

Anniversary of the Dedication of the Abbey Church  
(Ephesians 2:19-22 / John 4:19-22)  
18.01.2021

Today's first reading speaks to us of belonging. In what he wrote to the Ephesians Paul invited them to have a sense of belonging to the household of God; he urged them to see themselves as constituent elements of a building which is Jesus Christ Himself; he encouraged them to understand themselves to be part of a beautiful and constantly growing temple for God. That same invitation is addressed to us. The Apostle's words heard this morning remind us that we are called to be one with the Lord God through Christ-Jesus, whose Spirit animates our life together in this abbey, which we consider to be not only our home, but His house of prayer for all peoples. Called to be one with the Lord, we are also called to be one with each other in Him.

As we listen to this text from Ephesians, the call addressed to us is to espouse what it means to be Church... and to take on board the sense of mission that should be ours as Church.

On this day when we celebrate the anniversary of the Dedication of this Abbey church it seems appropriate to begin by giving thanks for the privilege and the responsibility that is ours to have been called to this place to form together God's household; and then, stemming from this, to remember that it befalls us to create here a place of welcome for those who come our way – a space wherein all can find hospitality, with all that the word hospitality suggests. Remember the word hospital is linked to the notion of hospitality. Included in the offering of hospitality here at the abbey is the notion of providing a place healing for all who frequent this Centre of Peace and Reconciliation.

The psalmist reminds us: *In God's Holy City and in His House all are called to find their home.* It has to be our hope and concern that all who come here feel made welcome and recognise that they are in God's House.

The Gospel text heard this morning reminds us that we are called to form what St Paul calls at one point *a spiritual temple in the Lord.*

I cannot help but think of what P. Emmanuel Andre said when he conceived the project of building the Monastery of Holy Hope at Mesnil-Saint-Loup, in France, where Olivetan Benedictine monastic life was established anew after the French Revolution. He spoke of his goal being to create there *a little corner of Jerusalem.* He clearly thought in terms of creating at Mesnil, a somewhat stark and desolate area of the Champagne countryside, a true oasis of peace.

The anniversary of the Dedication of this abbey church coincides with the first day of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. This happy coincidence was and remains intentional.

Given the context of our celebration, it seems appropriate on this day that we reflect upon some fundamental elements of our Benedictine monastic life seeing how they are – certainly can be understood as – a ferment of Christian unity.

Let us take some key words from the text from Ephesians heard this morning as the point of departure for our reflection.

We heard Paul declare in the lectionary translation of the text read: *You are no longer aliens or foreign visitors; you are citizens like all the saints.* The Apostle reminded his readers, including us, that *there are no strangers or foreigners for those who are in Christ.* As one translation puts it: *Now you are no longer strangers to God and foreigners to heaven, nor are*

*you no longer strangers and foreigners to each other, but you are members of God's very own family... in which you all belong together.*

Reading that Pauline declaration, I could not help but think of the following lines from the writings of St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross (Edith Stein): *For Christians there is no such thing as a 'stranger'. There is only the neighbour, the person who happens to be next to us, the person most in need of our help, whether he is related to us or not, whether we like him or not, doesn't make any difference.* For Teresa Benedicta of the Cross to go on to say: *Christ's love knows no boundaries, stops at no limits.*

The vision of all-embracing welcome, genuine heartfelt hospitality, found in both the Pauline text and that of Edith Stein which it evoked for me, should be the hallmark of every/any Christian community and *a fortiori* of any/every Benedictine monastic community worthy of the name.

Benedictine hospitality requires that we acknowledge Christ in others – *all who come to the monastery are to be welcomed as Christ Himself* – just as all with whom we share life in the monastery are to be seen in the same light of Christ.

We are called to recognise Christ in each other. Each one is to be approached with the same respect and shown the same honour due to the Lord Himself.

St Benedict instructs the abbot and all the monks to acknowledge, honour and adore Christ within the visitor and within the fellow monk. His little note suggesting that each one be greeted by a bow of the head or even on some occasions by the prostration of one's whole body points to this.

If in the Benedictine framework hospitality is to be shown not only to those who come from outside, but also in regard to each other within community, it is especially to the most needy among the brethren that honour is to be paid.

Writing in chapter 4 of the Rule, St Benedict insists that the monks gathered in community are never to lose hope in God's mercy. He insists that the whole of their life together is to bear witness to that grace.

In the monastery there should be an evident willingness to implore pardon for wrongs done and to offer pardon for offences endured. Pardoning grace should be a blessing that excludes no one in the community. The monastery is meant to be a foyer of graciousness; a place in which God's merciful love as at the centre of the life we share. Walking with the Lord and with each other in the house of God, monks who experience on-going reconciliation in community should bear testimony to that gift beyond the limits of their monastic fellowship to the wider Church and the whole world around them. Fundamental to this happening there must be a commitment on the behalf of the brethren to remain engaged on a constant path of conversion. Forgiveness and reconciliation are key and critical to Benedictine community life and spirituality. This is made clear by Benedict's insistence that the recitation of the *Our Father* at the Offices of Lauds and Vespers be lived in this particular frame of mind... *so that the hurts which are wont to arise between the brethren may be healed.* If left untended, wounds can cause not just unnecessary pain, but infection. They can become a source of poison in the community's life. For this reason they must be nipped in the bud, as it were. Benedict insists that the wounds wont to arise in the monastery be tended to not just once a day, but twice daily. Clearly, hurts are not to be nurtured in an unhealthy manner. Rather they are to be nursed in a way that leads to healing. Wounds need to be purified as soon as possible, so that the aggrieved party may be pacified without delay. Scars are to be salved by the offering and welcoming of forgiveness. It has been suggested by the spiritual writer Esther de Waal that *forgiveness is the greatest factor of growth in any human being.*

When we mull over slights or hurts received, we damage our relationship with God and our relationship with others. Not only do these relationships suffer, but we do ourselves no favour into the bargain. When we brood over suffering we tend to enter into a self-centred way of being – and that is not a good way to relate to ourselves. It only isolates us.

Benedict's frequent insistence that tears will be a hallmark of a monk's personal prayer (he hardly ever speaks of a monk's personal prayer in the Rule without mentioning tears accompanying it) makes an interesting point. It seems to me that what Benedict implies here is that for a monk's spiritual health and well-being – and that of the whole community with him – a sense of his misery and sin, what we might think of as his distance from the Lord, should never be far away from his heart. The monk's heartfelt remorse which finds expression in tears is not meant to have drown himself or wallow in sadness, however. Rather, it is to be experienced as a cleansing grace. Might I suggest that the monk's tears are meant to remind him of the salutary waters of baptism – in which he, was cleansed and brought to new birth, like all the baptised? Furthermore, I believe that the monk's tears – understood as a reminder of the waters of baptism – will open him up to a sense of his belonging to the community of all the baptised, the Church. In other words, as a monk grows in personal prayer, he will become more and more aware of the fact that he belongs to a community of believers with whom he is called to be one. In his personal prayer, united to that of Christ, the monk will find himself led to give thanks to the Father for the gift of unity already given, as Jesus did in His High Priestly Prayer in John 17, and, at the same time, he will implore in a fervent supplication that this unity may grow, as Jesus did when He pleaded: *May all be one.*

The Benedictine monk's vow of conversion is central to his response to God's call. The monk dedicates himself, along with his brethren specifically to live *conversatio morum*, which could be interpreted as a commitment to live in a way of readiness for and openness to the in-breaking of God's kingdom which will see all gathered together in harmony.

The vow of conversion is one which the monk makes as a member of a community in which all are engaged on the same path. Their shared commitment to conversion leads them to grow in communion. Put simply, using the image of the spokes of a wheel, we could say that the closer each one draws to Christ who is at the centre of its life, the closer they are all in community are drawn to each other.

Constant shared conversion is indispensable not only to Benedictine monks growth in communion, but to all Christians growth in unity. The way to Christian unity passes through the conversion of all believers to Jesus Christ.

The unity of the Churches depends upon the conversion of the Churches – their shared engagement on the path of the Gospel. *Le Groupe des Dombes* produced a very fine document to this effect some twenty-odd years ago – a document entitled *La Conversion des Eglises, The Conversion of the Churches.*

Through every personal conversion we live, through every reconciliation we engage in with another (with others), we advance resolutely on the way of mutual understanding and respect. But, our conversion must be seen not only as an individual enterprise. It has to be a way in which whole Church communities engage themselves to walk together. It is on that shared path that they will be led them to arrive at the goal: that unity which Christ willed for all His disciples and to which He never ceases to call us.

Repentance is required of all the Churches. Pope John-Paul emphasised this strongly in the Great Jubilee Year 2,000. He came back upon it at several moments during his pontificate and

not least in what he had to say about Christian Unity. I recall, for example, what he had to say in his document on the call to pay heed to the Churches of the East and engage in dialogue with them. In His Apostolic Letter *Orientalis Lumen* he declared: *Conversion is required of the Latin Church that she may respect and fully appreciate the dignity of the Eastern Church and accept gratefully the spiritual treasures of which the Churches of the East are bearers.* I would argue that the same could be said of our relationships with the Churches issued from the Reformation and vice-versa.

Fittingly, the first gathering we had in this church building was the Office of Vigils – a Service of Repentance – to make us ready for the Liturgy of Solemn Dedication of 18<sup>th</sup> January 2004. In that liturgy we recognised the sin of division which holds the Churches apart and repented of that sin with brothers and sisters of other Churches. We engaged ourselves to journey together on a path of shared conversion in a way that will lead us to the unity in Christ which He Himself longs to see us enjoy and for which He prays.

I recall that the first words of Scripture proclaimed in this church building that night were read by a Sister of the Reformed tradition – the then Prioress of Grandchamp. It is the Sisters of Grandchamp who prepared the texts for this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. The text Sr Pierrette read at the Office of Vigils on 17<sup>th</sup> January, 2004, was taken precisely from Paul's Letter to the Ephesians – a passage from which inspired this morning's reflection. Let me quote some of the words read that night. The text taken then was Ephesians 2: 13-22. I read these extracts so that we may take their message to heart again today, applying them to our mission here at Holy Cross to be a ferment of reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants in this land, marked by divisions, stained by the blood of Christian brothers and sisters. *Christ has made us all one family, breaking down the dividing wall of contempt that used to separate us. By His death, He ended the angry resentment between us... He took the two groups that had been opposed to each other and made them parts of Himself; thus He fused us together to make one new person, and at last there was peace. As parts of one body our anger against each other has disappeared, for both of us have been reconciled to God. And so the feud ended at last at the cross. The Good News of peace is now for all of us and for the whole world in which we are called to bear witness.*