

Response to Brother Alois, Prior of Taizé. “Monastic Life Today— Communion Enlightened by the Word of God.”

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Thank you for these beautiful reflections, Frère Alois. It is an honor for us to be addressed today by the prior of Taizé. We feel the beautiful spirit of your monastic community, and we feel in your message the spirit of Frère Roger, whose spirit lives on in your community.

I appreciated the method you used to build your reflections. The method is reflected in the title. You did what monks ought to do when they start thinking and talking: you used the Word of God to shed light on the themes you wanted to discuss with us.

Your main theme— the search for communion— is a theme that takes us immediately to the heart of what monastic life is all about. This is directly accessible to us, and it also immediately shows us the role of monastic life within the life of the whole Church, the Church which continues to renew herself under the still unfolding impact of the renewal called for by Vatican II. As the Synod of 1985 said twenty years after the Council in its “Final Report,”: “The ecclesiology of communion is the central and fundamental idea of the Council’s documents.” (Synodi Extr. Episc. 1985, Relatio finalis, C, 1.) It is still true for now, some 30 years later.

I was personally happy and very interested in your theme because since 1985 my own personal work as a teacher and theologian involved developing and refining an ecclesiology of communion that could function as an integrating tool for the entire theological curriculum at Mount Angel Seminary, a diocesan seminary operated by my monastery and influencing the theological vision of much of the clergy of the Western United States. Since 1985 I taught from those perspectives both there and, from 1992, also here at Sant’ Anselmo, until that teaching was abruptly interrupted by my being elected abbot in March of this year. (This room is full of people whose lives were abruptly interrupted and is the reason for their being here today. Ah well, this too is about “communion, enlightened by the Word of God.”)

I cannot comment at any length on the many rich themes you have brought before us today. We have time in our schedule now to process it in discussion groups. So, let me make suggestions now to the whole body about what the groups might discuss. Obviously what I suggest is not meant to limit the discussion, but rather to simply start it, if such can be helpful.

One way of taking what we just heard from and using it for discussion can challenge us to be quite concrete. We could ask this question: how can I assess my particular monastery and my own abbatial ministry in the light of the ideas that Frère Alois presented to us? I will offer just one thought from each of the three sections that he gave us.

Frère Alois spoke suggestively to us about personal communion with God, and he placed before us the image of the Transfiguration of Jesus. He said that “When we look at the light of the transfigured Christ in prayer, it gradually becomes an inner presence.” But is this happening for us? This light is meant to penetrate, he says, “what worries us about ourselves and others, to the point that the darkness is illuminated.” So, our monasteries should be workshops where this tension is being worked out. We should never lose this focus, and we should never doubt that such inner work, hidden from the gaze of others, is a contribution to what the world needs now more than ever from monastics. Then the expression “personal communion with God”—the first subtitle of the presentation—becomes more than a vague and pious phrase. It is one of the goals of our lives in the monastery: contemplating the transfigured Jesus and letting this light become an inner presence that penetrates our personal, existential darkness.

In the second theme of communion presented to us, “fraternal love,” Frère Alois said, “Brotherly love creates a space that is like the beginning of the Reign of God... it is a new world that begins to manifest itself.” This is beautifully put. Let us use this language—it is a language of “communion enlightened by the Word of God”—to guide and goad our monastic communities. It was in this context that our brother reminded us of the important idea recovered in the communion ecclesiology of the Council; namely, “In the mutual love of the disciples, the mutual love the Trinity is present on earth.”

It was in his third section on “communion becoming missionary” that the spirit of Taizé and Frère Roger perhaps especially spoke in Frère Alois. He suggested that a monastic community ought to function as a parable to those who encounter it. Taizé aims to be a parable of communion. This was a very rich section of the talk. Our brother offered us a useful, evocative description of how a parable functions. A parable—that is, a monastery—offers a simple and accessible narrative; its meaning is inexhaustible; it does not say things once and for all; it challenges. And in the midst of this description, he uttered a sentence that I consider to be of enormous importance as a description of monastic life as a parable. He said, “If Christ were not risen and present in them, these men and women would not live in this way.” This is a

sleeper sentence. It is the secret to everything. The way “these men and women live” in our monasteries ought to be a parable, whose riddle could only be explained by the resurrection of Christ. And the fact of resurrection is experienced by us and by those who encounter our monastic communities in the same way that a parable is experienced. To use Frère Alois’ words and apply them to resurrection. “This parable [resurrection in us] does not impose, does not want to prove anything; it opens up a world... it opens a window to a beyond, a breakthrough to infinity.” In our discussions we could ask: Is that what I am as a monk? Is that what my monastery is? Is that what I am doing as abbot?

It seems to me that the absolute novelty of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead should be front and center in all that concerns the New Evangelization and should be much more explicitly the thread that is invoked throughout as the content of the faith that the New Evangelization seeks to deepen and celebrate.

To think about resurrection I would like to share a story I heard on the floor of the Synod Hall during the Synod on New Evangelization. It was told by Cardinal Toppo from India. He told of a Hindu teenager who had been hanging around the Catholic priests for some time, in a school setting of some sort. I don’t remember the details of the setting. But the boy was obviously a spiritual seeker, and he was often asking questions about Christian belief. At one point one of the priests gave the boy a copy of the Gospels and told him to read them and then come back with questions and reactions. The boy came back more or less flabbergasted and accusing. He wanted to be sure he got it right, and so he demanded clarification. “Jesus is risen from the dead?” he asked, “really risen from the dead?” “Yes,” they calmly answered, not displeased at his excitement. “Why didn’t you tell me!” he shouted at them, astonished that they would not have told him that straight out from the start. I think this is a big lesson for us all as we consider what Frère Alois suggested to us about communion becoming missionary from our monasteries. Jesus is risen from the dead, “really risen from the dead.” Let us hope that it could never be asked of us or of our monasteries, “Why didn’t you tell me this!”

With this reminder and challenge I conclude my remarks. I must leave untouched a number of other topics that I hope will emerge in the discussion groups, especially what Frère Alois said about the reconciliation of Christians and interculturalism. Taizé has given the Church and the world so much in this regard, and we Benedictines are happy to have this opportunity today to express our admiration, our thanks, our communion with you, Frère Alois.

At the end of your talk you evoked the memory of Cluny, which is very near Taizé, and somehow still felt in the air, the land, and even the water and weather of your region! And you said something of Cluny that surely could be said of Taizé and that I think is meant as a reminder to each monastery represented here about the life we live together: “a small number of people have sometimes been enough to tip the scales towards peace... What changes the world... is daily persistence in prayer, in peace of heart and in human goodness.”