

Office of Vigils ~ Week of Prayer for Christian Unity
Ecumenical Encounter via Live-Stream & Zoom Link
21.01.2021

Queen's University Chaplaincies, Charis Community, Youth Initiatives,
with participation of the Abbey's Oblates and others.

The Prayer and Reflection booklet prepared for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity this year was compiled by the Community of Grandchamp in Switzerland: an ecumenical community of Sisters that issued from a Retreat Movement among women of the Churches of the Reformation around the period of the Second World War.

Our community here at Holy Cross Abbey enjoys a strong bond of communion with the Community of Grandchamp. We could say that both our communities have been graced by God to live a veritable exchange of spiritual gifts. This has been a source of great mutual encouragement over decades.

It was at Grandchamp during the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 1983 that the inspiration we received that led to monks being sent to Northern Ireland from the Abbey of Bec-Hellouin in France by the then Abbot – Dom Paul Grammont. Those monks were Fr Eric and myself. The mission confided to us then was *to live a hidden life of prayer as a gesture of communion with the suffering Church and people of this land*. That was at a dark period in Northern Ireland's history, a time when violence was raging and ecumenical relationships were far from easy. That initial presence of Olivetan Benedictine monks in Northern Ireland lasted for four years. (Dom Grammont came to be with us for one year – 1986-1987.) During that time we were blessed to have on-going contact with the Sisters of Grandchamp and were greatly sustained by their prayer partnership with us.

The group of founding fathers of the present foundation of Holy Cross, which dates from January 1998, was also marked by a passage through Grandchamp before travelling to Northern Ireland to establish our permanent monastic foundation. We still hold in our hearts and minds a memorable prayer of blessing shared in the Chapel of the Beatitudes at Grandchamp. The blessing received that night offered us great encouragement for what we were about to undertake here, setting out, as we did then like Abraham, not quite knowing where we were going, but reliant upon and confident in the Lord's promise to be with us and to bless us in our response to His call.

Long before any of that, Grandchamp itself was, we could say, born out of (certainly greatly encouraged by) contact with the monastic family of which this Abbey is part.

The vision that led to the establishment of community life at Grandchamp was the fruit of a moment of prayer and a vision received in the Chapel of our Sisters' Monastery at Cormeilles-en-Parisis on 14th February, 1938. (The community of Nun-Oblates of St Frances of Rome moved from Cormeilles to Bec after the restoration of monastic life there in 1948.)

Marguerite de Beaumont recorded the vision she received and her subsequent conversation with Madame Elizabeth de Wavrechin (Prioress of the Benedictine nuns) which confirmed for her that was called to consent to the establishment of a community of Sisters vowed to the common life in what had been hitherto the place where the group of Protestant women of which she was part had met for times of spiritual retreat in shared silence. She was soon to welcome other women who would live together as Sisters of Grandchamp. Let me share Sr Marguerite's story with you.

She explains that along with Madame Micheli who was later to become the first Mother of the Community of Grandchamp, she arrived at the Monastery in Cormeilles about a half an

hour before Vespers. They were to meet the Reverend Mother of the Benedictine nuns, but decided they would only meet with her after Vespers. They took the thirty minutes before Vespers for a time of silent prayer together. Sr Marguerite recorded: *I prayed in silence in the Convent chapel beside Genevieve (i.e. Madame Micheli). I saw a vast crowd who were hungry. They were waiting for the bread of life. It was as if I heard Jesus say to me: Give them yourself something to eat and He handed me a grain of wheat. I responded: Lord, what is a grain of wheat to nourish such an immense crowd. Jesus said to me: Throw the grain of wheat onto the ground, cover it over with earth, then wait and hope! I threw my grain of wheat onto the ground and buried it and then waited with the immense and hungry throng of people all around me. In God's good time, my grain of wheat produced one hundred grains. I carried them to Jesus and said to Him: Here, Lord, is my grain of wheat which has produced one hundred-fold, but what will I do to nourish such a multitude? Jesus replied to me: Dig a furrow, throw the one hundred grains in it, wait and hope! I dug the furrow as instructed, I cast into the earth the one hundred grains of wheat and I waited in hope, still surrounded by the hungry mass of people. The following year, each grain bore one hundred other grains which I carried to Christ – now ten-thousand grains of wheat and I said to Him: Lord, here, the one hundred grains of wheat have each borne one-hundred fold, but will these ten thousand grains be enough to nourish such an enormous throng of people? Jesus said to me: Labour the earth, till the ground, and sow it with the ten-thousand grains of wheat and wait in hope. I waited with hope! I did as instructed. I laboured the earth, I sowed the wheat grains. Again I waited and I hoped. When harvest time came, each grain bore one hundred more and I exhausted myself doing the harvest. When the harvest was complete and all was safely gathered in, I said to Jesus: Lord, I have harvested one million grains of wheat in my field. The crowd are crying out and are dying of hunger, what must I do? Jesus replied to me: Do not say: I have harvested and gathered in from my field, because the field is not yours. It is mine. My field is immense – it is as wide as all the earth – you are just one labourer. I will send other labourers to work with you in the little corner of my field that has been confided to you. Together you will work in my field. Therein you will sow the half of the harvest, and with the rest you will nourish the crowd. Sr Marguerite went on to explain: At that point, I opened my eyes and Genevieve was praying in silence beside me. At that point the nuns processed into the chapel for Vespers. After Vespers Mother de Wavrechin ushered us into a little parlour where she met with us. I said to her: Mother, what is a community? A community? That is where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst. I probed her further: How does one know is one is called to live in community? The Mother Prioress replied: That is when one can say: May Your will be done in my indifference, holding oneself always in the presence of God. For Sr Marguerite to conclude: From that minute, I knew that God had called me to live in community, and from then onwards never for one moment have I doubted my vocation to community life. I say clearly: I received a call to the common life – not a call to be a foundress and leader of the community. I had neither the call nor the gifts required to found and lead the community.*

At Grandchamp, the role of foundress and leader (Prioress) would be taken up by Madame Micheli, Mother Genevieve, but, that being said, it was Sr Marguerite's call that was at the origin of what very quickly developed into a vibrant monastic community... the community which exists to this day, having grown from strength to strength – a community whose ecumenical witness is greatly appreciated by so many from all the Churches.

This evening it seems right just to stand back and leave that story to speak for itself. I won't make many comments upon it. Let me simply draw to your attention what it helps us realise. What the story heard shows us is that we are all called to plant small seeds for the Churches' growth in unity. The growth of the seed is not our affair. We do the planting, the Lord blesses

the growth. The small seeds we scatter upon the soil will fructify as long as we act in obedience, in faith, hope and love... waiting upon the Lord in hope, as is emphasised again and again in the vision. It is only with time – sometimes a long lapse of time – that the harvest will be reaped... and we won't reap it all. Others will be led to reap a large part of the harvest we have sown.

The conversation with Mother Elizabeth (the Benedictine Superior) after the vision, indicated what Sr Marguerite was called to do and what we are also called to do. It amounted for Sr Marguerite, it amounts for us, to simply engage with others to live the parable of communion. That is the sense of forming Christian community together with others: to be a living parable. By the quality of our community life shared we become a visible sign of unity in Christ. The Lord uses our testimony to speak to the world and to spread the Good News. This ties in not only with the Gospel verse Mother Elizabeth quoted (which speaks of the Lord's being with those gathered in His name), but also with the insight of the psalmist which we already heard in this Vigil Office: *It is where brothers and sisters are gathered together in unity that the Lord gives His blessing.*

Sr Marguerite's story illustrates for us the importance of retaining the word heard in the realisation that we are called to do whatever is asked of us; and in the realisation that we are called to conform our will to that of Christ.

The Lord's will is made clear to us in the Gospel of St John. It is *that all may be one*. It is that *all God's scattered children be gathered together as one*.

The unity with our brothers and sisters in the faith to which we are called depends upon our personal union with Christ. It is from each one's personal union with the Lord that the unity of the Churches will stem. A call to personal and ecclesial conversion is addressed to us this evening... conversion to the Gospel, conversion to the person of Jesus Christ.

The stories heard this evening remind us that Christian unity is not a question of Church political debates and compromises, not of some kind of union arrived at by human ingenuity, but the fruit of a reciprocal spiritual exchange and the mutual enrichment that creates. The stories heard – that of Grandchamp and that of Holy Cross Abbey, remind us that unity is ultimately a gift of God's Spirit and the fruit of attention to His guidance.

Gathered in prayer this evening, we are called to welcome God's gift of unity and to allow ourselves to be led in our turn to bear witness to the Gospel together – convinced that the Gospel is a message of hope for our world today.

That is so important in the Chaplaincy settings in which you are called to labour with each other at Queens University. It is so important for you who are involved in *Charis* and in *Youth Initiatives* to take on board. It is something that others engaged in ecumenical ventures who are joining us must also hear. As a monastic community we have to hear it afresh each and every day.

For l'Abbé Paul Couturier the soul and the heart of the ecumenical movement, is spiritual ecumenism. When he spoke of – and when we speak of *spiritual ecumenism* this concept is not used to mean a spirituality that is vague, weak, merely sentimental, irrational and subjective; one that does not take into account objective Church tradition, or even ignores it. What is meant is that in ecumenism the first place belongs to prayer. The story I shared with you which lies at the origin of the Community of Grandchamp was born in shared silent prayer. Our experience in Grandchamp which led to monks coming to Ireland was born in shared silent prayer.

Our shared prayer – not only in organised Prayer Services such as that of this evening, but our prayer shared at all times – has us enter into Jesus' own prayer on the eve of his death *that*

all may be one (Jn 17:21). Or rather, it has that prayer enter into us! An emphasis placed upon spiritual ecumenism is an important reminder to us that Christian unity cannot be only the fruit of human effort; it reminds us that we cannot as human beings make or organize Christian unity. We can only receive it as a gift of the Spirit. We must remember that it is a gift to be shared. Let us thank God for the Spirit's gifts shared with us and between us. Let us thank the Lord for the opportunity of being a little part of the movement of His Spirit this evening.

Amen!