

REPLY TO THE SPEECH BY P BERNARDO BONOWITZ OCSO

I am grateful to P Bernardo for his contribution to our Congress. Rather than a reply, I will simply give an echo to his conference. He has centred his reflection on the theme that I suppose the organisers of this meeting proposed: Monastic Life today; communion in the light of the Word of God. Let us say at once that to present monastic life today in this way is a question of fidelity to the millennia-old Benedictine tradition, as also to the monastic tradition prior to S Benedict. For whether you put the emphasis on the hermitage or the cenobium, monastic life, like all Christian life, cannot aim at anything else than Trinitarian communion, in the light of, and animated by, the word of God himself.

P. Bernardo, you have reminded us of the fundamental objective out our life, just as St Benedict proposes to us in the Rule: the gaze set on God, conversion by means of a journey in communion, so that the observances that fill our days in the monastery do not remain on the earth of the functional and disciplinary, but truly point to communion with God and with our brothers; and you have indicated that four convictions are necessary for this journey of communion to be possible: identity, co-responsibility, availability for service and engagement for the future of the community. It is a word that educates us by its clarity and recreates us by its beauty.

I want above all to share a particular echo about the final point of your speech, which in the text, as you presented it, would seem to be a secondary argument, but which, to my mind, constitutes the conclusion of the whole line of your thought, especially as regards this congress to which your contribution has been directed: (comprising) abbots and priors, brothers placed by the Lord at the head of their Benedictine monastic communities throughout the world.

It is not at all superfluous to put before the eyes of the brothers the Lord has placed at the head of monastic communities the importance of their ministry. We have been chosen by the Lord, by means of our communities, to be signs and instruments of communion, to use that expression so dear to the bishops of Latin America in the Puebla assembly; we have been called to the service of communion, in which, at the instigation of the Word of God, we are servants of the Gospel. Thank you, P Bernardo, for having reminded us this morning of the fundamental purpose of our abbatial or prioral ministry, seeing that, in meetings like this one, of a Congress of Abbots and Priors, we run the risk of getting involved with a thousand questions that, however necessary and important, can distract us from the essential thing in our mission within our communities.

In the Spanish translation of your conference, the last word of the text is the word 'irresistible'. You insist on the fact that for a real abbot, without disregarding the risks, joy is much more important. You finish by saying: "do not disregard the risk, but the joy of nourishing the brethren in communion is irresistible." You set out in this way a certain criterion for discerning the authenticity of our ministry.

This meeting of Abbots and Priors is an excellent occasion for meeting those who share a common ministry to our brother monks; besides all the questions that we are discussing, as I said, that are important for the future path of our confederation, there is also the opportunity of a fraternal and spontaneous exchange over the life of our communities and our abbatial mission; it also serves, why should I not say it, as an outlet and a consolation for the difficulties that we have to face in our monasteries, for the difficulties and the pitfalls we face in the exercise of our ministry... and I have already said this, echoing your final word, what often seems irresistible is the temptation to run away, to escape, in the face of the weight of the problems and of the issues that we have to address. But, as I have already said: it is a temptation... and I have already said: often it is irresistible, with as much or greater force than the

irresistible joy of feeding our brethren in real communion. Thanks again for having encouraged us to live our ministry in a joyful way in service of communion; your words are an echo of those of St Peter in his second letter: “Feed the flock of God that has been entrusted to you, staying alert, not by compulsion, but of your free will, according to God.”