



**BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO**  
Curia dell'Abate Primate

Advent 2017

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica,

Greetings of Advent peace from Sant'Anselmo in Rome. It was Lent of 2017 when I sent a circular letter for the first time. Now that we are in the Advent season, it is another good moment to send you greetings as we reflect on the second coming of Christ and also prepare for a celebration of His birth. May these days of Advent be a time of renewal of heart and spirit, drawing us ever deeper into the mystery of Christ in the life of each of us, the great gift of the Incarnation, and the centrality of Christ's life and teaching in our monastic communities. There are so many things to relay to you, it is hard to know where to begin, but let us begin with consideration of a Jubilee that "crept up on us" and surprised us here at Sant'Anselmo.

In the year 2018, we will celebrate the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Benedictine Confederation by Pope Leo XIII. Here at Sant'Anselmo, we will commemorate that occasion in two distinct ways. On Thursday, 19 April 2018, we will have an audience with Pope Francis in the Apostolic Palace in the morning for the monastic community at Sant'Anselmo. I also would like to invite any of the abbots of the Confederation who wish to join us for that special occasion to do so. Please let us know if you need overnight accommodations. Then on Saturday, 21 April, the Feast of Saint Anselm, we will have a Mass to commemorate this occasion of the Jubilee. We have invited one of the cardinals from the Congregations at the Vatican to be our principal celebrant, but since I have not yet received a reply from him, it is best that I wait to announce who that will be. Nonetheless, these will be important days of celebration on both 19 and 21 April 2018 for our Benedictine Confederation.

As we consider this Jubilee of the foundation of the Benedictine Confederation, we are also reminded that our buildings date back to the 1890s. Each year, these buildings give us signs of their age, their wear-and-tear, and their need for renovation. New windows, roofs, bathrooms, and pavements have seen an upgrade in recent years. In recent months, there has been a significant improvement in our library. In the Reading Room, we have

renewed the mosaic floor, the lighting, and the cracks in the walls which were a result of the recent earthquakes in Italy. However, we were not prepared last month when some of the marble slabs in the sanctuary began slowly to break away from the walls to which they were fastened. Fortunately, we were able to see some faster moving slabs of marble before they completely broke away and hurt someone, or worse! A special word of thanks goes to our fine Prior, Father Mauritius Wilde of the Abbey of Münsterschwarzach, who acted quickly in contacting our Director of Development in Europe and Director of Projects, Father Markus Muff of Engelberg Abbey. Father Markus gave us all a sense of what needed to be done and how best to do it while preserving the beauty and safety of our Abbey Church. Thank you, Father Markus.

The school year at Sant'Anselmo began in good fashion with our new Rector, Father Stefano Visintin of the Abbey of Praglia. Father Stefano had served both as Dean of the Faculty of Theology and also as Vice-Rector of the university. He knows Sant'Anselmo well and has begun this new academic year with enthusiastic leadership and good guidance of our faculty and students. In the Collegio, we number 90 residents this year, up from 85 residents last year. If we had more scholarships for "room and board," we would have more Benedictines in the house. There are some Benedictines who are unable to meet the costs of room and board, and thus they find lodging in other places. We are working to raise more money for scholarships so that we can have a larger number of Benedictines to fill the house at Sant'Anselmo. Most importantly, there is an inspiring spirit of prayer here, coupled with a fraternal spirit of kindness, generosity, and service. We hope to have more Benedictines participating in our common life at Sant'Anselmo.

Sant'Anselmo offers some special programs in the summer. This coming summer, there will be the program on *Cultural Dimensions of Christian Spirituality* under the direction of Father Matthias Skeb of the Abbey of Königsmünster, Meschede. The second program on spiritual accompaniment in the monastic life is called *Holy Listening*, which will be directed by Father David Foster of Downside Abbey. Both of these programs are taught in English, and last for two weeks. The *Benedictine Leadership Program*, which we have had for the last five years, will not take place in the summer of 2018, but hopefully will resume in 2019. For further information of these program, consult the website for Sant'Anselmo: [anselmianum.com](http://anselmianum.com) . A special word of thanks goes to our Director of Marketing, Brother Simon Stubbs of St. Joseph Abbey in Louisiana, whose professional efforts have given us a "user-friendly" site for many people to get to know Sant'Anselmo better.

One of the new elements that has arisen out of our Strategic Plan for the Ateneo is the establishment of a new Advisory Board. As with all of the other pontifical faculties in Rome, it has been important for Sant'Anselmo to establish a board of outside advisors, drawn from the Benedictine Confederation and other areas of competence, that offers guidance to our various programs of study, development, and recruitment. The members of this Board are as follows: Abbot Primate Gregory Polan (Chairman), Father Stefano

Visintin (Rector and Vice-Chairman), Abbot Jeremy Driscoll (Mount Angel Abbey, former Professor of Sant'Anselmo), Abbot President Christopher Jamison (former and founding President of the International Commission on Benedictine Education, now Abbot President of the English Benedictine Congregation), Monsignor Kevin Irwin (former Dean of Theology at The Catholic University of America, and alumnus of Sant'Anselmo), Father Bernhard Eckerstorfer (Abbey of Kremsmünster, Professor at the University of Salzburg), Doctor Antonio Russo (Professor at the Università di Trieste, Italy), and Mr. Artur Kluz (Managing Partner of Kluz Ventures, an investment firm focused globally on advancing breakthrough technologies for the common good). Our first meeting was in October 2017, and as this was our first meeting, our sessions were long and intense, six hours each day for two days. This Board of Advisors promises to be a most helpful and wise guide for our Ateneo as we move into the future.

There have been a number of new additions to our personnel at Sant'Anselmo this year: Retired Abbot Fernando Rivas from the Abbey of Luján in Argentina, who comes as Professor; Retired Abbot Paolo de Souza Silva from the Abbey of São Geraldo in São Paulo, Brazil, who comes as Rector of the Church of Sant'Anselmo; Sister Anna (Antje) Eichhorn-Eugen from Dinklage Abbey in Germany, who comes as Secretary to the Abbot Primate; Father Stefan Geiger from the Abbey of Schäftlarn in Austria, who comes for the first semester as Professor of Liturgy; Brother Victor Ugbeide from the Abbey of Ewu-Esan in Nigeria, who comes as Assistant Guestmaster and Assistant in the Abbey Gardens; and most recently, Father Rafael Arcanjo dos Santos from the Abbey of São Bento in São Paulo, who comes as Assistant in the Business Office. I am most grateful to the abbots and priors who have released these men from service in their own community to work here at Sant'Anselmo. The contribution of these monks to the life of Sant'Anselmo is a genuine sacrifice on the part of their communities, and we are most grateful for their generosity and service here at Sant'Anselmo. I also mention the appointment of a new Subprior for our community, Father Olivier-Marie Sarr of the Abbey of Keur-Moussa in Senegal, who also serves as Professor in the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy. As we are talking about personnel, if there is a monk who could work full-time in IT services (computer assistance and technologies), we could offer him full employment at Sant'Anselmo. At the present time, we have a layman who comes in two days per week, but as you can imagine, in a house of 90 Benedictine faculty and students, our needs are considerably greater than what we are able to take care of. This would be a wonderful addition to our administrative and support staff.

As several monks join our staff, several also take leave of Sant'Anselmo, and it is important to express our gratitude for their years of service. Father Ádám Somorjai of the Abbey of Pannonhalma leaves after several decades of work both at Sant'Anselmo as professor and at the Vatican's Secretary of State. Father Alfredo Simón of the Abbey of Santa Cruz de los Caídos departed Sant'Anselmo with 16 years of teaching, and more recently, at the Congregation for the Causes of the Saints. Father Alcuin Nyirenda of the Abbey of Hanga completes 14 years as Rector of the Church of Sant'Anselmo. And

Father Patrice Mahieu of the Abbey of Solesmes returns to his community after two years of working in the Curia of the Abbot Primate. To each of these monks, we extend our sincere thanks for their years of generous service.

From 11 through 15 September, there was the annual meeting of the Synod of Abbot Presidents, held this year at Saint Meinrad Archabbey. While there was the usual business of a report on life in the collegio at Sant Anselmo, the work of the university, and the financial report of the Confederation, two papers were presented: one was a report on my first year as Abbot Primate and various activities in the Confederation; the second paper was entitled, "The Abbot President as Pastor." Both of these papers sparked good discussion. On the last day of the Synod, we were joined by Father Joel Ripinger of Marmion Abbey who gave a paper on the growth and development of Benedictine life in the United States. We were also joined by three members of Benedictine communities of women in the vicinity of St. Meinrad's Archabbey: Sister Barbara Lynn Schmitz, Prioress of Immaculate Conception Monastery in Ferdinand, Indiana, Sister Kathryn Huber, former Prioress of the same community, and Sister Mary Margaret Funk of Our Lady of Grace Monastery in Beech Grove, Indiana. They spoke to us of the history of their communities, their apostolic endeavors, and some of their reflections on monastic life as it is lived today in their communities. For the last few years, part of the last day of the Synod of Presidents has afforded the Abbot Presidents the opportunity to get to know more of the Benedictine life in the country where the meeting is being held. The hospitality at Saint Meinrad's was exceptional in every way, for which we were most grateful to both Abbot Kurt and Father Julian.

With the many invitations that come to preside, to preach, to speak, and to be present for many occasions in the Benedictine and monastic world, I have tried to confine my attendance to the regional meetings of abbots and the council meetings of the CIB (*Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum*) of Benedictine women. These have been very instructive and helpful meetings, giving me a sense of the Benedictine Order as it authentically lives out its monastic rhythm of life in various parts of the world. I have thoroughly enjoyed the opportunities to visit with abbots, priors, abbesses, and sisters, truly wonderful people who carry the Benedictine spirit in a most inviting manner. Thus far, I have attended a meeting of the German-speaking abbots of Austria, Germany, and Switzerland during Easter Week 2017, both addressing them and enjoying their warm fraternal welcome. This was followed by fraternal visits to the Abbeys of Münsterschwarzach and Sankt Otillien. At Sankt Otillien, three Abbot Primates met together: Archbishop Emeritus Viktor Dammertz, Abbot Primate Emeritus Notker Wolf, and the present Abbot Primate. In early May, the abbots and abbesses of Italy have their annual meeting, to which the Abbot Primate enjoys a warm and gracious welcome, and where he offers a spiritual conference. Living in Italy also provides an opportunity to get to know these gracious and warm Italian communities more closely, and as I write this letter, I am preparing to go and celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the founding of the Benedictine Nuns in Bergamo, at the Monastery of *Santa Grata*. This will

also include a visit to the monks of Pontida and then the nuns of San Benedetto in Lower Bergamo. Then in mid-May, there was the meeting of the abbots and abbesses of Spain and Portugal, which was a truly spirited and joyful encounter held at the Abbey of Santa Cruz de Los Caídos outside of Madrid. Once again, I found a genuine sense of Benedictine hospitality there, not only toward me but toward one another.

In early June, there was the Meeting of the Union of Monastic Superiors of England, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, which also offered a wonderful opportunity for a meeting and luncheon with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who himself is forming a religious community of men and women at Lambeth Palace. With his experiment in religious life, Archbishop Justin is trying to bring together the spirits of both Saint Benedict and Saint Francis into one community. At the present time, they make up a community of eleven (11) members, both men and women, who are committed to a serious life of prayer and a celibate lifestyle. The men and women who belong to this community spend three days each week in silence, prayer, study, and classes, and then have two days of service to the homeless, those in hospitals, soup kitchens, and other places of the church's service. Archbishop Justin was very interested to visit with us and to hear about monastic life, and to show us his appreciation for the dynamism of religious life as well as his efforts to help build it in the United Kingdom. It was interesting to hear the members of the community speak about how their experience of "community" has given them a new perspective on the beauty of religious life, and living in community.

In June, the Confederation held a conference for monks in Temporary vows, commonly called the "Juniors Conference." We had 26 juniors from 9 different countries who enjoyed a series of conferences and visits to key Benedictine sites in Italy, including Montecassio and Subiaco. The keynote speaker was Br. John Mark Falkenhain from St. Meinrad, USA. His input on celibate commitment and living was appreciated by all. The last evening was unforgettable, when the finest Roman weather provided a perfect evening for dining outdoors and an extended recreation. Later that evening, the confreres started to sing songs from their countries in their respective languages. One highlight was the folk-dancing of our confreres from Hungary. The whole conference was a very fraternal encounter for all who participated.

In early September, there was the Monastic-Muslim Dialogue in Nairobi-Karen, Kenya, a gathering which brought together 23 participants from 14 countries: 13 Benedictines and 10 Shi'a Muslims. This was something of a historic happening as this was the first Monastic-Muslim Dialogue to take place in Africa. Most of the monastic participants were from communities in Africa, with the hope that they then would be able to continue such dialogues with Muslims and their own monastic communities. More about this wonderful encounter and exchange can be found on the website for Monastic Interreligious Dialogue (DIM-MID). While the work of this secretariat in the Benedictine Confederation has been relating seriously with Buddhist monks and nuns, attention has now been turned to relating to Muslims with whom we share our monotheistic belief in

One God. The theme of this year's meeting, "Unity of God – Unity in God," goes to the very heart of the faith of Christians and Muslims. Both share a belief in the Oneness of God, but the way they express that belief is profoundly different. This dialogue was also an occasion to discuss openly and honestly the expressions of violence and terrorism from extremist groups, and to hear the expressions of sadness coming from the vast majority of Muslims, who are seekers of God in peace and mutual respect.

In late October, I was invited to speak at the General Chapter of the Austrian Congregation, as they met to elect a new president for their Congregation. The expressions of appreciation for their recently retired president, Abbot Christian Haidinger of the Abbey of Altenburg, conveyed their strong appreciation for his years of leadership, not only for the Austrian Congregation but also as Vicar for Religious in the Austrian Congregation. Their new president, Abbot Johannes Perkmann of the Abbey of Michaelbeuern, enjoys the strong support of his confreres and brings many gifts and talents to this new service of his Congregation. I was asked to address the topic of "Keeping a Community Young in Spirit," which was followed by a lively discussion.

Most recently, I have returned from an eight-day visit to Brazil, first of all to attend the 50-year Jubilee celebration of CIMBRA (The Conference of Interchange Among Brazilian Monasteries). This group includes the gathering of Benedictine, Trappist, and Cistercian monasteries of men and women throughout Brazil. This Jubilee celebration began with a meeting of the members and delegates of CIMBRA at the priory of São Bento in Vinhedo, where we enjoyed good discussion on monastic topics and the gracious hospitality of the community there. The Mass of celebration was the next day at the Abbey of São Geraldo in São Paulo. From there, I had the opportunity to visit the monastery of São Bento in Salvador-Bahia, the monastery of São Bento in Rio de Janeiro, and the monastery of São Bento in São Paulo. Then, I visited and spoke at the women's monasteries of Our Lady of Peace in Itapeccerica da Serra, the Abbey of Santa Maria in São Paulo, and also the Abbey of the Savior in Salvador-Bahia. Father Geraldo González y Lima accompanied me as translator into Portuguese. Words would fail to describe all the richness of monastic life in Brazil, having some of the finest schools, efforts at social outreach, and some of the best chocolate I have ever tasted (a product of the Benedictine Nuns)! All in all, it was a wonderful experience of Brazilian warmth and hospitality that will long be remembered. It was also so very hopeful to see the new and young vocations in all of these communities – a wonderful sign of the future of monastic life in Brazil.

Here in Rome, we had the International Congress of Oblates in early November. The speakers were Abbot Emeritus Notker Wolf, Sister Joan Chittister (Mount Saint Benedict Monastery, Erie, Pennsylvania USA), and the Abbot Primate. We welcomed 250 Oblates from around the world in a beautiful spirit of learning, discernment, prayer, and loving service of their monasteries of affiliation. Father Edward Linton served as the Coordinator and Director of this program, along with a wonderful international council of Oblates. A special award was given to Abbot Notker Wolf in gratitude for his efforts in

establishing the International Congress of Oblates over a decade ago. In addition to that, the Oblates from different parts of the world came to know one another, shared experiences of the relationships with their monastic communities, and learned from one another what can be productive for developing a community of Oblates with a monastery. I can only heartily endorse the importance of Oblates in our monasteries, these men and women who are truly “our best friends,” who wish to see us grow, succeed in all our endeavors, and offer us their generous service whenever needed.

At the Abbots' Congress of 2016, one of the major topics of discussion was the concern about "vocations." While there are some monasteries who suffer from a lack of new vocations, there are others where the growth has been significant but has had an effect on the lack of formation and the rhythm of the community's life. In considering vocations, I believe we are at a moment of significant grace in the life of the Church as we look to the forthcoming Synod on the Youth. In our present moment, there are many young people who feel distanced from the Church, its teaching, and its practices. I want to believe that this can be the time for us to listen – to listen attentively to the young adults of today to hear the questions they pose to us, to understand their reasons for being distant from organized religion and religious life, to hear what they would want to see coming from the Church if they were to be active members of it. Unless we listen carefully to them and engage them in dialogue that is welcoming and inviting, and not confrontational, we risk losing this generation of intelligent and creative young adults. Some of these are the very men and women we would hope to welcome into our monastic communities. I believe this is a call for us to dialogue with them, and in that dialogue, to evangelize, to open them to the teachings and example of Jesus Christ and the spiritual heritage of the monastic life. We cannot do this merely to fill our choir stalls; there is something much greater at stake here in opening them to the banquet of eternal life, a food that will feed their souls.

I invite, I encourage each monastery to arrange for young adults to come and visit them. Invite your Oblates to help you find young adults whom they think are open to dialogue and seeking spiritual riches. I ask you to do two things: 1) First, listen to them. Ask them, "What are you looking for most urgently in your life? What means the most to you in your present life situation? Where is God in your life? How do you see the Church today?" Just listen to what they have to tell you. Don't judge their responses, but rather listen receptively and openly. 2) Second, invite them to return for further dialogue and a chance to meet the community. Let them see the blessings of our prayer in common, our works in service of the Church, our joy in community life. The two key words are "invitation" and "follow-up." As Jesus responded to the two disciples of John the Baptist who asked him, "Where do you stay," he said, "Come and see." He invited them, and then accompanied them as his disciples. We cannot expect one visit with these young adults to have a great impact on them. It takes "invitation" and "follow-up" to make an impression. Are you willing to make the investment in time, energy, and expansion of your mind and heart? If we are willing to enter into the work of evangelization through dialogue, we will

see our choir stalls with new members. But again, that is not the primary reason we are doing this. We want to enter into the work of evangelization because we believe wholeheartedly in the call of Christ to each of us, and we believe in the richness of monastic life that we want to see continue for the good of our Church and the world today. Are we up to the task? I truly believe so.

With this climactic word on the forthcoming Synod on the Youth, I will close this circular letter. I take this opportunity to thank all of those communities who have so graciously and kindly welcomed me during these past 15 months as Abbot Primate. All of you remain in my prayers each day, as I ask a remembrance in yours. May these days of Advent lead us all to a truly joyful celebration of the Birth of the Savior.

Sincerely in Christ,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Abbot Gregory". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned above the typed name.

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