

ABBOT GENERAL'S TRIP TO SPAIN AND PERÚ

(September 9 to October 10, 2015)

On Wednesday, September 9th, Dom Eamon and I boarded an Iberia flight in

Rome with Madrid as our destination. The main purpose of this trip is for Dom Eamon to conduct the Regular Visitation at the Monastery of Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas, just outside Burgos, head of the Cistercian Congregation of Saint Bernard (CCSB), with houses of nuns only and, with one exception, found only in Spain. After the Visitation at Las Huelgas, we will also visit several other houses of this Congregation, with a total of 23, most of them quite small numerically. Las Huelgas also has a foundation in Lurín, Perú, which necessitates our travelling to South America in order to complete the Visitation.

The CCSB has been closely associated with our Order since the 1970s, and they view our General as theirs as well, even though they have their own Abbess President, M. Angelines de Frutos, who resides at Las Huelgas. There is a great deal of collaboration and interchange in Spain between their houses and ours, and their Abbess President always attends our General Chapter as a non-voting participant. During this particular trip we plan to visit only two OCSO communities. The first is Viaceli, on the occasion of the beatification at Santander, on October 3rd, of their Martyrs who perished in 1936, victims of the Spanish Civil War. And the second is Monte Sión, outside Toledo, for reasons I shall later explain.

Santa María la Real de Las Huelgas (Burgos)

The monastery of Las Huelgas, as its complete name ("Santa María *la Real*") indicates, is a "royal" monastery, founded in 1187 by King Alfonso viii of Castile and his wife, Queen Eleanor Plantagenet of England, daughter of Henry ii and Eleanor of Aquitaine. It appears that from the beginning the monastic church was intended to house the royal tombs, of which there are about 30, including those of Alfonso and Eleanor, located at the head of the nuns' choir in the central nave. Such foundations guaranteed that

all the deceased members of the royal family would be prayed for by the nuns in perpetuity, not only by conscious intention but simply because of the physical presence of their remains right in the middle of the community's daily liturgy.



With one exception, all of the royal sarcophagi were sacked by Napoleon's troops during their invasion of Spain in the early 19th century. In the beautifully set-up museum you can see the very little that was salvaged, but even this little gives a strong indication of the wealth the tombs contained by way of exquisite jewels and gold-thread embroidery. Most interesting historically, perhaps, is the very large and intact standard of the Muslim caliph Muhammad an-Nassir. It is supposed to have doubled up as the "door" to the caliph's field tent, and was captured by Alfonso viii at the great battle of Las Navas de Tolosa in 1212. This battle marked the decisive turning point, in favor of the Christian armies, of the *Reconquista*, that is, the push southward to drive all Muslims out of Spain, which would not fully succeed until 1492.

There are certain relics pertaining to Saint Thomas Becket in the museum. It appears it was Queen Eleanor herself who introduced the cult of this holy martyr when she came to Spain. This constitutes a major irony of history since it was King Henry ii, Eleanor's father, who had had Archbishop Thomas Becket famously murdered in Canterbury Cathedral during the celebration of Vespers when the girl was only eight years old.

Since its foundation in 1187 until this very day, there has been an uninterrupted Cistercian presence at Las Huelgas. This means that the praise of God has not failed to be sung there even for a single day over the past 828 years! The mind staggers before such a fact. And it is difficult to convey in words the grandeur and sheer monumentality of the place, its buildings and furnishings. Extraordinary works of art encounter the eye at every turn, and the most beautiful thing is that they are still objects inducing devotion rather than mere museum pieces.

It takes the visitor two or three days just to find his way around and not get lost. One discovers cloister upon cloister, of every conceivable size. The loveliest is the one called "Las Claustrillas", of

impeccable Romanesque design. The gracious succession of slender round arches, and the contrast between the darker cloister walks and the light-filled garth in the center, open only to the sky,

create a sort of *visible music* that at once instills peace in the heart and a curious sense of gladness just to be there.



Against such a background, and remembering that Las Huelgas was a royal foundation, you will easily believe the fact that, for centuries, the lady abbess of Las Huelgas wielded a level of both ecclesiastical and temporal power that placed her well above the archbishop of Burgos, then capital of Castile. In canonical matters she was answerable only to the Pope himself! About the only things she could not do was celebrate Mass and hear confessions; however, within her extensive jurisdiction, she appointed and removed the priests who did, and on occasion punished them by imprisonment in a special building you can still visit. The sisters here say that at one time the nuns of Las Huelgas had no fewer than forty chaplains at their service simultaneously! The unrivalled position of the abbess of Las Huelgas is so fascinating historically that a certain canon lawyer in the 1940s devoted his doctoral dissertation to a thorough study of the institution. This canonist was none other than Saint Josemaría Escrivá de Balaguer, the founder of Opus Dei.

At present the community numbers 24 sisters, the majority of whom are rather advanced in age. But what a lively and welcoming group they are! They are led by Mother Mercedes Amutio, a most forthcoming and generous hostess. The choir is consistently well-attended, and their recreations are always on the brink of turning into a party. The sisters have communal work in which they all share: namely, washing and ironing all the linen of a five-star hotel in Burgos. The more elderly sisters are particularly grateful for such work since they can do it in a sitting position, and this gives them a sense both of camaraderie and of making a valuable contribution to the community's needs.

The sisters seem to enjoy Dom Eamon's company, and few opportunities are missed for extended conversations between us and the whole community. In these encounters Father General, as usual, mostly speaks to the sisters about the state of our Order, explaining to them our present challenges and hopes, and always undergirding them at the end with his vision of faith and trust. The nuns at Las Huelgas (and elsewhere in CCSB communities, we would later see) appear very eager to receive such information, since they often feel quite isolated from the rest of the Cistercian world. This more social aspect of the visit occurs in tandem with the formal interviews between Dom Eamon and each member of the community, so that by the end of the first week our vocal chords clamor for rest.

Santa María de la Santísima Trinidad (Lurín, Perú)

The needed rest comes on Tuesday, September 15th, in the form of an 11½ hour, non-stop flight from Madrid to Lima, Perú. Such a flight poses ordeals of its own, but at least we can refrain from talking for its duration. We arrive in Lima in the evening and are met at the airport by the superior of Lurín, M. Trinidad Ruiz, and her chauffeur. Lurín is a little town located directly south of Lima, only about 20 miles or so down the Pacific coast. But Lima is such an enormous city and the traffic is so congested that it takes us a full two hours to arrive at the monastery. The small community of six sisters is awaiting us eagerly, but we are so exhausted that immediately after hearty greetings are exchanged and a quick supper eaten, we seek our beds.

The Monastery of the Most Holy Trinity at Lurín was founded by Las Huelgas in 1992. It is still a dependent house, which explains why Dom Eamon has had to come here in order to complete the Visitation of the mother-house. The whole monastic complex is very well designed and appointed, and the elegance of Las Huelgas is reflected here in miniature, though in another, much more modern, key. The spaces are pleasant and ample, although just the right size for a small community.

Though the sisters are few, their voices are excellent, and Sr Guadalupe plays the organ and the zither with great and understated talent. This creates a liturgy that is beautiful and moving, and very faithfully attended by all. The sisters' chief means of self-support is the baking of *panetones*, which I must say rival the Italian original, no doubt due to the fact that they use only high-quality products to make them.

One drawback of the site is that two big factories have been built very close to the monastery in the last few years. However, the sisters have risen to this challenge wisely. They have planted a large and abundant orchard all around the monastic buildings. These trees not only yield all kinds of delicious fruits, some of which are sold (especially the

omnipresent *lúcuma*), but they also act as a buffer zone between the monastery and the factories. The Peruvian shoreline between Lima and Lurín is rather monotonous, since one sees little more than enormous, grey-colored sand hills, some of which are covered with the dwellings of the poor. But these Cistercian settlers remind me of our early fathers of Cîteaux, who managed by their hard labor to turn a rather unpromising terrain in Burgundy into a *paradisus claustralis*. Lurín, too, is a bright "cloister paradise".

One morning we are driven into Lima. M. Trinidad has arranged for a close friend of the monastery, the diocesan priest Fr Rafael, to take us to visit some of the chief religious shrines in the Peruvian capital. We first go to the house of Saint Rose of Lima, where there now stands a great basilica, and along with other pilgrims we drop slips of paper with our scribbled prayer petitions into the famous well in the courtyard. The house where Saint Martin de Porres was born is right across the street, but we can't visit it because it now belongs to the State.



Fr Rafael next takes us to visit the great shrine of *El Señor de los Milagros* ("The Lord of Miracles"), which interestingly is run by a community of cloistered Discalced Carmelite nuns who wear a special purple habit in honor of this shrine's special devotion. We are introduced, across a grill of course, to the friendly Carmelite prioress and novice mistress. We then drive by the Plaza de Armas, where the solemn changing of the guard is just taking place, with much martial music being played.

Finally Fr Rafael, who has to run off to a funeral, leaves us at the near-by Dominican convent of Santo Domingo, entrusting us to the care of the very welcoming young prior, Fr Luis Enrique. This friar generously gives us an in-depth, two-hour tour of the huge convent, and acquaints us with the life and vocation of Saint Juan Macías, the third renowned Peruvian saint of the trio that bridged the 16th and 17th centuries.

Another day we have the honor of being visited at the monastery by the bishop of the Lurín Diocese, Monseñor Carlos García, a close and appreciative friend of the community. He is clearly tired, arriving at the end of a long work day; and yet he couldn't be livelier and more interested in Cistercian ways, the present vocational crisis in the Order, and above all the importance of monastic life at the heart of the local Church. He is particularly insistent and eloquent on this last point. He says that, however low the supply of priests, the monastery will never lack one to come and celebrate the daily Eucharist with the sisters—even if he has to come himself.

One afternoon M. Trinidad and the novice mistress Sr Lucía, a nun on loan from the community of Villamayor de los Montes in Spain, take us into the little town of Lurín to see two properties donated to the community. One of the houses has been very successfully restructured as a day-care center for the children of employees of one of the two above-mentioned factories. We arrive during the little tykes' naptime, and it is satisfying to see that premises owned by a monastic community should be put to such beneficial use in support of family life. As we chat with the staff, we clearly see their dedication to their charges. The staff-to-children ratio is unbelievably high. The whole place sparkles with cleanliness, colors and general well-being.

Las Huelgas, Again

After spending only four full days at this monastery and in Perú, the time comes for us to return to Spain and complete the Visitation at Las Huelgas. And so we undertake the long flight back to Madrid in the afternoon of Sunday, September 20th, arriving the next day around noon. Faithful Laurentino is at Barajas Airport again, waiting for us with a cartonful of fresh-picked blackberries, and ready to drive us back to Burgos. He is a most jovial jack-of-all-trades at Las Huelgas, with the most easy-going disposition, and he is an accomplished craftsman to boot, responsible, in fact, for making the sisters' elegant choir stalls in their house chapel.

Our few remaining days at Las Huelgas are now taken up with sharing with the community our visit to their daughter-house in Lurín, further reflections by Dom Eamon on the Order and on trends in contemporary monasticism, and finally the reading to the sisters of the Visitation Card. An atmosphere of expectation, relief and affectionate gratitude prevails around this last event. The good-byes under the 13th-century portico are

heartfelt on the afternoon of Friday, September 25th, as we drive off in our rented black Volkswagen Polo, weighed down with edible gifts.

Monasterio San Bernardo (Burgos)

We didn't have far to drive, really only from one suburb to another across the city of Burgos. Within ten minutes we had arrived at Monasterio San Bernardo, or, as it is popularly known, *Las Bernardas*. Only the intricacies of history and human motivation can explain why there are not two but, in fact, *four* houses of CCSB in the Burgos area, three within the city itself and the fourth only some twenty miles away. (Actually, there are really *five*, if we count the OCSO monks' monastery of Cardena.) We are welcomed by the abbess, M. Lourdes Aparicio, and are initiated at once into the mysteries of many keys and locked doors, a feature of most Spanish monasteries of women.



Las Bernardas is a community of 14 sisters, most over 70 years of age, living in a spacious house right in the middle of a cluster of high-rise apartments in suburban Burgos. Thankfully, they had the good sense, when building this modern monastery, to have stuck to the traditional monastic plan of a central garth surrounded by four cloisters. This facilitates an inward focus that can at least temporarily forget the mammoth apartment buildings looming all around them, and the traffic on Pisones Road.

They say that, when the community moved here in the 1970s from its ancient location in the center of the city, they were quite isolated; but the Spanish building boom of the '80s and '90s has slowly encroached upon them. Wisely, as at Lurín, they have put in place a large fruit orchard around most of the buildings. They also have a large number of fowl, among which, curiously, one sees more roosters than hens. The sisters make altar breads that supply the whole archdiocese of Burgos. Something rather amusing I have not seen (or rather *heard*) in any other Cistercian community: at table for dinner, right after the reading of a passage from the Gospels, the sisters listen to the newscast of the day on Radio María.

Las Calatravas (Burgos)

On the morning of Monday, September 28th, we drive across Burgos again, this time to the San Cristóbal neighborhood, to spend only a couple of hours with the sisters of the third suburban community in Burgos, known as *Las Calatravas*. M. Juana Tajadura extends a gracious welcome to us. Here, too, we find tastefully appointed modern buildings from the '80s, but the community itself is quite ancient and has experienced two major moves over the centuries. These sisters derive from the Order of Calatrava, a medieval

congregation of military monks, founded by Saint Raimundo of Fitero, that followed Cistercian traditions. The sisters would have then been the “praying branch” of the Order

Page
8



Saint Raimundo's imposing statue in the choir shows him bearing the abbot's staff in his left hand and a sheathed sword in his right. The sisters insist that, though nowadays the very concept of a military religious order contradicts our sensibilities, nonetheless the fate of Spain would have been very different indeed, both spiritually and culturally, if it hadn't been for such vigorous initiatives of self-defense on the part of Christians. Let us remember in this connection that Ruy Díaz de Vivar, “the Cid”, is buried in the Burgos cathedral.

A very large and beautiful orchard again surrounds the monastic buildings, which present a combination of modern practicality and traditional elegance and décor. There are here eleven enthusiastic and receptive sisters, with only one under 70. The sisters wear, in the center of their black scapulars, the distinctive red emblem of the Cross of Calatrava.



An interesting anecdote before we leave the Calatrava sisters: They, too, are surrounded by high-rises, though these are far poorer than the ones around the Bernardas, and there is a strong gypsy presence in those dwellings. For some reason, many of these gypsies are not Catholic but Pentecostal Christians. The gypsy pastor of the local congregation, who has some six children and lives right across the street from the monastery, says that he,

his family and his flock are “the defenders of the nuns”. Apparently there have been acts of vandalism against the sisters in this precarious neighborhood. I reflect that, whether in the form of the medieval monk Raimundo de Fitero or in that of a contemporary gypsy pastor, *The Defender* must be a strong cultural archetype in Spain.

Santa María la Real de Villamayor de los Montes (Burgos)

After lunch back on Pisones Road and a final meeting with our Bernarda sisters, we leave Burgos behind on this Monday afternoon and drive eastwards on the excellent expressway. Superhighways are fantastic throughout Spain. Within half an hour we arrive at our next monastic stop, Villamayor de los Montes. As already stated, this is the fourth community of CCSB in the Burgos area. The abbess, M. Ana Maestre, receives us with profuse gestures of welcome.

Though close to the Burgos-Madrid motorway, Villamayor de los Montes is a tiny and very attractive traditional Castilian village set high on a hill, and its chief feature is the monastery. From the bell tower one has a commanding view far and wide over the countryside, at this time of year typically clothed in a light yellow hue. Man-made mountains of bales of hay may be seen scanning the fields, and their color at first makes you think they are a part of the natural topography.



Unlike the previous two monasteries, the buildings here are mostly quite ancient. There are a small and delightful Romanesque cloister and a very beautiful early-Gothic church in the pure Cistercian style of the early 13th century. It seems the place was originally what is called a “lay monastery”, that is, a community of families and friends who lived a pious life in common but were not monks or nuns. Eventually the daughter of the most prominent of these families, already a nun in Las Huelgas, was sent to establish a true monastic community here.

The great surprise at Villamayor is that, although we do encounter the expected group of rather elderly sisters as in other monasteries, we also find a group of about a dozen young sisters that have joined them in recent years. These new arrivals are nearly all from outside Spain, specifically Venezuela and Africa, and one from Curaçao. Not all these sisters, however, are here necessarily to stay, though all want to profit from a monastic experience, and the community gladly accommodates this desire. It is, however, a widespread phenomenon throughout Europe in our day to find young non-European sisters in many religious communities, and it is also wonderful and heart-warming to see how well the younger non-Spanish sisters have bonded with the older Spanish nuns.

Judging from the decibel level of the sisters’ gatherings, Villamayor strikes us as a dynamic and joyous community that is exemplary, not only in its integration of young and old, but also of the Northern and Southern hemispheres. It is a real pleasure to sit with these sisters out in their orchard, enjoying the luminous cool weather, and bask in the enthusiasm beaming from so many faces. Surprisingly, here in the depths of old Castile we are given a flavorful taste of our contemporary and thoroughly international Church, whose members are so aware of being one Body despite the broad gamut of our cultural and racial variations. The sisters’ chaplain, Fr Buenaventura, for example, is from Burundi. As we are about to take leave of the community after lunch in the refectory, the younger Spanish sisters, led by Abbess Ana, join the sisters from Burundi in performing an African farewell dance.

Nuestra Señora del Río y San José (Liérganes, Santander)

In the afternoon of Wednesday, September 30th, we head north toward the Cantabrian coast and the small monastery of *Nuestra Señora del Río y San José* (“Our Lady of the River and Saint Joseph”). This community is located southeast of the coastal city of Santander, in the village of Liérganes. The drive from Villamayor takes 2½ hours, and is our first substantial car trip thus far. What a stunning change of scenery and weather from the high plains of Castile to this Cantabrian region!

The weather in the land-locked plateaus of Castile has all along been bright, cool and dry, and the landscapes beautiful though rather austere in their uniformly tawny autumn dress. Then this afternoon, after whizzing over several valleys on magnificent bridges,

and boring through a number of hefty mountains through impressive tunnels, we suddenly begin descending onto a lush, green expanse that extends as far as the eye can see. The air is thicker, the humidity unmistakable: we are indeed coming closer and closer to the coast of the Cantabrian Sea.

M. Ana Seco, the abbess, is eagerly awaiting our arrival. The façade of the monastery lies directly on the road, no more than two feet from the curb! We hardly know where to park the car. Liérganes, like most of these Spanish communities of sisters, has a long and complex history, often marked by wars, diminishment, anti-clericalism and the encroachment of cities that threaten to smother monastic life. Often in the course of the 20th century, especially between, say, 1960 and 1990, many houses of Cistercian nuns, driven by pragmatic considerations, have had to relocate, almost always leaving behind a venerable and sometimes monumental monastery containing artistic riches.

At Liérganes, a community of only 5 members, the oldest sisters often speak with some nostalgia of the time when they lived in the middle of Santander, and of how difficult for some the transfer was. Even though here they are right on a rather busy country road, the property itself is quite beautiful, with a generous creek flowing through their backyard, and a nice fruit orchard.

The sisters, as I say, are few and advanced in years, so that they are kept quite occupied simply by doing every-day tasks like cooking and cleaning. A full-blown sewing workshop now lies unused. As usual in Spain, the hospitality of M. Ana and her community is vivacious and prodigal, and again we note that it's difficult to eat a bad meal in a Spanish monastery. Often enough, the smaller the community, the larger the meal! We have the pleasure of twice concelebrating with Padre Pedro, the sisters' diocesan chaplain, a dynamic young priest who is very friendly to us and has a Roman doctorate. Besides tending to the sisters' liturgical needs, he also has to cover three or four parishes.

Santa María de Viaceli (Santander)

On the morning of Friday, October 2nd, accompanied by gorgeous weather, we make our way to our monastery of Viaceli, in the picturesque village of Cóbreces, directly on the ocean. The place is dedicated to Our Lady under the invocation "Way to Heaven". At a certain point, road construction makes us take a detour through very narrow mountain roads, something our gps strongly resists for a while. However, what at first seems like a nuisance turns into a delightful little trek because we are able to play hide-and-seek with the ocean from rather elevated spots, and at one point we are rewarded with a splendid rainbow majestically overarching the whole green valley.

Page
12

We have come to Viaceli to attend the beatification tomorrow, in the Cathedral of Santander, of the fourteen monks from Viaceli, headed by Fr Pío Heredia, who were martyred in exceedingly gruesome ways in 1936 during the Spanish Civil War, for nothing more than the crime of being Catholics. Together with them will be beatified, also as martyrs, two Cistercian nuns from the CCSB monastery of Fons Salutis in Algemesí (Valencia), and the diocesan priest Padre José Camí, who had already been accepted as a postulant by Viaceli. Thus, 17 persons in all will be declared new saints of the Church tomorrow. They ranged in age from 65 to 19 years when they died, and the average age of the group was around 30.

Because monks and nuns are arriving from so many places for the great event tomorrow, we are greeted at the monastery gate not only by friendly Dom Alejandro Castro but also by Sisters Augusta and Gabriella of Vitorchiano and many other familiar faces. Soon after us arrives Cardinal Angelo Amato, Prefect of the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, who will represent the Holy Father at tomorrow's ceremony and preside at the Mass.

From my guesthouse window at the monastery, which sits high above the town, I enjoy a wonderful view: both pine trees and palm trees in the foreground and, beyond them, the dazzle of the deep-blue Cantabrian Sea. After having spent several weeks ensconced in the land-locked austerities of Castile, Dom Eamon and I take off at once to stretch our legs and enjoy the new and expansive atmosphere by walking down to the Playa de Luaña, about two kilometers downhill from the monastery.

Around 10 in the morning of the big day, Saturday, October 3rd, we drive to Santander. Santander is an elegant, modern city right on the ocean, rather resembling Nice and Cannes with its broad seaside avenues and classy resort hotels. We arrive at the cathedral a good two hours before the ceremony, and the festive air is palpable on all sides. We are to vest for Mass in the bishop's palace next to the cathedral; but even at this early hour we must make our way through throngs of both laypeople and clergy. A full cloister adjoins the cathedral, and huge monitors and chairs have been set up there for the overflow crowd since the cathedral is not large.

Deafeningly loud bells begin ringing about a half-hour before starting time, and then again when the solemn procession starts moving toward the sanctuary. Besides the Cardinal, a few bishops, and a great number of abbots and abbesses, there must be at least 100 concelebrants. The brothers from Viaceli sit together directly behind the altar and the bishop's throne, and it is moving to know that one of these brothers is a blood-brother of one of the martyrs. I am fortunate to sit in their company.



Brief biographies of each of the 17 new saints are read from the ambo, giving particular details that bring them closer to us who have come to honor them and give thanks for the witness of their faith. Cardinal Amato's homily on the martyrs is hard-hitting and graphic, sparing no details as to the manner of their deaths, motivated by hatred for religion and the Church. Some of them, for instance, had their lips sewn together with wire because they would not stop praying aloud. Others were tied to the fenders of cars and dragged around for mirth, then driven over multiple times. Most were thrown into the sea attached to a heavy weight. At the offertory, just before the presentation of the bread and the wine, items are brought up for veneration which the martyrs had personally

used. I best remember the sports trophy cup that Fr Pío used as a chalice to celebrate the Eucharist while hiding in a home that gave him shelter.

The feeling and devotion of the congregation now takes body in the intensity of the singing. It seems that not a throat in the church fails to join the excellent choir in the loft. Over and over, the whole space quivers with solemn song. It must help, of course, that a large part of the congregation is made up of monks and nuns. As we drive afterwards to the formal lunch at Monte Corbán, the local seminary just outside Santander, Dom Eamon remarks with insight, I think, that whereas these monastic martyrs were killed out of an ideological hatred for religion, nowadays the challenge facing us, their descendants, is rather the world's total indifference to our way of life, something which inflicts wounds of its own.

Santa María la Real de Gradefes (León)

After a plentiful and delicious festal banquet at Monte Corbán, we again take to the road around 4 p.m. and head for our next monastery, located in the village of Gradefes near the city of León, about 2½ hours away. This, too, is a royal monastery, founded like Las Huelgas by nuns from Tulebras toward the end of the 12th century. The sanctuary and transept of the church are a magnificent example of early Cistercian Gothic, with the arch only slightly broken and wonderful proportions of width and elevation. Unique for Cistercian churches of women, this church has an ample ambulatory. Page 15



However, it seems the original nuns ran out of means half-way through the construction of their church, and so the nave is suddenly stunted in its growth a little after the transept, and there it ends! Later on an extension was added, and the present chapel of the sisters is in fact housed within this extension, which possesses nothing like the beauty of the sanctuary but is very adequate for the sisters' current needs.

M. Visitación and the community of 15 sisters cannot do enough to make us feel welcome. They listen attentively to Dom Eamon's tales of our travels in places like Morocco and Nigeria, and they are interested in his suggestions as to what these new monastic horizons can teach long-established European communities. It is poignant to watch the faces of these sisters, average age 75, who have daily been faithful to the Cistercian charism over so many decades, as Dom Eamon reflects with them on the challenges and

future of European monasticism. I wonder what lies behind their gentle, mysterious smiles?

A little revealing snapshot of life here: as I sat at the abbess' desk downloading my mail, she was on the floor of her office in front of me, cutting out the pattern for an alb. A diploma on the wall told me later that she is a certified seamstress.

Page
16

On Monday afternoon, October 5th, the sisters load us up with goodies of their own production and see us off affectionately as we leave for the monastery of San Miguel de las Dueñas, on the western side of the city of León and at the border with Galicia. Not far outside Gradefes, however, we don't miss the opportunity to stop briefly, though it is raining, to see the empty monastery of San Miguel de Escalada, a celebrated example of pure Mozarabic architecture.

The church itself is locked, but there is an outside corridor defined by slender columns and the graceful Mozarabic arches that are a marvel to behold. There is a unique charm in the way a Mozarabic arch, which just slightly wants to become a horseshoe, breaks the perfection of the semicircle. It can best be described as having the form of a broad omega. Viewing a succession of such arches, you suddenly feel for a few seconds the blithe lightness of Being.



San Miguel de las Dueñas (León, near Ponferrada)

The *dueñas* in the name of this monastery is the Spanish derivation of the Latin *dominæ*, and this archaic use of the word retains the Latin meaning of “ruling ladies”, referring of course to the nuns of this ancient community. There are vaults in one part of the buildings that date back to the 10th century, when a group of Benedictine monks lived here. In the 12th century a community of Benedictine nuns took the monks’ place, and at the beginning of the 13th century it adopted Cistercian usages and traditions. Most of the present buildings, however, date from the 17th and 18th centuries. The name of the small village is identical with that of the community, which probably means that the town grew up around the monastic site. Though here we are still technically in the province of León, both the weather (damp and rainy) and the people’s accent (ambiguous vowels in their Spanish) betray the proximity of Galicia.



In the period following the promulgation of the draconian laws of *desamortización* (or “expropriation”) of monastic property under Mendizábal (1836-1837), San Miguel did not fare as well as Las Huelgas: the sisters were, in fact, forcibly exclaustrated, and the monastery property confiscated, for a period of 26 years. However, there has been one extremely positive, long-term result from such high-handed intervention on the part of the Spanish government. After the religious were allowed to return to their monasteries,

these were now classified as “national patrimony”, and therefore the major part of renovations and upkeep now runs at the expense of the State.

The splendid results of the accord are visible in places like Las Huelgas and San Miguel, whose communities would never be able to afford such financially daunting projects. In return, the monks and nuns living in monasteries classified as “national patrimony” must make accessible to scholars and tourists the more historically relevant parts of the buildings on a set schedule.

Page
18

M. Mercedes Martín and nearly all of the 22 sisters welcome us very effusively at the front door, and at once begin showing us the sights. They have a German shepherd puppy, about the size of a small pony, whose surprising name is Trotsky. This name created a dissonance in my brain, fresh from the beatification of martyrs murdered by the Reds. Reminiscent of Las Huelgas, the place overflows with religious art of very high quality. Three of the sisters in the community are from Tanzania. Despite the obvious language barrier, these sisters were among the most forthcoming during Dom Eamon’s meetings with the community.

Monte Sión and the “Assisted Living Monastery” (Toledo)



On Wednesday morning, October 7th, we depart for the longish trip to our OCSO monastery of Monte Sión, about 70 km south of Madrid, where we arrive in the late afternoon. From the hills above the monastery you can see in the distance the elevated city of Toledo, of El Greco fame. Contemporary Cistercian life at Monte Sión dates only from 1970. It is an irony of history, however, that this community, which today has only five members, is still only a pre-foundation of Huerta, because this fact obscures its deep Cistercian roots and identity.

The monastery of Monte Sión, it turns out, was first founded in 1426 as the first house of a renewal movement within the Cistercian Order in Spain, and from Monte Sión was soon born the Cistercian Congregation of Castile. Then in 1835, under the Mendizábal laws already mentioned, the monastery was confiscated and sold by the State, and the monks were dispersed. In 1966, the then owner of the monastic property, Tirso Rodríguez, died without having heirs. Shortly before his death, he had most generously decided to bequeath the property to its original owners, including a sizable part of the rich fruit farm. And so it was that in 1970 monks from Huerta came to Monte Sión to re-establish Cistercian life here after a lapse of 135 years.

At present the monastery plays an important and unusual dual role in Cistercian Spain. On the one hand, it is a small annex house of Huerta, and so an ordinary monastery growing in its mission and numbers; but another part of the same buildings houses what is known as the *Monasterio Asistencial*, (or “assisted-living monastery”), a state-of-the-art health-care facility for aged nuns and monks, not only of OCSO but also of CCSB, which is at the same time a true monastic community.

The Abbess President of CCSB had particularly wanted Dom Eamon to visit here because in this way we could meet not only the twelve nuns residing in the assisted-living facility, all of whom presently belong to CCSB, but also come to know the eight sister-novices currently participating at Monte Sión in the two-month common-novitiate program. All these novices, too, happen right now to come from CCSB monasteries, and they are also all Latin American, as are two of their three teachers.

Thus, Monte Sión showcases under one roof several bold initiatives that bear much promise for the future by way of inter-monastery and inter-Order collaboration. While the brothers’ superior is Fr Severino of Huerta, that of the assisted-living community is M. Venancia Villarrubia, a young, highly capable and very energetic nun from Monasterio del Císter in Córdoba, who comes from Equatorial Guinea in Africa. I must emphasize that, though this is indeed a health-care facility that alleviates for our brothers and sisters the problems of old age and illness, this section of Monte Sión is also a true monastery, in which a full monastic horarium is followed.

It affords Dom Eamon and me a particular pleasure to sit and chat at leisure with this *double* feminine community or, rather, a community which becomes double for a two-month period twice a year, when Monte Si3n brings together at liturgy and meals the oldest and youngest members of the Congregation of Saint Bernard. We also meet with each of these groups separately. One afternoon the Archbishop of Toledo, who is also the Primate of Spain, Monse3or Braulio Rodr3guez Plaza, comes to Monte Si3n accompanied by Dom Isidoro, abbot of Huerta, to meet Dom Eamon and visit with all of us. The archbishop looks much younger than his 72 years! He is a great supporter of everything happening at Monte Si3n, and seems interested in every aspect of monastic life in its relevance to the local Church. Both the older residents and the younger novices are visibly thrilled to have both a Primate and a General available to them at the same time for easy conversation, and no one is shy with either questions or comments.

At Dom Eamon's meeting with the novices, each of the eight, as well as their three instructors, tells in detail the story of her Cistercian vocation. In the end, this audience does not allow Dom Eamon or myself to go away without telling our own vocational tales as well. This is always an occasion to marvel at the delicate intricacy of God's operations in our lives. For the record I should also state that, before joining their respective monasteries, all eight of these novices were spiritually nurtured in communities of the Neo-catechumenal Way.

Both this fact and the novices' Latin American origins are a sign of the times for Cistercian monastic life in our day, at least in Spain. With this energetic group and their mentors, Dom Eamon and I climbed up into the hills behind the monastery on our last afternoon in Spain, and prayed Vespers with them at sunset on a promontory overlooking the spires of Toledo and the Tajo (or Tagus) River.

At the end of this chronicle I want to leave you with this image of the glad and peaceful fraternal communion of an extemporaneous community praying Vespers on a mountain at sunset. In the morning of Saturday, October 10th, we make the short trip to Barajas Airport outside Madrid and board our Iberia flight back to Rome. No matter what the thrills and discoveries of a trip, it is always good to see oneself again in one's own room, and to lay down one's weary head on a familiar pillow.

Please pray for all of us here at Viale Africa, in the spirit of the following invocation of Our Lady, inscribed by some sensitive soul on a plaque under the statue of Mary in our front garden:

VIRGO CONSOLATRIX
FILIIS TUIS
E PROPRIIS MONASTERIIS ELONGATIS
SOLAMEN ET REFUGIUM ADSIS

"O Virgin, Consoler! Be present as solace and shelter to your children who are far from their own monasteries."

Fr Simeon

