples had to be accosted with a personal question of who Jesus was for them. “Whom do you say I am?” At another occasion, Jesus says to Philip “So long have I lived with you and you do not know me?”

Daily, in our life and mission, each one of us is faced with this same question. Who is Christ for me personally? When and where have I personally encountered him? Without *the Christ-Experience*, the individual is incapable of committing her/his life to Christ.

In the context of our present times I could ask myself: Who is the Christ whom I proclaim? In what circumstances of my work and activities, have I experienced a non-Preferential Love of Christ? Can I describe a concrete situation where I was confronted with a choice between Christ and something else?

## **2. Ora et Labora**

### *Primacy of Prayer* RB 8-20; 48-52

All of Benedictine life and activity begins and ends with prayer “First of all, when you begin a good work, *pray* that God may bring it to completion.” Our Benedictine Spirituality has its emphasis on liturgy (Eucharist, Divine Office), Lectio, community, etc. Each day in our monasteries starts (Lauds) and ends (Compline) with our common divine praise in the

Liturgy of the Hours, for which we gather several times a day. No other activity supersedes prayer. It is our first concern because from it depends the efficacy of all our missionary activities. Vice-versa, we bring our work to prayer to glorify God who sanctifies all we do.

Our 2006 General Chapter defines our identity in the context of the primacy of prayer and our mission:

*“Unlike the purely apostolic congregations, we put emphasis on choir prayer, Lectio Divina, communal life, and communal apostolate. Unlike other Benedictine communities, we do not confine our ministry within our walls but respond to the call of mission even to the ends of the earth.” (Proclaim 2007, p.8)*

### ***Liturgy as Proclamation***

The liturgy, as the official prayer of the Church, is the highest form of our prayer as Benedictines. Our common divine praise in the *Liturgy of the Hours* bears witness to the *priority of giving glory to God*. Our Divine Office, therefore, is in itself a proclamation of faith (*cf. Constitutions III, 2-3*).

What is the meaning of our Benedictine prayer in the context of our mission? The heart of our Liturgy of the Hours is the praying of the psalms. The psalms reflect the whole gamut of situations in our human existence. *The cry of terror, the groan of pain, the sigh of contentment, the gasp of awe are all expressed in the prayer of the psalms (J. Sutera)*. So are the human situations of enmity, injustice, despair and evil. Whether we pray the psalms of pain and laments, the psalms of praise and thanksgiving, or the psalms of confidence and hope it is God speaking to us in the realities of our times. We complain about our own fears, but we also bring before God the fears and tragedies of people in the world. In all this, we proclaim the power of God, who continues to be involved in the history of humankind, and works for our salvation.

### ***Some Implications for Mission***

How do the psalms speak to us in today’s context of globalization, in a world of violence and terror, of continuing war in Iraq and the Middle East, and other parts of the world? How do the psalms of exile become relevant prayer in the face of racial discrimination, the migration of peoples, our own OFW’s in their “homelessness” and struggle for a better life? How does the hunger and “famine” of millions of people in many parts of Asia and Africa provide a human face to our prayer as Missionary Benedictines?

In summary, we can say that our missionary prayer brings us in solidarity with all who suffer and weep. We plead to God to deliver us and the world from evil. In our prayer we carry the burdens and sufferings of people in their failures, disappointments, and in all the still unredeemed situations of our lives.

*Meaningful Ways of Inculturating Our Liturgy* (Direction Statement 1a, p. 10, Message of the Gen. Ch. 2006)

Our General Chapter enjoins us to “look for meaningful ways of inculturating our liturgy as an invitation to people to participate in our prayer life”. To implement this resolution, our recent Priory Chapter enjoins us to come up with vernacular versions of the Divine Office of some important feasts (*Proclaim*, p. 13). This effort towards linguistic inculturation is a good start in the context of sharing our Benedictine prayer with local groups.

Even if English is generally spoken in our country, there is a different impact on people when they can pray and sing and express their faith in their own language. In 1994, the Liturgical Commission of the archdiocese of Manila, prepared the first Tagalog translation of the Morning and Evening Prayers found in the Liturgy of the Hours, for the use of local groups. The book is by G. Diwa entitled: “*Panalangin ng Mga Kristiyano sa Maghapon.*”

Some of our own Sisters have composed parts of the Divine Office in Filipino. In terms of participation in our liturgy, there are, of course other laudable developments in our schools and other institutions, such as the praying of parts of the LOH by students, etc. But we cannot deal with them here in detail. In view of all this, the challenge for us Missionary Benedictine Sisters still remains: how can we strengthen our liturgical apostolate, specifically, that of bringing the liturgy closer to the lives of our people through training, formation and participation?

### ***Lectio Divina***

Our *Lectio* is an integrated form of reading, reflection, prayer and contemplation on God’s Word in the Scriptures. It nourishes our liturgy which draws heavily from the Scriptures in its selection of readings and use of canticles, psalms). RB 73:3 says

*“What page, what passage, of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?”*



Through *Lectio* we strengthen our relationship with Christ whom we proclaim, and we deepen our understanding of his life and message. The Scriptures provide me with the standards of service to God’s people, following the example of Christ.

When I was on mission in Namibia, Abbot Justin, OSB who once served us temporarily as convent chaplain shared with us a contemporary aspect of *Lectio*. He encouraged us to read the three books of *Lectio*. The first and eminent book is of course the Bible. The second is the “Book of Life.” How do we “read God” in the day-to-day events of our lives? God’s Word can cast its light on all the circumstances we encounter in life. Herein is a big opportunity for our missionary service, by being mindful of the events that transpire in people’s lives and bringing these into our *Lectio*.

The third book is the “Book of Nature.” All of nature reflects our life: the cycle of birth, growth, decay and re-birth. Nature’s need for preservation, for ecological healing points to

our own need for inner healing. Yet, here, too, our mission is to proclaim God, -- in this case, in the beauty, order, and marvels of His creation.

In the context of our apostolates, one could ask “How do we share our *Lectio* with others?” How does my daily practice of *Lectio* bear fruit in my life and mission? How do I lead others to a greater appreciation of the power of God’s Word?

For us Benedictines, the daily movement between common prayer (*liturgy*), *Lectio* and work can be summed up in being “Called from Worship into Service.” A 1901 Text by A. Bayly reads as follows:

*Called from worship into service,  
Forth in your great name we go,  
To the child, the youth, the aged,  
Love in living deeds to show.*

*Hope and health, good will and comfort,  
Counsel, aid, and peace we give,  
That your children, Lord, in freedom  
May your mercy know, and live.*

### ***Manualia***

Recently I watched a short power point presentation of Sr. Angelica Leviste, OSB on our “Missionary Benedictine Spirituality” in the context of SSC’s Mission-Vision 2007-2009. What struck me were the pictures of students down on their knees scrubbing the floor, students doing garden work, cleaning canteen tables after eating, etc. The school’s present objectives are “Go, SSC! Go ...Serve others, Save the earth, Seek peace and pursue it!”

As before it must be a tough challenge to communicate this value of *manualia*, especially to students in a middle class urban setting, where the average household has domestics to do the “dirty work.” And yet engaging in *manualia*, starting with our own example, is a way of imparting the dignity of manual labor.

Our 11<sup>th</sup> Gen Chapter says in its Message “We should realize that we are missionaries wherever we are and whatever we do: in our prayer, work, and suffering.” Even household work, cleaning, cooking, sewing, etc. are forms of proclaiming and witnessing to God’s love in a community. Living in a community where many Sisters are engaged in school administration, teaching, counseling, social work, nursing, etc. the Sister doing menial tasks around the house is just as valuable a part of our Benedictine community and certainly an important part of our common mission.

### ***Manualia and Our Solidarity with the Poor***

The Philippines has millions of OFWs, especially those who are employed as servants and domestics in Hongkong, Singapore, Italy, Spain etc. How many of them sacrifice their professional degrees and spend long hours doing household work in order to feed their families at home?

In what ways do I see my practice of Benedictine *manualia* as solidarity with the poor? Taking into consideration the nature of my



own present work, age, and state of health, what is my actual share in household work in my community, in spite of available help from domestics? Do I find time to do manual work around the house? What is my reaction when certain work emergencies arise in the community which require extra help from me (substitution for absent Sisters; unexpected guests; big feasts?)

In the context of your apostolates, (urban, rural; working with the rich, poor, etc.) to what extent is “manualia” practiced in the homes of those you serve? Can you find effective ways and means to communicate better to others the dignity of work?

### **3. Community**

We could start with a short prayer.

*Lord God, give us hearts that unite us as one community with no divisions and no exclusion. Grant this through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Community-building continues to be extremely important in our lives as Benedictines of today. Even the way we speak bears this fact. We speak of “CBS” – “Community of Benedictine Sisters”; “Sisters’ Community” to distinguish it from the “School (lay) Community.” We talk about “community spirit”, “community apostolate”, a “community Day”; a “community outing” etc. The early church was a “community of believers” who shared everything in common. What images and symbols are evoked in my mind when we speak of community? The sense of community is what we *actually feel* (sometimes not expressible in words) inside the walls of our convents. So, in the final analysis, it is the experience of caring relationships within the house that counts. We belong to one another, and are engaged in a network of support, trust, and service, first, to one another and then to the larger group outside. As fully constituted members of our community, we participate in shaping the culture and history of our group and become a part of it, such that when we are absent, or we leave, we are missed.

Benedict’s kind of monks are those who live in community. *Cenobium* = community (*cf. RB 1:1-2*). They are those who live together in community under a Rule and a Superior. Benedict saw his monasteries as small representations of the Church, “*ecclesiolas*”. Historically, the monastic foundations had served the people of God as the image or icon of the ideal community as exemplified in the Acts of the apostles. The characteristics of living together as brothers and sisters, and the way of service, which are both fundamental characteristics of the whole Church, found their eloquent representation in the monastic communities. (*cf. Garcia Paredes, p. 36*).

Benedict’s ingredients of successful Christ at the center. It is a life of others; mutual respect; bearing each patience, and putting the other’s



community living lies in having listening, anticipating the needs of other’s weaknesses with greatest interests above my own.

### ***Community and a Variety of Characters***

RB 2 refers to variety of temperaments in every community which challenges the Abbot to respect the uniqueness of each one in the group.

The qualities required of the Abbot applies to each member of the community, especially that of knowing how to adjust to different characters. This adjustment calls for the skill to approach each one according to her circumstances. The young are to be dealt with differently from the elderly, the sick differently from those who are well, and so on. “People skills” demand that we do not discourage others to the point of “crushing the reed,” and not to overwork anyone that she/he be disheartened and falls away.

On the congregational level, accepting our internationality and our differences in culture, education, and ways of looking at things can make community less of a burden and turn it to a celebration of blessings, e.g., enrichment through variety, unity in pluriformity.

### ***A Variety of Gifts***

Rom 12:4-7 points to our mission for the common good amidst the variety of the Spirit’s gifts, ministries, and services. All these gifts are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.



Ephesians 4:7-12 tells us how each of us was given the grace according to the measure of Christ’s gift. The gifts he gave were that some would be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ,...

### ***Some Implications for Mission***

Can you identify some gifts which you consider particularly relevant to our mission in the world today? In what ways do my qualities as a feminine individual enhance my missionary service? How do these qualities (listening, nurturing, hospitality, warm relationships) influence the community I serve?

In the context of our institutional apostolates, e.g., education, health, socio-pastoral etc. how can we promote unity, cooperation and a good community spirit among the religious and lay staff? How do we strengthen the ties that bind us together as a community centered on Christ? What are the characteristics of a good community inside a classroom? Within a social center? How does one create a community within a hospital set-up, taking into consideration out-patients, and outreach programs?

### ***4. Conversatio Morum***

“*Conversatio morum* encompasses our whole life as Missionary Benedictine Sisters; it is the way of following Christ in religious community under the guidance of the Gospel. This way

demands of us continual striving for conversion, ever trusting in God's mercy" (*Constitutions II, #2*).

It is easy to talk about conversion. As they say, "Talk is cheap." It is better "to walk the talk." So we have to put our deeds where our mouths are. It is one thing to speak about *the need to change*, but it is something else to *actually change* and be converted.

For a little example from the local scene, I am reminded of a 2007 UP Commencement speech which I read with great fascination. It is by Mikaela Irene Fudolig, summa cum laude, BS Physics, with a GWA of 1.099. She is only 16. She was admitted to UP at the age of 12 as a gifted student, bypassing high school. Allow me to quote a bit extensively here some of my favorite lines from that speech:

*We have been warned time and again. Our new world that they call "adulthood" is one that's full of compromises, where success is determined more by the ability to belong than by the ability to think, where it is much easier to do as everyone else does....*

*Today the nation needs brave, defiant pioneers to reverse our nation's slide to despair. Today, we must call upon the spirit that beat the tracks. Today, we must present an alternative way of doing things.*

*Do not just take courage, for courage is not enough. Instead, be BRAVE! It will take bravery to go against popular wisdom, against the clichéd expectations of family and friends. It will take bravery to gamble your future by staying in the country and try to make a prosperous life here. It might help for a start ....*

*Do NOT just be strong in your convictions, for strength is not enough. Instead, DEFY the pressure to lead a comfortable, but middling life. Let us lead this country from the despair of mediocrity. Let us not seek to do well, but strive to EXCEL in everything we do. This, so others will see us as a nation of brains of the highest quality, not just of brawn that could be had for cheap.*

*Take NOT the road less traveled. Rather, MAKE new roads, BLAZE new trails, FIND new routes to your dreams.....Explore possibilities, that others may get a similar chance."*

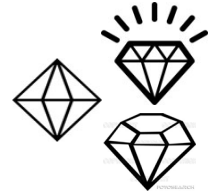
The author of the speech, a fresh college graduate, then acts on her own words. Instead of going overseas, she places herself at the service of the State University as a teacher, to share knowledge, and as an example of striving beyond the limits of the possible.

In last year's annual retreat, I remember one of Sr. Aileen Bahnkemper, OSB's challenges to us after showing a film on "Celebrating What's Beautiful in the World": *Not only to be my best but to become my best FOR the world.* Mahatma Ghandi had this principle to share with us: "*Become the change you want to see.*" Translating this into the context of prayer, I remember this little African prayer for an "enemy" which goes "*Lord bless him/her, change me*".

Many groups you would ask about what conversion is, will spontaneously come up with these key words: "transformation", "metanoia", "renewal", "growth" and "development," change. It also means "improvement", "one step at a time"; being more and more Christ-like in my thoughts, words and actions, step by step.



At this point I would like to share with you a desert image. On the way to Swakopmund, located along the Atlantic coast in Namibia, one passes the beautiful jugged mountains called “the Spitzkoppe.” Carved of solid rock, many poor people living nearby are the so-called “stone pickers”. They make their living by selling precious stones to tourists. Generally, the precious stones are still unpolished, “gems in the rough”. But a rough stone that has been cut and subjected to a process of “transformation” is a beauty to behold! This, to me, is my image of a person who has walked the way of *conversatio*.



The dynamism of our Benedictine value of *conversatio* challenges us to move out of our comfort zone for the sake of growth and development. Like the precious stone transformed, conversion does not happen overnight. Forming habits of mind requires many years to develop. *Conversatio* is a continuing process of “polishing” and transformation in Christ. It embraces the totality of our monastic journey as Missionary Benedictines: growing in holiness, Seeking God in community, prayer, *lectio*, the practice of the vows of stability, obedience, consecrated chastity, poverty, but also assimilating all of the Benedictine attitudes of humility, silence, good zeal, etc.

### *Implications for Mission*

How does *conversatio* help us discover the gem in each one of us? One of the values we often associate with Benedictine schools is “academic excellence.” How is this excellence to be transcribed in the context of our mission? Of doing everything to the best of one’s ability? How does my “commitment to excellence” become a blessing to those whom I serve? How is it an enrichment to the life of the world? What makes us complacent? What are the causes of indifference and the lack of drive to change? What other obstacles do you see to internalizing this value of *conversatio*?

How does RB’s concluding chapter 73, “...set out for the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues mentioned” in the Rule connect to our call to perfection? How is *Conversatio* a counterculture to situations of mediocrity and superficiality? How can we strengthen or promote the spirit of *conversatio* in our schools, social centers, and other areas of apostolate? Can we identify some of our “comfort zones” that prevent us on the road to conversion?

### *A Special Challenge to Our Schools*

In the context of our educational apostolate, the “10 Hallmarks ....” point out the need to challenge realities in curricular and co-curricular programs to foster intellectual and personal breakthroughs. Moreover, we seek to cultivate habits of mind that will transform students and faculty alike towards learning and generosity for life. Further, *conversatio* challenges educators to look into the kind of climate we develop in our schools and classrooms. For example, how do we help students fight timidity and fear of taking risks? Growth entails trodding the unfamiliar, trying new things, and stepping into uncertainty.

Taking inspiration from the above, we could ask “How do we develop a climate favorable to growth in our own communities?” How do we let one another change and grow? As

Benedictine communities committed to conversation, what is our commitment to renewal and lifelong learning in the School of the Lord's Service? What risks are students willing to take? In what ways do we resist change in self? How are change and growth celebrated in our work? How does *conversatio* relate to the task of integral development of our people, the task of promoting the growth of the total person, in all aspects of one's life?

## CONCLUSION

In the end, we can say that our Missionary Benedictine Spirituality embraces all of our life as Benedictines consecrated to mission. Everywhere, we see hints of Benedict's spirituality, -- in our day-to-day activities, in the liturgy and *Opus Dei*, our common and personal prayer, in sacred study and spiritual reading, in our *missionary service* both within and without the monastery. And, as C. Stewart says, "Benedict presents a simple theology of prayer: *"We believe that the divine presence is everywhere."* (C. Stewart, p. 31)

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(Text referred to on p. 5 above, par. 2)

### A CHRIST-CENTERED MONASTIC

She / He is a Daughter/Son  
Who listens.  
Who seeks God and desires Him.  
Who loves Christ above all else.

Who attends the School of the Lord.  
Who obeys.  
Who suffers with greatest patience.  
Who hurries to true life.  
Who runs with uplifted heart.  
Who watches and waits for the eternal Easter.

Who loves with all her/his power and might  
Her/His Prioress / Abbot / Superior  
Sisters / Brothers  
Because of Christ.

(From a Paper of Abbot Willibrord, OSB)

### **For Group Sharing**

1. At each successive stage in your life, which particular aspect of our Missionary Benedictine Spirituality nurtured your life and mission?
2. Take any of the sections of this conference and discuss any question(s) that speak most to you in relation to our mission today as Benedictines.
3. Apart from the four core Benedictine values which this paper focuses on (*Christ-Centeredness, Ora et Labora, Community, Conversatio Morum*), share your insights on any other value mentioned in “Proclaim 2007,” pp. 10-11.

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