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St Benedict 2023

(Letter n° 66)

“Love one another with mutual affection;
outdo one another in showing honour.”

(Rm 12:10)

Pope emeritus Benedict XVI died on 31 December 2022. He was pope from 2005 till 2013. We offer you the opportunity to read extracts from a text that he delivered at a general audience on 9 April 2008.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, I would like to speak about Benedict, the Founder of Western Monasticism and also the Patron of my Pontificate. I begin with words that St Gregory the Great wrote about St Benedict: "The man of God who shone on this earth among so many miracles was just as brilliant in the eloquent exposition of his teaching" (cf. *Dialogues* II, 36). The great Pope wrote these words in 592 A.D. The holy monk, who had died barely 50 years earlier, lived on in people's memories and especially in the flourishing religious Order he had founded. St Benedict of Norcia, with his life and his work, had a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture. The most important source on Benedict's life is the second book of St Gregory the Great's *Dialogues*. It is not a biography in the classical sense. In accordance with the ideas of his time, by giving the example of a real man - St Benedict, in this case - Gregory wished to illustrate the ascent to the peak of contemplation which can be achieved by those who abandon themselves to God. He therefore gives us a model for human life in the climb towards the summit of perfection. St Gregory the Great also tells in this book of the *Dialogues* of many miracles worked by the Saint, and here too he does not merely wish to recount something curious but rather to show how God, by admonishing, helping and even punishing, intervenes in the practical situations of man's life. Gregory's aim was to demonstrate that God is not a distant hypothesis placed at the origin of the world but is present in the life of man, of every man.

This perspective of the "biographer" is also explained in light of the general context of his time: straddling the fifth and sixth centuries, "the world was overturned by a tremendous crisis of values and institutions caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire, the invasion of new peoples and the decay of morals". But in this terrible situation, here, in this very city of Rome, Gregory presented St Benedict as a "luminous star" in order to point the way out of the "black night of history" (cf. John Paul II, 18 May 1979). In fact, the Saint's work and particularly his Rule were to prove heralds of an authentic spiritual leaven which, in the course of the centuries, far beyond the boundaries of his country and time, changed the face of Europe following the fall of the political unity created by the Roman Empire, inspiring a new spiritual and cultural unity, that of the Christian faith shared by the peoples of the Continent. This is how the reality we call "Europe" came into being.

St Benedict was born around the year 480. As St Gregory said, he came "ex provincia Nursiae" - from the province of Norcia. His well-to-do parents sent him to study in Rome. However, he did not stay long in the Eternal City. As a fully plausible explanation, Gregory mentions that the young Benedict was put off by the dissolute lifestyle of many of his fellow students and did not wish to make the same mistakes. He wanted only to please God: "soli Deo placere desiderans" (II Dialogues, Prol. 1). Thus, even before he finished his studies, Benedict left Rome and withdrew to the solitude of the mountains east of Rome. After a short stay in the village of Enfide (today, Affile), where for a time he lived with a "religious community" of monks, he became a hermit in the neighbouring locality of Subiaco. He lived there completely alone for three years in a cave which has been the heart of a Benedictine Monastery called the "Sacro Speco" (Holy Grotto) since the early Middle Ages. The period in Subiaco, a time of solitude with God, was a time of maturation for Benedict. It was here that he bore and overcame the three fundamental temptations of every human being: the temptation of self-affirmation and the desire to put oneself at the centre, the temptation of sensuality and, lastly, the temptation of anger and revenge. In fact, Benedict was convinced that only after overcoming these temptations would he be able to say a useful word to others about their own situations of neediness. Thus, having tranquilized his soul, he could be in full control of the drive of his ego and thus create peace around him. Only then did he decide to found his first monasteries in the Valley of the Anio, near Subiaco. (...)

Throughout the second book of his Dialogues, Gregory shows us how St Benedict's life was steeped in an atmosphere of prayer, the foundation of his existence. Without prayer there is no experience of God. Yet Benedict's spirituality was not an interiority removed from reality. In the anxiety and confusion of his day, he lived under God's gaze and in this very way never lost sight of the duties of daily life and of man with his practical needs. Seeing God, he understood the reality of man and his mission. In his Rule he describes monastic life as "a school for the service of the Lord" (Prol. 45) and advises his monks, "let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" [that is, the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours] (43, 3). However, Benedict states that in the first place prayer is an act of listening (Prol. 9-11), which must then be expressed in action. "The Lord is waiting every day for us to respond to his holy admonitions by our deeds" (Prol. 35). Thus, the monk's life becomes a fruitful symbiosis between action and contemplation, "so that God may be glorified in all things" (57, 9). In contrast with a facile and egocentric self-fulfilment, today often exalted, the first and indispensable commitment of a disciple of St Benedict is the sincere search for God (58, 7) on the path mapped out by the humble and obedient Christ (5, 13), whose love he must put before all else (4, 21; 72, 11), and in this way, in the service of the other, he becomes a man of service and peace. In the exercise of obedience practised by faith inspired by love (5, 2), the monk achieves humility (5, 1), to which the Rule dedicates an entire chapter (7). In this way, man conforms ever more to Christ and attains true self-fulfilment as a creature in the image and likeness of God. (...)

Benedict describes the Rule he wrote as "minimal, just an initial outline" (cf. 73, 8); in fact, however, he offers useful guidelines not only for monks but for all who seek guidance on their journey toward God. For its moderation, humanity and sober discernment between the essential and the secondary in spiritual life, his Rule has retained its illuminating power even to today. By proclaiming St Benedict Patron of Europe on 24 October 1964, Paul VI intended to recognize the marvellous work the Saint achieved with his Rule for the formation of the civilization and culture of Europe. Having recently emerged from a century that was deeply wounded by two World Wars and the collapse of the great ideologies, now revealed as tragic utopias, Europe today is in search of its own identity. Of course, in order to create new and lasting unity, political, economic and juridical instruments are important, but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal which draws on the Christian roots of the Continent, otherwise a new Europe cannot be built. Without this vital sap, man is exposed to the danger of succumbing to the ancient temptation of seeking to redeem himself by himself - a utopia which in different ways, in 20th-century Europe, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, has caused "a regression without precedent in the tormented history of humanity" (Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture,

12 January 1990). Today, in seeking true progress, let us also listen to the Rule of St Benedict as a guiding light on our journey. The great monk is still a true master at whose school we can learn to become proficient in true humanism.

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In the course of his service to the Congregation, Abbot Mark-Ephrem visited several communities: on 7-14 December the Abbey of Bec (France), on 10-17 January, with Bro. Thierry he travelled to Arizona to complete arrangements concerning the former Monastery of Holy Trinity; on 26-28 Abbot Mark-Ephrem visited Paris and the Abbey of Bec; on 6-8 February he was again in France; on 12-19 February he visited the Abbey of Abu Gosh in Israel; on 27 February-7 March he visited the Abbey of Maylis (France) with Bro. Thierry.

One event deserves special attention: our Abbot General, Dom Diego M. Rosa invited monks from four French-speaking communities (Abu Gosh in Israel, Bec, Maylis and Mesnil-St-Loup in France) to a meeting in the Retreat Centre at Chevilly-Larue on 9-11 May. 14 monks attended along with Dom Diego, Dom Andrea M. Santus (General Bursar), Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry. The meeting provided an opportunity for representatives of the four communities to get to know each other better and to exchange views on issues concerning the fragility of their communities, whether by reason of numbers or age.

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✠ From 1 to 6 December, Dom Maksimilian Nawara, Abbot President of the Benedictine Congregation of the Annunciation and Abbot of a new foundation in Ukraine preached our community retreat.

✠ On Sunday, 4 December, Abbot Mark-Ephrem attended the Church of Ireland cathedral in Armagh for the installation of a new ecumenical canon, Rev. Dr Heather Morris, Secretary General of the Methodist Church in Ireland.

✠ On 4 January, the community took advantage of the January closing of the Abbey guest house for a community outing; we went firstly to Saul (thought to be the site of the first church of St Patrick) and spent some time in prayer; then we went to Belfast where we took part in “Van Gogh: The Immersive Experience”, a 360° digital art exhibition that invited us to step into the universe of Vincent van Gogh; then we attended Mass at the Redemptorist monastery in Clonard. We ended the day in an Italian restaurant!

✠ On 18 January, we celebrated the anniversary of the dedication of our church and entered the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in the company of Rt Rev. Richard Clarke, former Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh who preached at the Eucharist and shared lunch with us.

✠ From 19 to 21 January, we welcomed Dom Mark Butlin, a monk of Ampleforth Abbey (England) who is still involved in the Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM), despite his 91 years.

✠ On 22 January, a Service was organised at the Church of Ireland cathedral in Belfast to celebrate the setting up of the Irish Council of Churches and the 50th anniversary of the setting up of the Irish Inter-Church Meeting. The community took part in the Service, singing a psalm and the canticle of Simeon in Gregorian chant.

✠ On 25 January, Abbot Mark-Ephrem, Bro. Eric and Bro. Thierry attended a diocesan meeting in Dromantine on the Synod and synodality with the Administrator of our diocese, Archbishop Eamon Martin, of Armagh.

✠ On 11 February, Bro. Thierry was in Castlewellan for a gathering of European university students and facilitated a workshop on prayer.

✠ The Little Sisters of Jesus decided to close their community in Belfast. On 12, the two remaining Sisters, Sr Hélène and Sr Josiane came to say goodbye. Both are returning to France.

✠ From 13 to 18 February, Bishop Kevin Doran, of Elphin (Ireland) made a retreat with us.

✠ On 21 February, Bishop John McAreavey, our former bishop, visited.

✠ On 23 February, the board meeting of the Irish Council of Churches met at the Abbey for a working session.

✠ From 24 February to 1 April, Bro. Laurent is in the Philippines with his family.

✠ On 8 March, we celebrate the 40th birthday of Bro. David-Joseph. Various events marked the day.

✠ On 9 March, Graham Browne begins his noviciate as a secular oblate. On the same day, we were happy to welcome Bishop Trevor Williams, former Church of Ireland bishop of Limerick (Ireland) and his wife Joyce for a meal and some time with our community.

✠ On 12 March, we learn of the death of Mike Colombo (89 years), husband of René, sister of Abbot Mark-Ephrem. The funeral took place on 21 April at Penistone (England). Abbot Mark-Ephrem, accompanied by Bro. Eric, presided at the funeral Mass, and preached the homily.

✠ On 12 March, Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Bro. Thierry attended the reopening, after renovations, of the St Patrick Centre in Downpatrick and the launch of a new song in honour of St Patrick. The song was written and sung by Dana (who won the Eurovision Song Contest in 1970).

✠ On 17 March, feast of St Patrick, Bro. Ildefonso M. Quilao arrived from the community of Monte Oliveto Maggiore (Italy).

✠ From 22 to 25 March, we were happy and honoured to welcome Esther de Waal. She spoke to us about her next book on the places that marked her spiritual journey.

✠ On 6 April, Abbot Mark-Ephrem took part in the Chrism Mass in the cathedral of our diocese in Newry. Archbishop Eamon Martin, administrator of our diocese, presided.

✠ On 23 April, Canon Peter Thompson was installed as the new Archdeacon of the Church of Ireland cathedral in Armagh and Rev. Matthew Hagan was also installed as a new canon. Abbot Mark-Ephrem attended the celebration.

✠ May 6 was the day of the coronation of Charles III. To mark the event two Services were held at the Church of Ireland cathedral in Armagh. On 2 May, Archbishop John McDowell, Church of Ireland archbishop of Armagh, preached at a Service of thanksgiving for the King; on 25 May, Charles III attended a Service in which the leaders of the four main Churches (Church of Ireland, Catholic, Presbyterian and Methodist) prayed for him. Abbot Mark-Ephrem occupied his seat as ecumenical canon on both occasions.

✠ On 14 May, Abbot Mark-Ephrem preached at the Church of Ireland cathedral in Armagh. On the same day Mental Health Awareness Week began. A Sunday Service, pre-recorded and broadcast on this day on BBC radio 4 and BBC radio Ulster; during this service, Abbot Mark-Ephrem gave three short reflections, and the community sang two pieces of Gregorian chant.

On that evening our community hosted a classical guitar concert to support “Cancer focus”, a charity whose aim is to support families of those ill with cancer.

✠ On 17 May, we visited Hillsborough Castle, the royal residence in Northern Ireland.

✠ On 18 May, the feast-day of Bro. Eric, the whole community visited the St Patrick’s Centre, Downpatrick. In the evening we joined with those gathered for Evening Prayer in the Church of Ireland cathedral and visited the ruins of Inch Abbey, a Cistercian abbey from the 12th century.

✠ On 4 June, Abbot Mark-Ephrem concelebrated a Mass of Thanksgiving in Banbridge for the 50th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of our bishop emeritus, Bishop John McAreavey.

✠ On 7 June, the feast of St Colman, first bishop and founder of the Church of Dromore, Bishop John McAreavey, accompanied by a Polish priest, Fr. Vladimir Szymanski, concelebrated Mass with us.

✠ On 6-15 June, Bro. Eric is in France with his family.

✠ On 21 June, as for the last three years, an ecumenical Service is held in the Church of Ireland cathedral, Belfast, to remember the victims of the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Representatives of all the Churches took part. Abbot Mark-Ephrem represented the Catholic Church. Abbot Mark-Ephrem and Br Thierry sang the Gregorian intonation *Da pacem...* (Give peace, Lord, to those who cling to you; may your prophets be found faithful; hear the prayers of your servant and of your people, Israel).

✠ From 29 June to 8 July, Abbot Mark-Ephrem is at the mother-house of the Little Sisters of the Poor at St Pern (France); he preaches the retreat to the Sisters who will make their profession.



“Plurality which is not reduced to unity is confusion.
Unity which does not depend on plurality is tyranny.”

(Blaise Pascal, 1623-1662)