

March 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Greetings of peace from Sant'Anselmo in Rome. Please excuse the tardiness of this circular letter. I had hoped to have some information to you by Christmas, and now we are already in Lent. Coming to the office of Abbot Primate has been a steep learning curve for me, yet I must say, everyone here at Sant'Anselmo has been most welcoming, kind and helpful. I am grateful for the many kindnesses extended to me. However, I can see that it is going to take a full year to "learn the ropes" and become more comfortable with all that goes with the tasks of being Abbot Primate. So many have assured me of their prayers, for which I am very grateful.

I begin with a word of thanks to Father David Foster, faculty member and Choirmaster here at Sant'Anselmo (and monk of Downside), who assumed the position of Pro-Priore as we waited for our new Prior, Father Mauritius Wilde of the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach who arrived in mid-December. I am very grateful to Abbot Michael Reepen who has allowed Father Mauritius to assume this important position for Sant Anselmo and the Benedictine Confederation. There are many things that Father Mauritius and I are learning about life at Sant'Anselmo, Italian culture, and a new rhythm of life. Happily, all is progressing well.

The question which everyone asks is, "How are the monks and nuns in Norcia?" I have had two opportunities to visit the monks, who have taken up residence about 3 kilometers outside of Norcia on a hillside overlooking the city. The site is the location of an old Capuchin friary. The monks have set up temporary living quarters with a chapel, refectory, and a dormitory. It is their hope to rebuild their monastery there. They have been blessed with many contributions. For those who wish to contribute to their rebuilding efforts, you can go to their website for instructions. Part of their monastery in the city has been destroyed by the earthquake, and part of the building is still standing (the gift shop and the brewery), but its safety is still being examined along with the other buildings of the whole city. You can only enter the city accompanied by an engineer. Everything has the appearance of a bombed out city, with shop windows, billboards, restaurant awnings, and crumbling walls just as they were when the earthquake took place. There is a very eerie

feeling when you walk down the streets, seeing chicken wire holding up many of the buildings to keep them from falling into the streets.

The Benedictine nuns have moved and have been welcomed to the community of Benedictines at Trevi, about 20 kilometers from Norcia. I also had the chance to visit them. Their monastery building is still standing but is filled with cracks and evidence of falling plaster. Until an assessment of their building, along with all the buildings in Norcia, can be completed, they will stay at Trevi. As you would imagine, the nuns at Trevi have been most kind and gracious in helping the Norcia community adjust to another home, at least for the time being. What we have seen in the photos of Norcia is magnified when you see it in person. The members of the CIB (women Benedictines) have set up a relief fund for financial assistance to the nuns of Norcia. Further information on this effort can be made by contacting Sister Mary Jane Vergotz at [srmmaryjane@mtstbenedict.org](mailto:srmaryjane@mtstbenedict.org).

While we are noting the impact of the earthquake on the monks and nuns in Norcia, it should be mentioned that here in Rome, we felt the earth's movements on several occasions. Unfortunately, there was some structural damage to the ceiling of the library, which went all the way into the church, and in the choir stall next to the Abbot Primate. Some initial structural work was done to keep the areas safe until such a time during the summer when we can finish the project and ensure the safety of those areas. The cost of this repair work will come to approximately 100,000 €. Another point on the property of Sant'Anselmo that suffered from the earthquake is the balcony of the Abbot Primate's living quarters. The repairs here are less serious but need our attention for safety on our property.

One of the biggest challenges thus far is finding personnel for Sant'Anselmo, which includes workers for the Abbot Primate's Curia, the business office, the Collegio, and the university. Thus far, I have had both successes and failures. Let me begin with a big failure: the position of the Tesoriere (the Treasurer for the Confederation). This position has been held most recently and competently by Father Geraldo González y Lima of São Paolo in Brazil. His monastery of Abadia São Geraldo has asked for him to return after eleven years of service at Sant'Anselmo. His service has been significant, and when he returns to his monastery, his absence will be sorely felt here at Sant'Anselmo. I have now asked four different abbots about having one of their monks come to Sant'Anselmo to serve as Tesoriere, and they have all told me that they cannot part with this monk at this time. I must ask for generosity in this

regard, for it is not only as assignment for Sant'Anselmo, but also for the whole Benedictine Confederation. I ask once again – If there is someone who can work with some accounting and organizing of our finances, we are in serious need.

On a brighter note, I am happy to announce the generosity of both the Abbess of Dinklage, Mother Franziska Lukas, and Sister Antje Eichhorn-Eugen, who has accepted the position of Secretary to the Abbot Primate. I saw the language skills of Sr. Antje at the AIM International meeting in Vienna and was most impressed with her ability to work as a translator. Sister Antje is also an accomplished iconographer, which I hope she will be able to continue part-time while she is here in Rome. Thank you again, Mother Franziska, for your generosity in allowing Sister Antje to come to Sant'Anselmo. I also take this opportunity to thank Abbot Philip Dupont of Solesmes for allowing Father Patrice Mahieu to assist as Secretary in the Curia until September. A word of thanks goes to Abbot Administrator Placid Solari of Mary Mother of the Church Abbey for the services of Father Gregory Gresko, who will continue part-time as Secretary while taking on additional teaching duties in the university.

In the Ateneo, we began the year with 26 students in the Philosophy program, 100 in the Theology program, and 313 in the Liturgical Institute. In November, Father Jordi-Agusti Piqué of the Abbey of Montserrat was re-elected for a second four-year term as President of the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy. Father Eduardo López-Tello of the Abbey of Sankt Ottilien was elected for a four-year term as Dean of the Faculty of Theology. For the last eight years, Father Juan Javier Flores of the Abbey of Silos has served as Rector of the Ateneo and thus completes his term with this academic year. We will have an election of a new Rector to take place later this spring.

Two of our faculty members have received appointments in recent months that distinguish their scholarship and generous service to the Church. Father Olivier-Marie Sarr, professor of liturgy in the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy and monk of the Abbey of Keur-Moussa in Sénégal, has been appointed as theological consultant to the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. In addition, Father Vincent Laisney, professor both at Sant'Anselmo and the Pontifical Biblical Institute (Biblicum), and monk of Flavigny, has been raised to the position of Ordinary Professor in the Biblicum's Department of

Oriental Languages. To both of these monks, we offer our hearty congratulations and continued blessings upon all their endeavors.

As requested at the Congress of Abbots, we have begun preparations for a new program in the Monastic Institute to be taught in English. This program brings together aspects of monastic spirituality and culture. Fundamentals relating to the study of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, monastic tradition, prayer, *lectio divina*, and contemporary culture all feed into this new program. This two-year program will lead to a Licentiate or Master's degree and is well designed for those who would be moving into the position of Novice Master or educator in their monastic community. We are hoping to attract a good number of students into this program. Father Bernard Sawicki from the Abbey of Tyniec, director of the Monastic Institute, has worked diligently with our marketing director, Brother Simon Stubbs of Saint Joseph Abbey in Louisiana, to prepare literature inviting people to consider this new program. Please give it your special attention and consideration.

Here in the Collegio, the residence at Sant'Anselmo, we have 82 residents, a decline from last year which numbered 104. This reduction in numbers is due mostly to the diocesan residents dropping from 24 to 13. We have 28 nationalities represented, and of those residents, 62 are Benedictines from 52 monasteries, and 1 Cistercian from Northern Italy. Much work has been done to complete a refurbishment of the basement corridor with a new lounge for the professors, lockers for the students (especially our external students), and a renovation of the office for the work done for *Ecclesia Orans*, the scholarly journal of our Ateneo. In addition to these renovations, our driveway and piazzale have been totally redone through the good efforts of Father Markus Muff, our Director of Development for Europe, a monk of Engelberg. Long-term work continues on the expansion of the library working areas and the installation of improved air-conditioning.

One of the deeply appreciated additions to the life of the Collegio this year has been the additional of a new *Vesperale*. The old copies were almost disintegrating in our hands as we prayed with them. A word of thanks goes to Abbot Elias Lorenzo, who generously paid for these books with gifts received at the time of his priesthood jubilee. These *Vesperale* are beautifully bound and truly fitting for our evening prayer at Sant'Anselmo.

There has been a good collaborative effort with almost weekly meetings of the Administrative Council of the Abbot Primate. This meeting brings together the Abbot Primate, the Prior, the Subprior, the Rector of the Ateneo, the Development Director, the Treasurer, the Economo, and the Bursar. Each member is able to submit topics for our discussions. This practice enables us to keep a close watch on the needs of the community, our present financial situation, and an update on the works that are taking place.

There have been numerous requests for the presence of the Abbot Primate at various celebrations throughout the Confederation. Especially as I am learning much about the tasks of the Abbot Primate, I am trying to limit myself to the regional meetings of Abbots and the meetings of the Benedictine women's CIB. While still trying to complete some of the commitments from my time as Abbot of Conception Abbey, a few schedule conflicts have occurred, but I am doing my best to keep a balance between the work at Sant'Anselmo and the larger commitments of the Benedictine Confederation. For example, I look forward to a meeting of the German-speaking Abbots of Austria, Switzerland, and Germany in April. Then in May, there is a gathering of the Abbots and Abbesses of Spain and Portugal, and a meeting of the Abbots and Abbesses of Italy. In June, I will participate in a meeting of the monastic superiors of the men's and women's communities of England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland and Northern Ireland, which will include visit to Lambeth Palace and a meeting with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby. Then in June, I will attend the General Chapter of the Swiss-American Congregation, having been one of its Councilors, and being held at my home monastery, Conception Abbey in northwest Missouri.

During these almost six months as Abbot Primate, I have had the honor of a private audience with Pope Francis, who showed much interest in the Order and its various works. There was also the annual visit of Pope Francis to Sant'Anselmo on Ash Wednesday, when he took time to greet and briefly visit with the Mass servers and members of the *schola*. It was wonderful to see the choir full and brimming with Benedictines and Dominicans for this special celebration to begin the season of Lent. I've also had reason to visit the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Congregation for Consecrated Life, the Congregation for the Oriental Churches, the Congregation for Catholic Education, and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. We, as Benedictines, are warmly received at all of these dicasteries.

We recently had a meeting at Sant'Anselmo of the China Commission, with fourteen members participating. We were grateful to have among us Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State. As we all know, there have been a variety of conversations between the Vatican and the Government of China in recent years. Cardinal Parolin told us that these conversations continue to proceed in a positive direction, but they move slowly and quite deliberately. The work of the Commission is carefully and capably led by Brother Nicholas Koss of Saint Vincent Archabbey. For me personally, this was an inspiring day to learn much about how Benedictines have been very active and generous in terms of personnel, and visionary in carrying forward the Church's mission of evangelization. The participants in the meeting told of their past and present efforts for the growth of the Church in China – a stirring and moving account of their apostolic and prayerful endeavors.

Before concluding, I want everyone to know that it is my hope to become better acquainted with the lives and efforts of the Confederation and the CIB. My plan in the first years is to accept invitations to regional meetings of abbots, nuns and sisters; this rhythm will give me a sense of the development of the Benedictine Order. If you wish to have me attend a meeting and have the dates in mind, please do not wait to send those invitations. As you can imagine, my schedule fills up quickly, and I must be attentive to the life of Sant'Anselmo with its Ateneo and Collegio. I know that I have much to learn on many levels, and I happily can attest that everyone has been most welcoming, kind, patient, and supportive in helping me make the adjustment to the life and duties of the Abbot Primate. Be assured that all of you are happily remembered in prayer each and every day. May these final days of the Lenten season lead to a glorious celebration of the great Easter mystery for all of our monastic communities.

In Christ and Saint Benedict,

+  Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.

Abbot Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.
Abbot Primate