

Abbot Primate Gregory J. Polan, O.S.B.'s Address to His Holiness Pope Francis on the Occasion of the 125th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Benedictine Confederation – 19 April 2018

Holy Father, it is both a joy and an honor to receive this audience with you on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the establishment of the Benedictine Confederation. Through this important work of your predecessor, Pope Leo XIII, there exists greater unity, collaboration, and support among the 19 Congregations of the Benedictine Order who number about 7,000 men, and the Benedictine women who number about 12,000. At Sant'Anselmo, we have the Pontifical Institute of Liturgy, a school of theological studies, a school of philosophical studies, and a Monastic Institute. Represented here today with me are officials from our Ateneo and Collegio at Sant Anselmo, representatives of those who work in our Ateneo and Collegio, various abbots who represent the various Congregations of our Order and their presidents, members of the *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* of nuns and sisters, Oblates from our monasteries around the world, representatives of our Alliance for International Monasticism which work to aid the monasteries in the developing world, representatives from our Dialogue for Interreligious Monasticism, and representatives from our schools where the work of education and formation continue in the Benedictine spirit.

As Saint Benedict has in the opening command of the Prologue to his Holy *Rule*, "Listen, my child, to the precepts of your Master with the ear of your heart," we note how often you have called both the members of the Church, and truly all people, to "listen from the heart." When we are able to listen from the heart, we open the door to friendship, and from friendship, we can move to true and honest dialogue. And importantly, through one another, we can hear the voice of God speaking to the Church and the world today. Last September, we engaged in a Monastic-Muslim Dialogue of five days in Kenya, East Africa. How much we were able to learn about one another's beliefs, hopes, and dreams for the future. It was our hope that meeting on African soil with African Benedictines and Sunni Muslims from Iran and Europe, we can be ambassadors of good will for all, peace in our world, and reconciliation of past hurts with a move into the future with peace.

Visiting monasteries, you have been able to see how often they are set in a place of beauty where the natural environment sets the stage for a place where people can come to pray, to be silent, to reflect and to listen to the voice of God in their heart. We are most grateful for your encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which emphasizes the importance of good stewardship of the land, water, and air that the whole planet depends on. In the monasteries I have visited, there has been a proper care of the environment, especially so that what we have may be shared with all people, and sustained for the future. While this preserves the beauty which God has given us, we remember that good stewardship of the land provides for the poor and the needy. Saint Benedict reminds us that every guest who comes to the monastery is to be received as Christ, as you have stated in your recent Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*; and this is especially true for the poor and pilgrims because we particularly encounter Christ in them who show us their faith and the divine face.

Education has, for centuries, been a part of Benedictine life. Today our schools include primary and secondary education, colleges and universities, and also seminaries where

there are programs of priestly formation where future priests are prepared for the service of evangelization, celebration of the sacraments, and care for the many needs of the people of God. We have 191 schools in Africa, Asia, Europe, North American, Europe, Latin American and Oceania with approximately 180,000 students. In the context of Benedictine education, our history has emphasized not only the important of gaining information and knowledge, but also the necessity of growth in wisdom. So deeply rooted in the Biblical tradition, a love of learning must be connected to the search for God and spiritual wisdom in all things, in all places, and in all circumstances.

One of the things that is distinctive of Benedictine life is the manner in which we evangelize. For Jesuits, Franciscans, and Dominicans, they go out to the four corners of the earth to preach the Gospel. For Benedictines, we evangelize from the monastery, also those from the margins of the earth; many people come to us to find the silence, prayer, and peace of a monastery where they can listen carefully to the voice of God in their lives. That is why monasteries are such important places in our world. We are always there as places of prayer and community, as households of peace and welcome. Our vow of "stability" keeps us in the same place, always ready to welcome, to invite, and to serve. In our world of broken promises, alienation within families and among friends, injustice in the workplace, and broken dreams, monasteries provide a place for people to come, to hear God speak in the silence of their hearts, to lift up their hearts with the prayers and psalms in the liturgy, and to find hope in the message of the Gospel. We believe that our witness to "community life" is prophetic in a world where people are often alienated; we are men and women of different backgrounds, generations and personalities, yet we live in community to say to the world – we can all truly live in peace and charity. We believe that the service of hospitality given in monasteries today is one of our gifts to the Church and to the world. Moderation, balance and peace have been the hallmarks of Benedictine life for 1,500 years. We ask your blessing upon the works of our hands, our hearts and our very lives in the service of God and neighbor.

It is with much enthusiasm that the Benedictine Order looks forward to the Synod on the Youth. We have been blessed with vocations through the years; there are still young men and women who continue to knock at our monastery doors and seek entrance to our communal life; and I have witnessed this around the world. Your continued reference to "joy," Holy Father, is what we seek in our communities: the joy that comes from our belief in God's call to each of us, the joy that comes with sacrifice for others, the joy that invites young men and women to follow in the footsteps of Saint Benedict, and the joy that we are all loved, truly loved by God. Thank you for this continual encouragement to show forth our joy, a joy that is touched with love, a joy that is touched with hope.

Holy Father, we ask your guidance and help in offering us a word of instruction of the deepest meaning of our contemplative life, our love of the liturgy, and an encouragement in our charism of hospitality in welcoming Christ in every person who comes to be with us. And we thank you for your witness of faithful service, the joy that you show the Church and the world, and the teaching which you continue to offer us, especially by the example of your life. You are in our prayers each day, by name, and we ask you, please bless us, dear Holy Father.