

Address to the Congress of Abbots

16 September 2016

We have now arrived at that moment when we bring these two weeks of the Abbots' Congress 2016 to a close. There have been many words and gestures of fraternity expressed to one another during these days. We have heard of the challenges that face us both at Sant Anselmo and throughout the Confederation. We have also been inspired by the words and gestures that have been expressed by our brothers and sisters in the Benedictine Order, and beyond our Order.. Yet in the midst of all the challenges that have been articulated in these recent days, there has been a sense of hope regarding the Benedictine Order, and deep gratitude for the witness we give in the Church and in our sometimes chaotic world. Though certain monasteries wonder about their future, we must remain people of faith and hope. If we look at the history of our Order, of our houses in Europe, and our monasteries in the developing world, at the beginnings of Benedictine life here in Italy, its beginnings have always been fragile, weak, uncertain, and even threatened. But the small seed of monastic life has grown into a great tree that has spread its branches far and wide, with ever new blossoms coming to life.

Where do we go from here? Please, go out to wherever there are people in need of a share in our Benedictine life and charism. Invite the young to come and experience the joy, peace, and blessing of Benedictine life. Invite those who are adults to come and taste the blessings of silence and a retreat among us. Especially to the young, we have to be God's messengers, God's voice inviting others to follow Jesus in the Benedictine and monastic ways of life. Welcome them into the halls of your monastery so that they can see the beauty of brothers and sisters who live a way of life that calls forth generosity and service, prayer and reflection, the inspiration of which come to us from the word of God. What a powerful symbol it has been to have the Book of the Gospels stationed in the middle of our assembly. We want to be transformed by that word. In fact, we want to become "living words" of the Gospel for all to see.

It is my conviction that monasteries are among the most important places in our world today. Why? Because there are so many people whose lives are significantly touched by brokenness, sadness, disappointment, failure, struggle, loss, and woundedness. What we offer is a warm welcome, whoever you are and whatever your story in life tells; we say, "come and be with us and find healing in the word of God that we offer you." The Psalms that we pray every day tell of people who lament the sadness of loss in their lives, the pain of failure in broken relationships, and the fear of enemies. For those who suffer, these words of the

Psalmist tell of their life experience; and in these words, they come to see that they are not alone -- and most importantly, God is with them. The Psalms also tell us of the joy and gladness that comes in knowing the Lord. How often do we hear in the Psalms, "Sing a new song to the Lord." Each day provides for us a new experience of God's providential care and love. When we can tell the mystery of God's working in our lives, we "sing a new song to the Lord," and our faith inspires hope in others. The Psalms also tell of the history of a people broken and enslaved, but then freed and made whole. That is the story of each of us, and of each of our communities; it is the paschal mystery. We re-live the story of our lives in the Psalms and in the prayer that rises from our recitation of these holy words. Prayer is communion with God. And our prayer together with our brothers and sisters is the place where we encounter the God of our salvation, the God who listen with the divine ear of the divine heart. Without that time for prayer, we can do or accomplish nothing. Our prayer must be our strength and our place of refuge. By our presence there, attentive and open to what God has to say to us, we show our brothers and sisters what is essential: As St. Benedict reminds us, "Nothing is to be preferred to the work of God." And yes, the Psalms also tell us the story of Jesus; the Psalms give us the nourishment which fostered the growth of Jesus as a young boy into an adult man, who found nourishment for his spirit, and also became a "living Psalm" -- giving voice to lament in his life, praise to the God of all creation, and opening his heart to the One he called *Abba*.

Also we evangelize in the silence of prayer, in the silence of reflection, and in the silence of *lectio divina*. To use the words of Brother Aloise, "this is how our lives are a parable of communion." They are, for us, simple signs, but they make the kingdom of God known, and at the same time, reveal something much deeper: the daily and life-long search for God through *lectio divina*. Our stability tells the people who come among us, "these monks are always there; they are always there *for me and for others*." By our witness, we tell people that a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit stands as a way of life that heals our every pain, binds up our personal wounds, and gives joy to our life. When people are alone and afraid, and we offer them the welcome Jesus himself as told in the 25th chapter of the Gospel according to St. Matthew: "When I was a stranger, you welcome me. When, Lord, did we welcome you? You welcomed me in the least of the brothers and sisters who came among you, seeking welcome." Our hospitality to others brings us a double blessing because we become ambassadors for Jesus Christ, sons and daughters of St. Benedict, and we are blessed because we believe it is Christ who we welcome in the stranger who comes among us, who comes into the midst of our monasteries. Yes, this is why monasteries are among the most important places in our world today. In the quiet

of our lives, in the peace of our prayer, and in the joy of our community life, we invite others to join us in following Christ, and we also meet Christ.

These days in the liturgy of Mass, we have been hearing from Chapter 15 of St. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians on the marvelous mystery of the resurrection. My brothers and sisters, we cannot forget that each day, we are living by the power of Christ's resurrection at work in us. That alone should be enough to manifest our joy. But truly, there is so much more for us to realize and incarnate into our lives. In the resurrection of Christ, a power and strength has been unleashed in the world, and we are the recipients of strength and power, that unique grace of Christ's resurrection that flows through us to others. It flows through us to others -- in our words of compassion and understanding to those in need, in our deeds of charity and concern to whomever needs our help, in our willingness to listen to others, however insignificant their words may initially sound to us. The resurrection of Jesus Christ means that our earthly life is changed and deeply graced, yet it is heaven bound. Our lives as Benedictines carry something of the heavenly calling -- with all there is here for us on earth, there is so much more that awaits us. And so we live the way we do -- nourished by the word of God, sacrificing many pleasures, and being ready for service. We do this by the power and strength of Christ's resurrection.

Something that I have said often in preaching retreats is this: Listening is the heartbeat of the monastic life. It is the first command of St. Benedict, with a distinctive way of listening -- with the ear of the heart. Words don't just come into our ears; but words come into our ears and then flow down to our hearts. In the Bible, the "heart" is something more than the root of our emotions. The heart is the place where our human will, our mind, our deepest convictions, and our passions come together. When we are able to listen with the ear of our heart, we listen to others like Jesus listened to them -- with all that he possessed within him. His *Abba* has formed his heart in those times of silence and prayer to react to life in a way that showed us the meaning of the new humanity he was living through the new law of love, mercy and compassion. So let us listen with the ear of our heart, and believe that when we do, God forms, transforms, and conforms our hearts into the image of his Son, Jesus.

Now allow me to speak to you on a very personal level, namely, what this past week has been since you have called me to be Abbot Primate. Together, we must thank Abbot Notker once again for his sixteen years of selfless service and sacrifice for the Benedictine Order. After only a week, it is so obvious how much

he has done, and I see it with new eyes and deep appreciation. Let us again express our thanks to him.

In light of all that Abbot Notker has done, I feel so small before a task that is so large. And yet there lies within me, a strong sense of intending to do whatever I can, and to give these tasks my best efforts. My twenty years as abbot of Conception Abbey have involved many different tasks and responsibilities. These years have been filled with much work and effort, and yet it has enabled me to grow in a love of my brothers at Conception Abbey that makes it very difficult to leave them. I will miss them very much, very much, indeed. They have taught me so much by their goodness, their openness, their prayerfulness, their obedience, their honesty, their fidelity, and their desire to love God above all things. Yes, they have taught me so very much. Now, it is your turn to teach me the tasks that are so important for Benedictine men and women today.

Several years ago, we, the monks of Conception Abbey, were asked by a daughter house of ours to help them when they were in need of leadership and members. The experience of seeing how we can help one another, sacrifice for others, and give to others from the richness of our personnel has been a way of true communion between and among communities. When I ask you for personnel for Sant Anselmo, know that as abbot of Conception Abbey, I have given of our monks one of the most talented and experienced to serve others. It was a huge sacrifice, but it has made a significant difference in the life of this community that is slowly winding down, and preparing for its end, as they had known it before. They will soon move to part of us with a presence in our infirmary.

Together we want to seriously look at the monastic values, charisms, teachings, practices, and traditions which distinguish the Benedictine life. Why? Because it is in silence that we can powerfully encounter the Christ who speaks to us. Because it is in the daily practice of *lectio divina* that we hear the voice of Christ who calls us to grow strong in faith. Because it is in our prayer together that we meet the Christ who himself was instructed by the words of the Psalms and came to find God's will. Because it is in hospitality that we welcome Christ among us. Because it is in knowing the meaning of the paschal mystery that we follow Christ more closely. We never stop deepening these monastic values; they grow richer with each passing year. We are always in the process of renewal.

Before I offer a word of thanks, there are a few final things to say to you. For me, the moment of being surrounded by all of you, with my hand on the Book of the Gospels, and reciting the Creed and my promise of fidelity to the Benedictine

Order and the Church -- it was a moment of deep emotion, grace, and inner strength. What a beautiful symbol of our unity, our prayer, our faith, our support of one another. I thank you for the precious gift of that deep moment of faith. I will remember that moment when I miss my community, when there are important questions, and when there are moments of challenge. In that moment, you blessed me deeply, and I will not forget it.

Now I must thank all the people who have worked so faithfully to serve us during this Congress. The Preparatory Commission deserves a special word of praise for all thy efforts made to bring us together in such a unified and fraternal way. The Curial staff, secretaries, and moderators of the Congress have been some of the unsung heroes of our meeting, doing much work “behind the scenes,” quietly working so that our days are well spent and organized. A sincere word of thanks goes to the many monks, nuns and sisters who prepared the seminars to stimulate our minds and our hearts. You have made these days both reflective and enriching. Essential members of this Congress were the translators – both those who have worked here at Sant Anselmo, and those who prepared texts to be read at the Congress. If we think that it has been hot and humid here in the Church, the booths have been like a sauna! We thank them sincerely for their daily efforts to assist us. The Liturgical Commission has worked carefully to prepare our books for the liturgical celebrations; and then there are all those who served as Hebdomidarians, Lectors, Cantors, and Organists – the music brought beauty, joy and reverence to our celebrations. The team of students worked to provide all the hidden services for us – washing dishes, setting up for the “breaks,” setting up for the workshops, the people who served at the reception desk – for 270 people, 3 meals each day, those are a lot of dishes to wash. And certainly, the kitchen staff. We ate so very well at every meal. And who will ever forget the cake that came out for our festive pranzo.

I commend to your prayers those Benedictine communities who are in difficult or serious situations of any kind. Especially do we pray for the monks and nuns of Norcia, and for all those people affected by the earthquake. We remember the communities throughout the Middle East where attempts are made to destroy anything related to Christ or the Church. May God's own strength be the force that builds up hope, peace, and charity in their hearts as they daily face acts of violence, hatred, and discrimination.

I have received word that I have a new Prior for Sant Anselmo, but his abbot has asked he announce it to the community first. In the meantime, Father David

Foster, a monk of Downside, choirmaster and professor at Sant Anselmo, will serve as Pro-Priore.

There is always more to say, but there have been many words already. Please pray for me, that I might serve well in the image of Christ and the spirit of St. Benedict. And I assure you of my prayers and fraternal support.

Let us pray. We lift up hearts of praise and gratitude to you, Almighty and Eternal God, for the blessings on these days of the Congress of 2016. Strengthen us to be bearers of your word, to listen with the ear of our heart, and to follow in the spirit of our holy Father Saint Benedict. Through Christ our Lord.

Now may the Lord guard your going forth; may you travel to your monasteries in hope and reach your destination in safety and in peace. May Almighty God bless you, + Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and remain with you forever. Amen.

With this blessing, I conclude the Congress of Abbots of 2016.