



BADIA PRIMAZIALE SANT'ANSELMO

Curia dell'Abate Primate

Laetare Sunday – 22 March 2020

Dear Abbots, Abbesses, Priors, and Prioresses,

Greetings of Lenten peace from Sant'Anselmo in Rome. My sincere thanks and gratitude go out to so many of you who have already written to express your prayerful remembrance of all of us at Sant'Anselmo, the Benedictine Confederation, and the members of the women's monasteries of the *Communio Internationalis Benedictinarum* (CIB). All together, we are living through a time of unprecedented change in so many aspects of our lives. We have all come to see that the best attempts at planning for events, good-will endeavors to be of service to others, and arrangements for community celebrations can come to a halt in a matter of moments. All our efforts to eat and live in a healthy way seem suddenly useless when the virus enters our community. With the collapse of travel and commerce, many of our sources of income from our guesthouses, our courses, and our small businesses and workshops, have gone down or even disappeared at present. While all this can be disappointing, discouraging, worrying and frightening, our faith reminds us that all people, all things, and all events are in the hands of a God who loves us, cares for us, and provides for us. While we may think of the name of God so often used in Advent, Immanuel, it is a divine name that stands true each day of our lives: indeed, God is with us. We cannot just say that, we have to believe it and put it into practice in ways that are life-giving for ourselves and for those with whom we live and serve. That is our encouragement and our strength as we move forward in faith.

Last Tuesday evening before Vespers, we had a meeting for all the residents here at Sant'Anselmo. The Prior gave the community an update on the situation relating to the Coronavirus as found in the documents of both the government and the Church. This was followed by time for questions and discussions. We are fortunate to have as one of our monks a medical doctor who understands the situation well and can answer concerns and questions, Dom Alfio Catalano of the Abbey of Praglia, near Padua. I concluded the meeting with a spiritual reflection. That evening, we were going to pray Psalm 125 at Vespers. There is a beautiful verse in that psalm which gives us an ancient truth that is still pertinent for us today. The text reads in verse 2, "Jerusalem! The mountains surround her; so the Lord surrounds his people both now and forever!" What a powerful image for us to reflect on. In effect, the Psalmist tells us that we live, move and have our being in the embrace of God's loving care. God's life-giving protection and care surrounds us, even when we do not feel it. But like the mountains that stand firm in their place, encircling Jerusalem, God's steady, stable and strong arms remain a force that guides the course of world events, including the one in which we all now stand.

Someone wrote to me and asked if this Coronavirus is God's punishment upon our world today. No, certainly not. When such disasters happen, it's natural to ask, "Why did this happen,

where did it come from, who is to blame?” This same question is found in the Gospel according to Luke, when people asked Jesus about the 18 people who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them. Jesus replied, “Do you think they were more guilty than anyone else in Jerusalem? By no means” (Lk 13:4-5a). The answer of Jesus to the people was that their interpretation was incorrect; the point often is, we simply do not know, and our human existence is filled with many unanswered questions. Another example appears in the Gospel according to John, when the disciples ask Jesus, “‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus replied, ‘Neither he nor his parents sinned’ (Jn 9:2-3a). Jesus tells the disciples to look within themselves and to walk in the light that Jesus shows them, that is to follow him faithfully.

God continues to guide and care for us through the dedicated men and women in our governments throughout the world. They have taken a hard look at the threats that face us by the experiences that have already begun to spread through China, and now in Italy and beyond. God speaks to us through them, and also through the leaders of our Church who have told us to follow the restrictions and guidelines that the medical profession has given to our governments. These laws that have been put into place to halt the spread of this debilitating virus, to preserve lives, and keep safe those who are most vulnerable, and really, all of us. This virus does not discriminate according to age. These restrictions limit our lives, and put boundaries on what we can do, where we can go, and how we can relate to one another – all for our benefit. These men and women are instruments of God’s voice to us, to know the divine presence through this human communication. We can believe that our obedience and cooperation will be redemptive in both saving lives and arresting the spread of this virus.

An article appeared in one of the Italian newspapers from a doctor in northern Italy who was treating patients with this virus. It reads more powerfully if I simply give the story to you as the doctor himself speaks to the journalist. In Italy, no one is free to enter a hospital to visit anyone – not a priest, nor a religious sister, nor a family member. This is a story about a priest who came to the hospital because he was sick with the symptoms of the Coronavirus. “Nine days ago, a 75-year-old pastor came to us for medical help. He was a kind man, he had grave respiratory problems, but he had a Bible with him and it impressed us that he was reading the Bible to the people who were dying and holding their hands. We were all tired, discouraged doctors, psychologically and physically spent, and so we found that we were listening to him. Now we must admit: as human beings we have reached our limits, there is nothing more we can do, and more people are dying every single day. And we are exhausted. Two of our colleagues have died and others are infected. We realized that we have reached the limits of what man can do. We need God, and we have begun to ask for his help. We speak among ourselves and we cannot believe that we who were fierce atheists are now seeking for interior peace by asking the Lord to help us to resist so that we can take care of the sick. Yesterday the 75-year old pastor died. Despite the fact that in the last three weeks we have had over 120 people die in our unit and we are all exhausted and feel destroyed, he succeeded, despite his own condition and our own difficulties, to bring us a PEACE that we no longer hoped to find. The pastor went to the Lord, and soon we will follow him if things continue like this. I have not been home for six days; I don’t know the last time I ate something; I realize my own worthlessness on this earth, and I want to dedicate my last breath to helping others.”¹

¹ Marco Tosatti, “THE CRY OF A DOCTOR IN LOMBARDY. ABOUT THE VIRUS, DEATH AND GOD.”, March 20, 2020 accessed <https://www.marcotosatti.com/2020/03/21/the-cry-of-a-doctor-in-lombardy-about-the-virus-death-and-god/>

My dear brothers and sisters, the Coronavirus places before us a great mystery, a paradox for us to ponder: in suffering and death there is healing and new life. The God who surrounds our lives is able to take the grief, anguish, suffering and even death, and bring forth the healing of souls and bodies to experience new life. We understand the paschal mystery at work in the words of this doctor; his exhausting service has meaning in God's unfolding plan for our healing and our renewal. The transformation of the human heart is the work of God, and often God uses us as instruments of divine grace to bring about the restoration of people's lives. That is why we can be assured that God stands in the midst of all the events of human history; not that he has brought them about, but that, as the Lord of human history, we are never far from the redemptive hand of God.

In the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, there is a moment when the people and city of Jerusalem are under siege by the Assyrian forces. In effect, the enemy is at the door, poised to enter and attack them. When Israel is tempted to make an alliance with Egypt to fight off the Assyrians forces, God gives an opposing and important word through the prophet which speaks to our situation today. "Thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa 30:15). Salvation and deliverance remain in the hands of God; our task is to trust with serene confidence. That is not always an easy task. The advances that have been made through the work of scientists, chemists, medical doctors and researchers all attest to the advances that have been made in recent centuries to curb disasters and to keep us free from threats of harm. Well and good, but we have now seen that even the brightest of minds and the most skilled in the medical profession are stumped, and waiting for something to reveal a cure. So now is a moment of great faith and challenging trust to see how God will lead us forward. The Psalmist says it another way: "Be still and know that I am God: exalted over nations, exalted over earth" (Ps 46[45]:11). It is God who moves the minds and hearts of professionals to see things in new ways and to make new discoveries. Our challenge is to know faithfully trust that God stands in the midst of this, and will lead us forward.

As Benedictines, our daily prayer remains a source of encouragement as our communities gather each day to hear the word of God and to pray the Psalms. The texts of Scripture and the Psalms unite us in one voice crying out to God, not only for ourselves, but for all who have suffered loss in any way. Sometimes people have said to me that they struggle with the harsh and violent words of the psalms, especially those found in the Laments. At this moment when so many are suffering under the pains of a foreign enemy that invades and debilitates the human body, the words of the Laments give us a language of solidarity with our brothers and sisters in the human family who have suffered death, disease, and distress. The words of the Laments join our voices with those people who can hardly express the pain they have experienced; we can become their voice to God, crying out for mercy and reprieve, an end to their confinement or exile. A deep sense of solidarity unites us with them, as together we storm the heavens both with our words and with our acts of sacrifice. When we can accept the sacrifices that are asked of us with ready willingness and a spirit of genuine charity, we fulfill the words of God given us through the Prophet Isaiah, "By waiting and by calm you shall be saved, in quiet and in trust shall be your strength" (Isa 30:15). The daily practice of *lectio divina* steeps us in the Word of God as a divine voice that speaks to us and asks for us a response. May we listen with open hearts to what God wishes to tell us in the quiet moments when the Scripture reveal to us a voice of compassion, hope, and peace. In that daily spiritual exercise we come into contact with the living God who desires to enter into communion and conversation with us. Let us listen faithfully and hopefully.

It is also important to mention that I realize that many of our Benedictine monasteries of women will be without a priest to celebrate the Triduum liturgies; and this is true of many of our devoted and fervent lay people whose parishes are closed for safety in keeping the virus from spreading. I do not know how all the countries of our monasteries are affected, but there are common elements we all share. Our daily celebrations of the Liturgy of the Hours provide rich fare for our reflection, food for thought and meditation that has sustained the faith of the Church for centuries. The Psalms, the biblical readings, and the non-biblical readings all tell the story of the mystery we celebrate during the day of the Triduum in a language that heightens the greatness of the paschal mystery for us to contemplate. I have read about the men's monasteries that are live-streaming their liturgies so that the Sisters, Oblates, and Friends in their region may participate in the Sacred Triduum. One of the Oblates from my home monastery wrote to tell me how close she feels to the monks of Conception Abbey by their live-streaming of Lauds, Vespers, and Mass each day. The way that modern technologies today have developed, there are a variety of different ways that the Triduum liturgies can be celebrated. For all of us, men included, the Triduum will be a different experience which we will remember for many years to come. Also, the isolation which we all experience becomes an opportunity to go deeper within. We all know that the word in Latin *Monaco/monaca* refers to one who is alone. In that experience of solitude, therein lies the grace to dig deep into the rich well of the faith that lies within each of us. And however small our community is, we are privileged to gather as a community, brought together by Christ who told us that where two or more are gathered in his name, he is there in the midst of them (Mt 18:20).

Our charism of hospitality has a special meaning now, and we must think lovingly and creatively. For many of us, we are unable to welcome guests, allow others to join us in our common prayer, or allow our employees to carry on their tasks with us. As the saying goes, "Charity begins at home." Our welcome and kindness to our community members becomes a genuine source of hospitality that we can often miss. When someone in the community looks lonely or fearful, a kind word, a greeting, or a simple expression of friendship becomes a way of expressing our care and concern for one another. When we have boundaries of space within our own living conditions, taking time to visit with others, observing the respected distance is a way of working together to combat the disease and to strengthen the bonds of brotherly or sisterly appreciation. Also, keeping in contact with those we know who are alone becomes another way to express our appreciation for the bonds of family or friendship. Hospitality extends a loving concern wherever we see or know of someone in need.

Here at Sant'Anselmo, we have taken on special times for prayer with Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, the recitation of the rosary, and prayers for the people of Italy who have been especially hard hit. Our prayer together builds confidence, dispels fear, and builds a solidarity which strengthens all of us who feel the constraints of this situation. It is moments like this when our human possessions mean little to us, and our faith is a most treasured gift that enables us to be selfless, generous, and kind at all times. We remain strong in the embrace of God. Our prayer possesses a power that is stronger than we can fully comprehend, so let us keep faithful to that daily plea to God for an end to this debilitating disease. And let us listen attentively to the voices that God sends to us through the government and the Church, trying to foster a healthy path to overcoming this present situation.

Regarding events scheduled here at Sant'Anselmo this summer, we will be able to make a decision about the course "Cultural Dimensions of Christian Spirituality," and also "Leadership According to the Rule of Saint Benedict," during Holy Week; we will communicate this to all our

monasteries. Also, a number of Abbots have written to ask about the Abbots' Congress scheduled for early September. We have made the decision to wait until the month of May when we will have a better idea of how our world is faring in this journey to physical and emotional healing, as this is an international event. Once we have a better idea of how the Coronavirus is affecting the nations of the world, we will see if the professionals can give us some guidance and direction for what is the best things for us to do, for the Abbots' Congress is an international gathering; that must be taken into consideration. We continue to work toward having the Congress, but a decision will not be made until mid-May.

Let us continue to pray for those who are seriously affected by the Coronavirus, for those who are working for a vaccine to prevent its spread, and for all who suffer from the physical and emotional effects of this dreaded virus. We look to Mary, whose maternal love and care for all of us is a sure hope for healing and restoration. And as we celebrate the feast of the Incarnation with the solemnity of the Annunciation of the Lord, we are reminded of how close Jesus Christ is to us, taking on our human flesh, to heal a broken world from the inside-out. Let us continue looking to Christ with trust, confidence, and hope.

Sincerely in Christ, our great Hope,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Abate Gregory". The script is cursive and elegant, with the first letter of "Abate" being a large capital 'A' and the first letter of "Gregory" being a large capital 'G'. The signature is centered on the page.

Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, O.S.B.