



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

18 May 2020

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,  
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica,

Here we stand in the midst of the Easter season. In the Gospel we recently heard at the Eucharist, Jesus tells his disciples in the Last Supper Discourse that he bestows upon them a peace that is not like any other. "Peace, I leave with you; my peace I bestow upon you. Not as the world gives it, do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid" (Jn 14:27). The Easter peace which Jesus gives is not a freedom from anxiety, but a freedom to live amid anxious time with faith in God's presence, and trust in ways that will open up a manner to face and live into the future. That is a great encouragement to us in this moment of anxiety and insecurity. These words of Jesus are true sources of inspiration and support to us. Despite the fears and worries, there is something quietly stirring in the hearts of believers; the Holy Spirit within us guides us in ways that are so simple and good, so touching and transforming. It is a "peace" that is subtle and quiet, humble and gracious, wise, noble, and advantageous. This is the mysterious Easter peace that Christ left to us, his Benedictine disciples, and to all who follow the Gospel message.

How easy it is to name the challenges that have come our way with this pandemic: fear for the present moment, unexpected death, uncertainty about the future, living with an invisible enemy, financial pressures, distance from loved ones, praying in unfamiliar ways, and many more challenges. But isn't it important for us, now with a little hindsight, to search deeply to discover the blessings that have come to us? Let us reflect on the blessings we have come to see.

First, we have come to see what a blessing our Benedictine tradition and calling has been for us during these days. While many people live alone in a small place, isolated and without another human face to encounter, we have been blessed with our monastic community. The human desire that resides in all of us to be connected with others stands as a distinguishing characteristic of our daily life. With social distancing, we have been forced to live somewhat apart, but clearly, not alone. Again with social distancing from one another, there has grown a kind of unique closeness that happens when challenges unite people in a way that bonds them by their willingness to do together what is for the good of all. Sacrifice is rarely an easy act, but when it is done by a whole community, it possesses a unique character that binds people in a joy that is both satisfying and enriching, and sometimes, life-changing. While in community our fears actually become moments when courage builds up within us, our anxieties develop into moments of trust because of the strength we experience in the midst of our community life together.

Second, both our community and private prayer take on new dimensions. We regret that in most instances, our oblates and friends who usually pray with us are not present. Yet, their

absence fosters a true concern for them in our heart; we miss them, and we earnestly pray for them in the midst of our brothers or sisters. Though at a distance, the presence of those who usually pray with us is felt. It is easy in our daily intercessions to remember the Church, the world, and our governments; yet now, knowing the challenges which they face for the good of the people they serve, there is a greater sense of the worldwide communion which we share, not only as members of the Body of Christ, but as brothers and sisters in the human family. I have heard from several of the Oblates of my home community, and also from other monastic communities, how much they have appreciated the ways in which the monks, nuns and sisters have been able to live-stream their celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours and the Eucharist to include others. Whether it is to their elder members in another building, or to their oblates, both men and women Benedictines have shown genuine concern for those who usually pray with them. We see in this how our community prayer ministers and assists others in their communion with God.

Third, the environment of our monasteries has often provided us with places to be grateful for the beauty of creation, the gifts of God's earth, and the opportunity to reflect on how important our care for the earth's resources really are. When we read the Psalms and reflect on the wonders of creation, we see how our early ancients in the faith could see so deeply into the gift of created things. God has made us stewards of these gifts. Here in Rome, with the lockdown, from our tower, you can see the Mediterranean Sea; that is how clear the air has become in Rome, a city known for its pollution. Saint Benedict's emphasis on the care of all material things in *RB* 32, reminds us of our stewardship to use wisely and carefully what has been given us. During this pandemic, we have experienced a short-term effect of seeing how we can be better overseers and guardians of what has been given us to develop the beauty and splendor of God's reign among us in the created order. May that spirit continue in our monasteries, so well endowed with the blessings and grandeur of God's loving hand.

Fourth, an element of the monastic life that has intensified during these weeks and months has been part of Saint Benedict's spiritual doctrine on silence in Chapter 6 of the *Rule*. Until a few months ago, our lives have been caught up in the fast pace of society, which can have the tendency to diminish the time devoted to silence and reflection. When we finish a project, there is always something waiting for us to do; our lives are very busy. These weeks have awakened in us the importance of silence and reflection. We have sometimes come to see how uncomfortable we are with more silence in our lives; and it has taken both time and effort to use the silence that has been forced upon us as something that really is a "gift in disguise." The moments of silence and reflection are precious times for communion with God, whether in the practice of *lectio divina*, adoration, or stillness before the divine presence already within us. The simple line from Psalm 46 challenges us to take the quiet we have been given, and to find God present within us. "Be still and know that I am God" (Ps 46:11a). There is no doubt that God has many important things to say to us in the midst of this crisis; what is important is that we can take this time and realize how silence and solitude are "gifts" that are there for us to use wisely even after the time of this pandemic.

Fifth, we are living in a moment of inspiring heroism. On the larger scale, we have seen the sacrifice of their very lives by dedicated doctors, dedicated nurses, vigilant public servants who have all put their lives in harm's way to fulfill the calling they have received. Likewise, there has been a more silent, yet still dedicated heroism in the fervent prayer, generous service, and creative ways of assistance to people who have stood in need of spiritual need and desire. Many of our monasteries have offered spiritual guidance to oblates and those in need through the internet, email, and phone conversations. The beautiful challenge that now stands before us is to

keep this kind of generosity and creativity growing in our monasteries, certainly to one another, and to all who come to us as guests, in the figure of Jesus Christ. The heroism of our lives as Benedictines is often not as well known or widespread as we have seen on the front pages of newspapers and magazines; yet, it is heroic in the living of our tradition according to the Gospel and the *Rule of Saint Benedict* with a sense of mission that is vibrant and life-giving for one another and for whomever we may serve.

To give you some perspective on the Benedictine Order as information has come to us here at Sant'Anselmo, we can say that most of our communities have been spared the infection of the Covid-19 virus thus far; the point of emphasis is that "most" have been spared, but not all. We have heard that a few monasteries in Europe and the United States have contracted the virus. Also, word has come to me from several Abbots that we should be very careful about giving specific information about the Coronavirus and how it has affected different communities. The reason for this is that with the spread of this virus, situations can change from day to day. There is also the matter of personal privacy with regard to both monastic communities and the individuals within the community. We have become aware that a few acts of discrimination have been leveled against communities or individuals where the virus has entered their monastery and the effects it has had on their members, and also their relations with the world outside the monastery. Simply stated, let us pray in a special way for the monasteries of our Benedictine Order, and also other religious communities where groups of people living together can more easily become infected because of the close proximity in living with another. We pray for our whole world as it moves forward in its attempts to care for those who have become infected; and we ask for divine assistance that scientists will soon discover a vaccine that will bring this pandemic to an end.

Several weeks ago we announced that the Abbots' Congress in September 2020 is postponed, hopefully until September 2021. There are still many factors to consider when making a final decision. Since it is an international meeting, involving Abbots from all over the world, it is important to see how travel will be functioning between continents and countries, who will need Visas, and if there will be sufficient time to obtain all the necessary documents. We hope that we will be able to meet in September 2021. The proposed dates of the Congress are as follows:

- 1) New Abbots arrive on Sunday, 5 September 2021
- 2) All other Abbots arrive on Tuesday, 7 September 2021
- 3) The Congress ends the evening of Tuesday, 14 September 2021
- 4) Departure, Wednesday, 15 September 2021

Please mark your calendars for these dates. Keep up-to-date on these matters by turning to the website for the Congress: [www.congressusosb.com](http://www.congressusosb.com) .

Sister Lynn McKenzie, OSB, the CIB Moderator, wrote me the following text: "Due to the threat of the coronavirus, the CIB decided to postpone its annual Conference of Delegates meeting from September 2020 in Assisi to September 2021. Next year's Conference meeting will also be held in Assisi. The dates are 4-8 Sept 2021. The CIB Council will meet before the Conference meeting. After the Conference meeting in Assisi, on 8 September we will travel to Rome to join the abbots for the Congress of Abbots at Sant'Anselmo which will be from Sept 8-14. The CIB Council has been staying in touch with the CIB Delegates and Substitutes during this time of pandemic. We remain in communion for the safety and healing of all impacted by the virus."

I'm pleased to report that all 77 of our Benedictine and diocesan priest residents still present here at Sant'Anselmo are healthy, safe, and at peace. We have followed the programs

outlined by the government and the Italian Episcopal Conference for our daily rhythm of life and the celebration of the liturgy. The Ateneo continues to finish the academic year in good form, and looks forward to next year's program, which is being prepared with care and several possibilities for participation in its courses. If you have been planning on studying at Sant'Anselmo for the coming academic year, we hope you will continue your plans to be with us. Those who are planning to live and study at Sant'Anselmo or to take courses at any of the other Pontifical faculties in Rome should reserve a room with the Prior, Father Mauritius Wilde at [priore@anselmianum.com](mailto:priore@anselmianum.com). We hope to have a good number of Benedictines, as we have enjoyed in recent years.

In concluding, there are two spiritual reflections to leave with you. In the Scriptures, we know how important the word "name" is. The name of a person often identifies a person's character, identity, mission in life, blessing, or a unique calling. We know that when people are given a new name this can be a sign of a new calling in the movement of their life in relation to God's unfolding salvific action. Abram becomes Abraham; the prophet Isaiah's name means "the LORD saves;" Saul becomes known as Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles; the city of Jerusalem is depicted as God's bride and called "my delight is in her" (Isa 62:4b); and Jesus speaks of God as *Abba*, a term of tenderness and closeness. During these days of the Easter season, and the First Vespers of each Sunday in the Roman Liturgy of the Hours, we hear St. Paul's hymn in the Letter to the Philippians. That Christological hymn culminates with the acclamation, "that at the *name* of Jesus, every knee should bow [,,,] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Phil 2:10a, 11a). This hymn describes the paschal mystery in a profound way; Jesus empties himself of his Godly form and takes on the human form of a slave. By means of that emptying, God has both exalted him and given him a *name* that is above every other name. In these days of the invisible enemy before us, when fear, worry, uncertainty, dread, and anxiety find a passing place in our hearts, we need only call upon the *Name* that is above every other *name* (Phil 2:9), and simply come before the One who knows all things within our hearts, and call out the name of Jesus Christ, placing in him our trust, our confidence, our desire for peace and hope within us. There is a second place within the Psalms that invites us to call upon the name of the LORD that may sound a bit obscure in its meaning, but truly is an expression of deep and profound faith. It is the opening line of Psalm 54, "O God, save me by your *name*, by your power, defend my cause." What does that mean? The Psalmist invokes the *name*, that is, he calls upon all that God is to help in this situation: summoning God's infinite power, entreating divine mercy, imploring compassion, begging for goodness, beseeching divine healing, arousing God's sovereignty to do what no one else can do. What a beautiful mantra this is for us today: "O God save me, save us by your name!"

And lastly, as we move forward in the liturgical year we approach the coming solemnities of the Lord's Ascension and the celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Do we not find ourselves at this moment like the apostles and Mary, sequestered in a place together in prayer, in waiting, and in holy anticipation for the loving and gracious hand of God to bring us the anticipated blessing of healing, inner renewal, and hope for the future? Indeed, we await during these days for the grace of the Holy Spirit to come to us at Pentecost and to give us what we need most – a sign of God's loving care for each of us, for our communities, for our Church, and for our world. Like the apostles and Mary, gathered in waiting, so do we await in hopeful prayer for a sign that will show us a way forward. There is no doubt that the months ahead are going to be a time of transition to new ways of living in our communities, in our celebration of the liturgy, in the way that the Church will adjust to new expectations. There will also be numerous ways in which we will see changes in the way we live within our societies and cultures following the experience of this

worldwide pandemic. This is a time when we should ready ourselves to be taught how to move forward with faith in the God who never abandons us, but always surprises us with a divine goodness that exceeds our expectations. The path forward will be different, with the mixed elements of challenge and blessing; the future will carry a newness that asks us to be docile to the movements of the Holy Spirit who never ceases to teach, guide, and inspire us along new and uncharted paths. Like the apostles and Mary in the upper room, let us wait in confidence, in trust, and in hope. Let us ready ourselves to respond with enlivened trust that God is opening for us a new “tomorrow” where we will be guided by the divine Spirit of our good and gracious God.

To each of you, I offer sincere thanks for the ways in which have witnessed to the monastic spirit of prayer, stability, obedience, charity, generosity, sacrifice, and openness to the movement of the Holy Spirit in this unexpected pandemic. May our testimony as Benedictine men and women of the Gospel and the *Rule* lead us forward into the future, yet unknown, yet known in the mind and heart of God who walks with us each and every day.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Abate Gregory". The ink is dark and the handwriting is fluid and personal.

Sincerely in the risen Christ, our great Hope and Strength,

+ Gregory J. Polan, OSB  
Abbot Primate of the Benedictine Confederation