

MGM 2011 - 1st Conference of Dom Eamon

“View of the Order today”

MGM 2011 - 2nd Conference of Dom Eamon

“Ongoing Formation of the Superior”

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As an **Order today** (Jan. 1, 2011) we are 2083 monks in 97 monasteries and 1736 nuns in 72 monasteries giving a total of 3819 monks and nuns in 169 monasteries in 44 countries. Among the monks there are 343(16%) in initial formation and among the nuns 257(15%). In the past five years the number of monks has decreased by 165 and that of nuns by 22. The overall number of monks has been decreasing over the years but it is only in the past two years that this slight drop has emerged among the nuns. This is an overall decrease of 5% in five years which does not seem very big on the long term.

Looking at the statistics from 1960 to 2010, a 50 year period, shows the trend of decrease more strikingly. In 1960 there were 78 houses of monks in the Order (today there are 97) and the first 65 of these, apart from a few exceptions, have been in steady decrease numerically during that time. This is not to say that they are not getting vocations today but that the overall number is in decline. These monasteries are all in Europe, the U.S.A., Canada, China, Japan, and Israel. The only exceptions to this continuous decrease in numbers are in a few monasteries in Europe, pre-eminently Sept-Fons which has grown during that period and is the second largest monastery of monks in the Order. The houses that are growing numerically are in Africa, parts of Asia and Latin America.

Looking at the same 50 year period for the nuns we find that there were 39 houses in 1960 (today there are 72) and among these the first 34 houses of the elenchus with a few exceptions show a descending graph in terms of numbers. And these houses are again the older communities in Europe, Canada, Japan and the U.S.A. There are a few exceptions to this trend the most outstanding being Vitorchiano which has maintained 70-80 sisters during this time even though they have made 7 foundations. The growth areas are, as for the monks, some parts of Asia, most of Africa and Latin America.

Another significant fact is that slightly over half of the monks and nuns of the Order are in the 91 houses that make up the 7 regions of Europe but only one third of those in initial formation in the Order are in Europe, while the other two thirds of those in initial formation belong to the 78 houses that make up the regions of Oriens, Rafma and the Americas. So the decrease in numbers in the Order is found mainly in the communities of Europe and North America which shows itself in fewer young people and an increasing number of elderly monks and nuns.

This statistical overview of the Order shows that most of the older and more established houses of the Order are under increasing pressure on several fronts manifested in issues such as the following:

- The difficulty in finding members of the community suitable for positions such as superior, novice director, cellarer and other positions.
- The need to care for elderly and infirm brothers and sisters means providing people and facilities to care for them whether in the monastery or outside it.
- The need to adapt economy and or enterprise to the size and capabilities of the community. This often leads to an increasing amount of lay help, either as paid workers and/or volunteers. This of course affects the economy too and will also affect the monastic environment and this can be for better or worse.

- Where lay help is not used or is kept to a minimum and even when it is used the monks or nuns are still often overloaded with work.
- With diminishing resources of monks/nuns the liturgy, formation and positive stimulation of community life can become impoverished, and life together can be reduced to a matter of keeping things going.
- The need to reduce the living space and the cost of maintenance of buildings no longer needed.
- This sort of ambience can be morale sapping for some and also anxiety generating – we have to get novices and we have to do things to make the place attractive etc. This can lead to a lack of discernment in accepting people and keeping them, which can have other negative repercussions on the life of the community.

These are some of the challenges faced in the context of lack of recruitment and advancing age in communities.

The communities of Oriens, Africa and Latin America which, in general, enjoy good recruitment have different challenges. Oriens is culturally and geographically so diverse that it is hard to generalise about this area which has the greatest concentration of humanity on the planet and is home to all the great non-Christian religions, Confucianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and more. The Christian and Catholic faith is in a minority in most of this area and language is an obvious difficulty to be overcome for many of our monks and nuns there in accessing the Christian and monastic tradition.

The monasteries of Rafma live on a continent that shows life and hope in the face of poverty and much suffering. While there are many who enter the monasteries, there are also many who leave and there is much need of teachers who witness to a life faithful to our charism and capable of teaching it. The monasteries reflect cultures where a sense of God and the world of the spirit are deeply embedded but there is much work to be done in integrating and confronting this world with the demands of our monastic and evangelical calling.

The Latin American monastic scene is in a strongly Catholic ethos but one which is being confronted with the march of progress and the inroads that secularism and globalisation are making. The monastic world here is marked by vitality, enthusiasm and Catholic tradition.

The world around us

The Order is present in 44 countries of the world and that world has its effects on the monasteries in different ways. I mention just a few of these ways: The fact of instant communication, via 24 hour TV, internet, video, face-book, twitter, cheap air travel and the ubiquitous mobile or cell phone, has made the world a global village. The dissemination of the Western lifestyle is encouraging materialism, consumerism and a levelling out of what we want in our shopping basket. This information and knowledge makes people more aware of possibilities and of their human rights and dignity. The recent so-called Arab Spring is a startling example of a combination of these factors where the action of one individual started a reaction that spread across North Africa and the Middle East. And so the poorer nations are travelling towards the better off ones and we have the immigration issue. The point I want to make in all of this is that this rapid change, not to mention the financial crisis, leads many to anxiety about the future and where it is all going to end up. And these issues are not going to go away. Change is here to stay, if you will pardon the expression. So the two scenarios I have described so far are: the statistical view of the situation where many communities are dropping in numbers with the follow on effects and a world around us of rapid change. This is not an environment conducive to solitude and silence though it may be very much in need of both.

Over the past three years **I have visited 90 of the 169 monasteries** listed in the elenchus: 15 in Oriens, 8 in Rafma, 22 in the Americas and 45 in Europe. My overall impression is positive in that the majority of monks and nuns live generous and dedicated lives: they work hard and earn their living. I have been impressed by this especially in houses of nuns – they seem to have more creativity in terms of ways of earning a living. The liturgy is given attention and performed well and very well indeed in some communities. The quality varies obviously depending on resources, talent, degree of sophistication of the community and cultural background. The majority of monks and nuns seek God in their lives. There are, as St. Benedict says, the strong and the weak, and, I would add, a lot in between. There are community histories and personal histories that can make life difficult for some and leave others unhappy or unsettled in their monastic lives. Older communities have a tradition which gives a certain stability but at times this is not enough to stave off a sense of discouragement and anxiety about the future. Others, however, while being fragile in this sense can accept their situation and get on with living with energy and facing up to life as they find it, happy to live their reality with faith and trust in God. One does get a sense though that people are under pressure and probably overstretched. Younger communities naturally, have a lot more energy and drive and tend to have more conflict as a result. This is normal where people are finding themselves and their place in a new community. But conflict is not limited to younger people. In Africa, which is the fastest growing region of the Order, special attention needs to be given to discernment (of vocations) discipline (monastic observance) and direction (the need for spiritual guidance, for teaching and for teachers who live what they teach).

What became evident to me in my visits and in listening to people was that the big challenge in daily life is not doing or not doing things, it is living with others in a peaceful and positive way. **The big challenge is to love one another.** It is relationships - to live in a loving way with my brothers or sisters.

Many communities have done much work in over the years in learning how to dialogue and to work together on issues. They have used facilitators, group dynamics' experts as well as personal therapy and counselling. They have taken courses and read books and acquired skills which have improved the quality of their lives as communities and helped them to work more effectively together. They relate better and are probably more human and understanding with each other. This is good and helpful and something to be grateful for, but it is not enough. The foundation of our love as Christian monks and nuns is our faith (and hope) in God. And our love of others needs to be rooted in this faith. God has spoken to us, the Creator of all, revealing to us that we, and all people, are his children, that he is our Father and that we, and all that he has made, have a future and a hope. We have a value and a dignity given us by God. In Jesus he has shown what God's love is like in a human being. When we begin to understand this we are humbled at what we mean to God and what others mean to him and we can begin to act in a humble way and become loving people. We see God, the world ourselves and other people differently. Faith in God offers us a new way of looking at reality. It is a call to see things as God sees them. This way of seeing things is exemplified in the person of Jesus as revealed to us in the Gospels and the New Testament. Jesus calls this change a conversion. It is a change of direction, a turning upside down of our view of reality, a change in our thinking, our affections and our actions. This faith is a gift of God which enables us to believe not just intellectually but to entrust ourselves to God and his purposes for us. Faith in Jesus as God is fundamental – in him God speaks to us. I think of this as a "sense of God" which gives stability and a direction in our lives and which forms the basis of our choices and actions. I see it in the "timor Dei" of the Rule, what Benedict looks for in the monk to whom he entrusts responsibility. Pope Benedict talks in a similar vein in his "Verbum Domini" – the Word who became flesh is the same Word who was in the beginning, the absolute beginning, and through whom all was made. We can only truly understand ourselves, he says, in accepting the Word and what he reveals to us of God and of ourselves. In the RB it is this "sense of God" of being responsible to God that is important in the maturing of the monk. Chapter 7 of the RB describes the way we have to go to arrive at this love. We learn there the patient love of God for us who makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. The older I get the more I see that a lot of loving has to do with bearing with rather than doing things for others. It has to do with being a life-giving presence to others, not pulling down but building up or at least not getting in the way of the building. When I look back at the people who are respected and really looked up to in my community I think especially of two brothers who are these kind of men: both of them are discreet, not reactive, not loud, easy to be with, good humoured, people who can listen to others, who don't threaten or speak about others; they are people whom the good and the wayward can talk to without any sense of being judged or taken to task. They are both men of the word and of prayer; full of good sense and down to earth – fine human beings. They are men who are happy to be monks.

The other thing that has struck me over the last three years is the number of visitation cards that speak about **empty scriptoria and/or a lack of lectio and a lack of silence.** I tend to see these remarks as symptoms of an illness rather than its cause. Are they not perhaps indications of a lack of depth in our lives, a weakening of our relationship with God and consequently of our seeking Him? If our faith and hope in God is weak then it is no surprise that we have trouble in loving one another as he has loved us.

To sum up then: I spoke first about statistics and the areas of numerical growth and decline in the Order and the consequences of this for monastic living today. Then, secondly, I spoke of the world today and its effects on our life – anxiety and unease with one's life and the future. Thirdly, I mentioned my own experience of visiting monasteries, describing this as basically positive but also indicating difficulties and challenges that are there. Finally I spoke of the main challenge as the challenge of loving one another. Related to this is the need for a deepening of our faith and hope in God who has first loved us, so that we can love as he has loved us. **To conclude**, when I give what may appear to be a very simplistic statement of the challenge today, I do so not denying that we need to do many things today, earn a living, adapt our monasteries and ways of doing things, read the signs of the times, get to know ways in which we might attract people to our lives. Monasteries are doing these things and that is life but the most important thing is that we live a Christian witness of community now, that we find our happiness in living the gift of our vocation in the circumstances in which we find ourselves and with the brothers or sisters God has gathered together. This is Christian love and this spirit needs to inform what we do, otherwise we labour in vain.

f. Eamon, Assisi, September, 2011.

2nd Conference of Dom Eamon

“Ongoing Formation of the Superior”

Before reading the conference, I just think I should mention about the non-inclusive language I'm using here; with special reference to English speakers, I just speak of monk and abbot, and I don't use the terms nun and abbess – but they are included or understood.

Given the assembly that we are, composed mainly of superiors of the Order come together to discuss the salvation of their own souls and of those committed to them (C. 77.1) I thought it might be helpful to share some thoughts on the ongoing formation of the superior.

The monastic way of monk and abbot

The abbot is a monk and does not cease to be such when he takes on the ministry of abbot. He walks the same path - that of being transformed through the monastic life so that the grace of baptism comes to fruition in him as a child of God, one who is truly like Christ. It is the journey from fear of God to love of God without fear which is marked out in Chapter 7 of the Rule. It is to become a truly loving person whose characteristics are described in Chapter 72 of the Rule. The abbot like the monks is to strive to reach the kingdom of God through faith, perseverance in good works and under the guidance of the Gospel. The abbot is to fear God and keep the Rule (RB 3).

This fear of God is a fundamental disposition in the Rule that St. Benedict requires of all the monks but it should be particularly evident in those who hold a responsible position in the community (abbot, cellarer, infirmarian, porter). It is a sense of God, a reverence for God and an acknowledgment of his existence. It is the rock on which virtue is based in the Rule. It is the motivating force in how we respond to other people and to tasks we have to do. It is faith in the reality of God, his existence, his concern for us and the fact that we are answerable to him. This applies in particular to the abbot. God is over all, sees all and is the one to whom we are answerable. We are creatures and he is our Creator. He is the one who sent his Son into the world to redeem it and we are called to imitate the Son in living in the accord with the will of the Father and in this way to become truly his children, not slaves but sons and daughters. It is towards his Kingdom that we travel in this life and the journey does not make any sense if we forget that. It is this disposition in faith that determines our relationships with others and with things. It is an attitude of reverence for God, of honouring others, and a respect for all that he has made. This is then the ground for ongoing formation for the abbot as for the monk.

Formation to what? Some models

The monk is on the way and so is the abbot; the formation is ongoing but at the same time Benedict does give us some examples of the kind of person he would consider holy and a good model. When he talks about the cellarer he looks for someone with the following qualities: good judgment, mature of character, sober, not self-important, not turbulent, someone who is a father to all, compassionate who has respect for people and for things, who does not sadden others but is humble, gentle, and kind in speech. The qualities of the abbot run in a similar vein. I mention some: he should be of profit to the brothers rather than just preside over them; needs to know the divine law be chaste, temperate and merciful; shows forethought and consideration, is discerning and moderate. These lists are rather impressive in the human qualities they mention and the level of maturity they witness to. Such persons would rate rather highly on most contemporary personality assessments. This should not come as a surprise because they rest on living out the imitation of Christ as described in the degrees of humility. The qualities are the fruit of lives lived in an evangelical spirit of imitation of Jesus in putting the Father's will first in his life and the giving of himself in the service of others. It is a life modelled on the one who was truly human and truly divine. Appreciation of this mystery of the kenosis of Christ which gives us life is the energy that makes possible the life that Benedict proposes to his monks in the Rule. It is a life that is founded on a relationship (“Christ loved me and gave himself for me”) and that is lived in the knowledge that one is loved. The abbot lives out this life as the other monks do by following the Rule, the pattern of prayer and reading, of meals and rest, and of work. And it is his work (his ministry) that distinguishes him from the other monks, his work being his particular service to the community which Benedict recognises as a difficult task. The abbot's service of the life of the community is described in the following images: father, teacher, shepherd, doctor and steward. He

exercises a ministry of care to the community, a care that nourishes the life of the community, so that they can become people shaped and guided by the Spirit and live a life of love that leads to eternal life.

The conclusion I draw from the above is that, for the abbot as for the monk, ongoing formation takes place through the living of the life of the community with all that this involves and the important difference in the case of the abbot is the ministry he has in the community and to the community.

The abbot's service: challenges

The abbot's service is one that has its own stresses and strains as Benedict readily admits and also its own hazards some of which he mentions. Particular challenges are mentioned as follows:

- Avoiding personal preferences for any reason (except virtue) in his way of relating to the brothers because all are one in Christ. In an age of dialogue and community votes the danger might be to cultivate like-minded people and those who side with one's point of view.
- Adapting to the temperament and character of others rather than expecting them to adapt to him. This can prove quite a challenge.
- Putting the welfare of souls before material considerations. In a time such as ours, with the economic crisis, when there is much adaptation of buildings, remodelling and such activities going on in monasteries it is very easy for an abbot to get taken up with such projects with the best will in the world and for the good of the community. But this can lead to other tensions and make life difficult for brothers. It tends to be felt more in monasteries of nuns than of monks from what I have seen, perhaps because nuns are more used to contact with the abbess than are monks with the abbot?
- Remembering that he is called to care for sick souls not just healthy ones. To work with the people he has rather than ones he would like to have is a challenge not only for abbots. The danger of avoidance here is real – avoiding those who are more tiresome and trying and staying with the stimulating and supportive.
- Realising that he is not always the best person in every situation to help someone and being free enough and trusting enough to use others as the need arises. He needs to recognise his limitations.
- Knowing how to heal his own wounds he can heal those of others. How does one go about healing one's own wounds? Will come back to that.
- Being of profit to the brothers and not just presiding over them. The danger of liking the glory rather than the work. We can get caught up with our status and begin to see ourselves as important – become image conscious. A good deal of this can depend on the particular place the monastery has in a given society and desire to fulfil people's expectations.
- Obviously too pride is a more serious hazard which can easily slip into one's style, either initially, when in our innocence we are sure we know what the community needs, or later, when we get some experience and because of that feel we have all the answers.
- Benedict specifically warns against jealousy (in relation to the Prior) and being out of touch with one's own weakness – seeing the faults of others and not seeing one's own.

And so Benedict talks about the need to watch over one's own soul and the Constitutions (33.3) talk about renewing oneself with the Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers. So while Benedict sees the monastery and life lived within the monastery as able to provide a way that leads to growth in holiness and humanity and even talks of it as a straight path to the Creator, he also recognises that human frailty is very much in evidence and that there are many pitfalls along the way. Michael Casey spoke somewhere of the monastic way as the art of wobbleology – rather than heading on the tracks straight to one's goal it was a matter of going from side to side up the road that led to the kingdom.

The abbot's service: some helps

For us today it is much less evident that all we require in the way of aids to our transformation in Christ is available within the enclosure of the monastery, whether on the material level or on the spiritual. I want to

return here to the question of the need for the abbot to watch over his own soul, to be conscious of his own wounds and to know how to heal them.

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- Some of the most important influences on our lives are happenings over which we have no control: who our parents were; the choice of brothers and sisters if we had them; my social background and so on and the kind of person I am as a result. These are given realities that we have to accept and live with as best we can for better and for worse – none of us came from perfect families. And so we have basic stances to life and particular temperaments, gifts and limitations. Out of these and out of other life experiences and choices we make over time we are who we are. Coming to accept oneself and one's own history is a big factor in human maturation and wisdom. But for the Christian and the monk it is also an act of faith in God's providence in one's life. We used to speak in the past of our predominant fault (long ago!). Today we might talk about personality styles and defects that we never seem to be able to get rid of. Paul spoke of a thorn in the flesh. Some wounds we have can be healed, thankfully through grace and with the help of others; others we have not only to live with but according to St. Paul rejoice in. Such a disposition is the work of God in us. It is important then for one who exercises the ministry of abbot to be aware of his own weakness, so that it does not get in the way of his service of others. The Sacrament of Reconciliation, spiritual guidance and prayer are ways that can lead to healing or living more peacefully with who we are. The important thing is that we are able to be truthful with ourselves before God. Being truthful with another can be a great help in doing this.
- Just as there are no perfect families so there are no perfect monasteries or a perfect monastic formation though clearly enough some monasteries are much richer in human and material resources than others. So at times it may be difficult for an abbot to find someone who can help him at this level within the monastery. This can mean seeking help from someone outside at the professional or the spiritual level. This can be something that is necessary at a particular time or it may be something regular on a long-term basis. It may be a course that one does at a particular time, or a sabbatical or it may be a pastoral meeting of superiors. Some may find their way by having hermit days or the like. The important thing is that whatever we use is not just an escape but actually helps us to be freer in our service of God and of the brethren and more profitable to them and that it enables us to live our monastic ascesis with renewed zeal.
- Abbots because of their ministry have much more exposure to people - the brethren as well as outside contacts – than most others in community and this can be both a service to others and a real school of ongoing formation for oneself. The document from the Holy See on the service of authority and obedience of some years ago remarks: "It will be the responsibility of persons in authority to keep a high level of openness to being formed as well as the ability to learn from life. In particular, this is important to do regarding the freedom of letting oneself be formed by others and for each one to feel a responsibility for the growth of others." We learn about ourselves in our relationships with other people and sometimes that learning can mean making mistakes, saying we are sorry, being humiliated as well as experiencing real fraternity or friendship. This is where the much used phrase "affective maturity" becomes evident. We can learn much from the way others relate to us and treat us as well as from the manner in which we respond or react as the case may be. Keeping a high level of openness is not easy but it is a path of humility and of life.
- This might be the moment to say something about a particular challenge for many today. And here a quotation from the document I mentioned above says it well: "Persons in authority can also become discouraged and disillusioned. In the face of the resistance of some members of the community and of certain questions that seem insoluble, he or she can be tempted to cave in and to consider every effort for improving the situation useless. What we see here is the danger of becoming managers of the routine, resigned to mediocrity, restrained from intervening, no longer having the courage to point out the purposes of authentic consecrated life and running the risk of losing the love of one's first fervour and the desire to witness to it." The way to deal with this, the document continues, is by recalling that the service of authority is an act of love of the Lord Jesus, and so the need of being patient in suffering and persevering in prayer and to continue to contribute.

Some desiderata for the ongoing formation/conversion of the abbot:

- Believing in one's calling and responding to God's call by freely and willingly using the means that our life provides – leading the life of the community - liturgy, lectio, work, fraternal life.
- Openness of heart with oneself and before God – being transparent with another about all that is going on in oneself.
- Serving others as abbot as best one can, and knowing that one's service as abbot will end some day!
- Knowing that we won't get our ongoing formation all right but accepting in faith and trust that there is a Providence who has it all in hand and whose paths and purposes will be realised despite us, to our delight and for his glory!

f. Eamon
Assisi, September, 2011.

