

ABBOT GENERAL'S TRIP TO BELGIUM, THE NETHERLANDS and GERMANY

(February-March 2020)



IN THE MORNING of Tuesday, February 11th, under the protection of Our Lady of Lourdes, Dom Eamon sets off on a month-long trip that will take him to Belgium and the Netherlands, with one brief foray into Germany. He will visit a total of 13 communities, as well as attend the episcopal consecration of a member of our Order. We are fortunate to depart Rome and fly to northwestern Europe after the hefty hurricane Ciara has lost most of its strength. We arrive at Charleroi Airport, just south of Brussels, around noon time, rent a car, and take the west-bound road at once, arriving in time for Vespers at our first stop on this journey: the Flemish-speaking community of Sint Sixtus.

How could we have known on February 11th, as we left Rome, that within a very short time an infinitely greater threat would hang over the whole world, compared to which a passing storm would seem like child's play?

1.

SINT SIXTUS ABBEY

Westvleteren, Belgium (Feb 11-13)

At this time of the year the Belgian landscape here in the Flanders region, in addition to being extremely flat, is also quite lacking in color, and the trees are very bare. Yet bright sunshine lights up the scenery. One does not go far without crossing some military cemetery. We pass near the town of Ypres, the very name of which brings back memories of war-time poems about the dreadful battlefields of two World Wars. One memorable example is the famous "In Flanders Fields" by the Canadian physician-poet-soldier John McCrae (1872-1918), with the following stanza:

*In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below.*

After a stop for lunch we arrive at Sint Sixtus Abbey in the late afternoon and are welcomed by Dom Manu Van Hecke, abbot of this community since 1996.

At present there are some 20 brothers in the monastery, located in West Flanders near the village of Westvleteren. Over the centuries, at different intervals, there have been monastic communities of various sorts in the area around Sint Sixtus. But the origin of the present

Cistercian community dates back to 1831 when a hermit in the area was joined by a few men to live a life of prayer in the woods. Shortly afterwards they were incorporated into the Order. Sint Sixtus, a Flemish-speaking house, would go on to found Scourmont Abbey in French-speaking Belgium in 1850.

The monastic buildings we see are the result of recent renovations. They are ultramodern, with a stark black-and-white color scheme relieved, occasionally, by a touch of gray. The decorations I would call minimalist, and the spaces are wide open and empty for the most part. Perhaps this style would be too austere for some tastes, but I bask in its understated immediacy. The extreme simplicity of lines and the almost total absence of art objects create an atmosphere of sober serenity that foster tranquil recollection and lucid thought and prayer.

The “new” church, for instance, built in 1968, is quite denuded of ornamentation and lacks windows. One’s attention is thus naturally drawn upward from the red-brick floor and walls to the wooden ceiling that folds back wing-like toward the sky and opens up the line of vision into an upper gallery of glass. This gallery surrounds the whole perimeter of the walls and admits plentiful light into the space of worship. The stained glass is utterly simple in design, clear for the most part or using only black or gray as colors at certain intervals, and the simplest straight lines or an occasional circle for ornamentation. There are no choir stalls as such, only hefty individual seats, and no desks for the choir books, which each brother has to carry in for each Office. Religious art in the church is limited to a crucifix and a statue of Our Lady, alongside a massive tabernacle.

The exterior of the buildings uses black bricks and black tiles for the most part, which contrasts powerfully against the blue of the sky. Around the corridors of the monks’ cells, the rectangular windows are of a size and design that invites you to view each section of the surrounding countryside as if it were a framed painting by a Dutch master, full of luminosity, depth and stark simplicity of line.

Dom Eamon addresses the community in chapter on Wednesday morning after Lauds, recalling his first visit to Sint Sixtus back in the 1970s when he was a student in Rome and stopped here over Christmas break. He then proceeds to give them a talk based on Pope Francis’ recent homily on consecrated life from the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord. Because this homily provided Dom Eamon with his theme for many of the talks he gave to the communities during this trip, I will conclude my account of each visit with a passage from that papal address, by way of sharing the richness of the Holy Father’s thought with you as well.

Like several of our Belgian and Dutch houses Sint Sixtus too has a brewery, which dates back to 1838. Its product has been touted by the New York Times as perhaps the best beer in the world! And yet the amount of beer produced here is relatively modest. Years ago the brothers of this monastery decided that, regardless of demand, they did not want the “tail” of the brewery to “wag the dog” of monastic life. Therefore they adopted a policy of non-distribution: that is, they would sell their beer only on-site at the monastery in Westvleteren, all the while imposing a rather severe ceiling on production. Consequently they have set up a very efficient online order system, with personal pickup in one’s car at the brewery.

One morning, while Dom Eamon meets privately with brothers, Dom Manu treats me to a very thorough tour of the premises. What my memory has retained most vividly from this visit is the poignant detail of a discovery the monks made when the old church was gutted and transformed into the new library. As the Abbot and I stand between bookcases, he points over our heads to the exposed beams. He then explains that, when the old church ceiling was removed, the workers found in the area just under the roof artifacts like field cots, bottles, silverware and plates that during World War II had served the daily needs of Jews whom the monks had hidden up there from the Nazis.

Early in the morning of Thursday, February 13, we leave the happy company of the brothers of Sint Sixtus in northwestern Belgium and set our sights to the southeast, our goal for the day being the Abbey of Rochefort in Wallonia, the French-speaking region of Belgium.

Pope Francis speaks to us: “My eyes have seen your salvation.” These are the words of Simeon, whom the Gospel presents as a simple man: “righteous and devout”, says the text. But among all at the temple that day, he alone saw Jesus as the Savior. What did he see? A child; a small, vulnerable, simple child. But in him he saw salvation, for the Holy Spirit allowed him to recognize in that tender newborn “the Lord’s Anointed”.

2.

OUR LADY OF SAINT-RÉMY ABBEY

Rochefort, Belgium (Feb. 13-15)



OUR ITINERARY FROM Sint Sixtus to Rochefort leads us around Brussels, and for lunch we stop over on the far side of the Belgian capital at the town of Louvain-la-Neuve, home to Dom Eamon’s sister Moira and her two daughters, Aisling and Chantal. We enjoy a most pleasant Belgian-Irish meal with them and arrive at Rochefort in the late afternoon just in time for Vespers with the monks.

St-Rémy Abbey, official name of the Rochefort community, is an imposing place. The car arrives before a monumental gate between towers and the porter has to come out and grant you admittance to the inner graveled courtyards of the monastery. Dom Gilbert Degros, abbot since 2006, and a couple of other brothers come out to welcome us warmly. The Abbot is holding a large walking stick because he is convalescing from a recent illness. At this time there are 13 brothers in the community, including Father Petr, a monk of Sept-Fons on loan to Rochefort as novice master. There are currently two simply professed monks.

Ever since the early 13th century there has, at intervals, been a Cistercian presence on this site. First there were nuns, but they were replaced by monks in the 15th century. You would never guess, judging from the current beauty and tranquility of the place, that from the mid-16th till the late 18th century the Abbey of Rochefort frequently suffered all manner of pillage, famine and plague. The armies of the French Revolution in 1789 invaded what were then called the “Austrian Netherlands”, and the Abbey was summarily closed and sold. Shortly thereafter the new owner destroyed the greater part of the monastic buildings, sparing only those structures considered “useful” as serving the farm. Stones from the ancient abbey may be seen today in the walls of early 19th-century buildings in the town of Rochefort. Ancient abbeys and churches used as modern quarries: a recurring European cultural phenomenon.

The community was refounded in 1890 by monks coming from the Abbey of Achel, located right on the border between Belgium and the Netherlands, one part of the property on the Dutch and the other on the Belgian side. Achel Abbey was itself closed some years ago. A completely new monastery was soon built at Rochefort in the last decade of the 19th century, in the massive neo-Romanesque style popular in that period of monastic restoration. The great vaulted church in particular offers an atmosphere of awe and recollection. Beginning in the 1990s the entire monastery was progressively remodeled, with splendid results. It is obvious that every nook and cranny of the present monastery is very meticulously cared for. Along with several of our houses in this region, Rochefort too possesses a very renowned Trappist brewery. It harkens back to the first beer-making plant established here as far back as 1595.

On Friday morning, February 14th, Fr Luc gives me an extended tour of the property, which includes both the old brewery from the 1950s and the state-of-the-art brewery that has just been completed and that on this very day is brewing its first batch of beer! During this visit I caught a good glimpse into this monastery's past by climbing with Fr Luc up into the cavernous interior of the old flour mill, a vestige of the 19th century that apparently was in operation until some 30 years ago, hydro-powered from a nearby pond. Because the building has been left more or less as it must have been on the last day of activity, it offers the thrill of a living relic, with the dust flour of many decades still visible everywhere and the challenge of instant vertigo as one peers down the open elevator shaft that brought the grain for grinding up to the third level.

A special custom at Rochefort is that Compline is not prayed in the stalls but on stone benches built into the wall in left aisle of the church, with the brothers gathered around an 18th-century statue of Our Lady and the Child Jesus. This arrangement lends the concluding prayer of the day an atmosphere of greater fraternal intimacy.

***Pope Francis speaks to us:** You, brothers and sisters, left behind precious things, such as possessions, such as making a family for yourselves. Why did you do this? Because you fell in love with Jesus, you saw everything in him and, enraptured by his gaze, you left all the rest behind. Religious life is this vision. It means seeing what really matters in life. It means welcoming the Lord's gift with open arms, as Simeon did. This is what the eyes of consecrated men and women behold: the grace of God poured into their hands.*

3.

OUR LADY OF PEACE ABBEY

Chimay, Belgium (Feb. 15)



ON SATURDAY MORNING, February 15th, we leave Rochefort and head directly west for our sisters' monastery of Chimay, likewise in southern Belgium. We suddenly realize that the famous Benedictine monastery of Maredsous is only a brief detour on our route and so we decide to make a quick stop there. This is where the renowned Irish monastic writer Blessed Columba Marmion (1858-1923) was abbot early in the 20th century. Many of us in our youth drew much inspiration from classic works of his such as *Christ the Life of the Soul* and *Christ the Ideal of the Monk*. Dom Eamon wants especially to pray briefly at Blessed Columba's tomb inside the monastic church.

While we are saying our prayers along comes a tall man in lay clothes (we were wearing our habits) and greets us warmly, asking if he can help us with anything. This very friendly and rather youthful person turns out to be the present abbot of Maredsous, Dom Bernard Lorent, just now completing his daily health circuit around the property. We then spend about another half-hour in his gracious company as he shows us the cloister, the chapter room and other interesting places in the monastery. Dom Bernard's spontaneous hospitality leaves us with a warm memory of this visit.

After a short drive we finally arrive at Our Lady of Peace Abbey in Chimay, presently a small community of 6 sisters. Mother Catherine Pagano, former abbess of Rivet in France (1996-2003) and superior here since 2011, receives us with great animation. Because we arrive with some delay we proceed at once to share a delicious festive lunch with the sisters. Even though the monastery is located right in the village of Chimay, the property behind the buildings is quite extensive and picturesque so one does not have a sense of excessive confinement.

The nuns of Our Lady of Peace are heirs to a venerable and long-standing community with an at times agitated history, stretching back through the centuries to the Cistercian community of Gomerfontaine, founded in 1207. This house was suppressed at the time of the French Revolution in 1792, but was refounded only 10 years later at Saint-Paul-aux-Bois. About a century later, in 1904, the sisters had to go into exile to Fourbechies. Then, with the generous aid of Scourmont Abbey, they were finally able to settle at their present location in Chimay in 1919, thanks to the peace that came with the end of World War I.

After a brief rest Dom Eamon meets with the Abbess and the sisters through the afternoon. It seems that, as a rule, the smaller the community, the livelier the conversations and exchanges. Such is certainly the case here in Chimay among these delightful sisters. Unfortunately we can stay with them for only a few hours since our brothers of Scourmont Abbey, on the other side of town, are already expecting our arrival. Our itinerary for this trip is quite tight, and so we normally stay at a given house for a length of time proportionate to the size of the community. In this way Dom Eamon ensures that he has sufficient time to meet privately with as many brothers and sisters as desire to see him.

And so in the late afternoon we say our goodbyes to the sisters of Chimay, who load us down with baked goodies from their ovens, and we undertake the great 10-minute journey across town to Scourmont Abbey where we are being expected for Vespers.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *The consecrated person is one who every day looks at himself or herself and says: "Everything is gift, all is grace". Dear brothers and sisters, we did not deserve religious life; it is a gift of love that we have received.*

4.

OUR LADY OF SCOURMONT ABBEY *Forges, Belgium (Feb. 15-18)*

WE ARRIVE AT SCOURMONT just after Vespers has started and we slip into the area behind the choir, sitting with the lay visitors. Then we have supper with Dom Damien Debaisieux, the community's young abbot, elected only in 2017. The brothers at this moment are at the tail end of their yearly retreat. There are 14 brothers present in the monastery.

By way of exception to the general European pattern, Scourmont is not an ancient monastic foundation, nor had there been consecrated life on this wild plateau of Scourmont, in the Belgian province of Hainaut, until 1850. In this year a small group of monks arrived here from Sint Sixtus Abbey in Westvleteren at the prompting of a local parish priest, and they founded a priory. The monks soon established a school and a model farm for the education and training of orphaned and abandoned boys. All of these projects required immense labor since the soil around Scourmont is naturally barren. Eventually a cheese dairy and the famous Chimay brewery were added. Scourmont has no fewer than 7 houses in its filiation: Caldey (Great Britain), Mokoto and Kibungo (Ruanda), Chimay and Soleilmont (Belgium), Clarté-Dieu (Congo), and Kunnambetta (India).

Dom Damien invites me to take a long walk with him around the property on Sunday afternoon. Among many other attractions I watch the abbot feed the chickens and collect their eggs. Then a raging wind storm comes up, more wet than cold. At one moment, while standing in the middle of a forest, we actually see (and *hear*!) the strong wind topple a giant pine in our proximity. Dom Damien explains that recent rains have drenched the ground and loosened the roots of the trees.

On Monday morning Dom Eamon meets informally with the community around a large coffee table for an hour of open-ended conversation, something that is more doable in smaller communities. And then, early on Tuesday morning, February 18th, we leave Scourmont, in the extreme south of Belgium, for Arnhem, a community located about 300 km away to the north in the Netherlands.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *"My eyes have seen your salvation." These are the words we repeat each evening at Night Prayer. With them we bring our day to an end, saying: "Lord, my salvation comes from you, my hands are not empty, but are full of your grace". Knowing how to see grace is the starting point. Looking back, rereading one's own history and seeing there God's faithful gift: not only in life's grand moments, but also in our fragility and weakness, in our insignificance.*

5.

OUR LADY OF KONINGSOORD ABBEY

Arnhem, Netherlands (Feb. 18-19)

DURING THIS TRIP I have learned that it is now considered incorrect to refer to the country whose capital is Amsterdam as "Holland" as we normally did in the past.

“Holland” is in fact only one of the provinces that make up the country correctly called “The Netherlands”. An acceptable alternative to “The Netherlands” is “the Low Countries”. But its citizens still remain “the Dutch”.

The community of Koningsoord (or the “king’s place”) was founded in 1937 by sisters from Chimay, under the auspices of the monks of Koningshoeven (meaning the “king’s farmsteads”) near Tilburg. Over several decades following the foundation of the monks’ monastery in 1881, young Dutch women interested in Cistercian life were directed by the Tilburg monks to go to the nuns of Chimay. As many as fifty Dutch young ladies entered monastic life in this Belgian house, and finally the time was deemed ripe in the mid-1930s for establishing a feminine Dutch community of the Order. The nuns’ monastery was built in the Tilburg suburb of Berkel-Enschot and completed in 1937. During World War II two blood sisters of Koningsoord and their three brothers from Koningshoeven, all children of the Jewish Löb family, were deported to Auschwitz and gassed there. Koningsoord founded Maria-Frieden (Germany) in 1953 and Butende (Uganda) in 1964.

Because of the rise of urban developments around their monastery in the 1990s, the sisters at Berkel-Enschot began to feel the city closing in on them and so they finally decided to move. They chose a location further north in the Netherlands near the city of Arnhem, on a property that had belonged to the Mill Hill Missionaries. And so a brand-new monastery was built there and the community of Koningsoord moved from Berkel-Enschot to Arnhem in May, 2009.

Today there are about 20 sisters in a community whose main manual work is bookbinding. The new abbess, Mother Pascale Fourmentin, elected only in 2019, is a French-speaking Belgian, something of a novelty for a Dutch-speaking house. We stay at Arnhem only one night because Dom Eamon already visited the community for a week in November of 2015. But the sisters make the most of Dom Eamon’s stopover and make us feel very warmly welcomed.

Soon after our arrival Dom Eamon meets with the community for a lively exchange. Then, after a festive supper, the sisters bring out a guitar and encourage us to join them in singing party songs, with “My Darling Clementine” being an all-time favorite. We are astounded to see most everyone in the community fluently singing the chorus in English, but then the Dutch should no longer surprise us with their linguistic proficiency and international flair.

After lunch the next day, Wednesday February 19th, we set off in a southerly direction, again for Belgium, this time bound for the Abbey of Westmalle near Antwerp, just over the border from the Netherlands.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *The tempter, the devil, focuses on our “poverty”, our empty hands: “In all these years you haven’t got any better, you haven’t achieved what you could have, they haven’t let you do what you were meant to do, you haven’t always been faithful, you are not capable...”, and so on. Each of us knows this story and these words very well. We see this is true in part, and so we go back to thoughts and feelings that disorient us. Thus we risk losing our bearings, the gratuitous love of God. For God loves us always, and gives himself to us, even in our poverty.*

OUR LADY OF THE SACRED HEART ABBEY

Westmalle, Belgium (Feb. 19-21)

THE SHEER ENORMITY of Westmalle monastery overwhelms. You arrive at the monumental gate house and you think it's the end of your journey, but you still have several courtyards to traverse before you reach the monastery proper. In the center of the buildings there is a vast cloister garth where you could fit a small forest. Endless cloisters in every direction easily disorient a first-time visitor like myself. And the famous brewery has an underground storage facility that could house a whole army. We arrive just in time for Vespers. Dom Nathanaël Koninkx, who has been abbot since 2005, welcomes us and shows us to our rooms.

Westmalle owes its existence directly to Dom Augustin de Lestrangé, the novice master of La Trappe who left France in 1791 at the time of the Revolution and settled a community of monks at the empty charterhouse of La Valsainte in Switzerland. From here Dom Augustin sent out successive groups of monks to try and establish new Cistercian communities in Spain, Italy and America. One group was destined for Canada and passed through Antwerp on the way to catch the boat in Amsterdam bound for the New World. When travel proved difficult, the bishop of Antwerp asked Dom Augustin whether these monks could not instead establish a monastery in his diocese. Thus it was that a priory was founded at Westmalle in 1794 by an original group of 10 monks. Because of this early foundation date in modern times, Westmalle ranks as number 3 in our elenchus of communities, coming only after Cîteaux and La Trappe.

The community grew quickly, and by 1830 a large guesthouse had been built. In 1833 the Westmalle monks were granted exclusive rights to print and bind the large Latin psalters and antiphonaries then in use by the whole Order. They carried out this task with admirable results, until the coming of the vernacular liturgy in the 1960s when these venerable choir books, handed down from generation to generation, were replaced by hastily mimeographed booklets. The world-renowned brewery was established in 1836. A total overhaul of the buildings was completed in 1964. The filiation of Westmalle today includes: Diepenveen (Netherlands); Rochefort, Orval and Nazareth (Belgique); and Kasanza and Mvanda (Congo).

There are some 25 brothers present in community, one of whom in particular we are happy to see again. I speak of Fr Ivo Dujardin, who was abbot of Westmalle from 1987 to 2004 and well known to us from his tenure as chaplain of Vitorchiano, near Rome, from 2008 to 2019.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *When we keep our gaze fixed on him, we open ourselves to his forgiveness that renews us, and we are reassured by his faithfulness. We can ask ourselves today: "To whom do I turn my gaze: to the Lord, or to myself?" Whoever experiences God's grace above all else can discover the antidote to distrust and to looking at things in a worldly way.*

7.

OUR LADY OF NAZARETH ABBEY

Brecht, Belgium (Feb. 21-23)

AFTER THE MID-MORNING Eucharist at Westmalle on Friday, February 21st, we travel the very short distance to Nazareth Abbey in the town of Brecht. Here we are welcomed very warmly by the community's energetic abbess, M. Katharina Michiels, elected to this service only in 2019, and we meet straightaway with the sisters. The conversation is easy and free-flowing from the outset even though the group of sisters is relatively large, numbering some 26 nuns. They live a rather austere life with a very good community spirit and an attitude of great openness to visitors. They now have a 39-year-old postulant.

The Nazareth community has both an ancient and a modern history, and these two halves are discontinuous. From its foundation in 1236 until the French Revolution shut it down in 1797, the monastery of Our Lady of Nazareth was located at Lier in the Duchy of Brabant. Its first prioress was the great mystic and spiritual writer Blessed Beatrice of Nazareth (ca. 1200-1268), known for her *Seven Ways of Holy Love*. Time and again attempts were made to re-establish the community during the century after its closure, but to no avail. At the end of World War II, however, the then Abbot of Westmalle, Dom Robertus Eyckmans, took the matter into his own hands and invited the sisters of Soleilmont Abbey (Belgium) to refound the community of Nazareth. They gladly accepted.

Naturally they first thought of returning to the original site of Nazareth at Lier, but unfortunately this property was no longer available. Soon a new location was found at Brecht, practically at a stone's throw from Westmalle. The monks of this abbey prepared the ground for the coming of the foundresses and, in June of 1950, 13 nuns arrived at Brecht from Soleilmont with M. Agnes Swevers at their head. They came ready to rekindle the flames of the ancient Nazareth. Nazareth itself then founded two other communities: Redwoods Abbey in California (USA) in 1962 and Klaarland Priory in Bocholt (Belgium) in 1970.

The main work of the sisters consists in soaps, cosmetics and cleaning products, as well as some liturgical objects and hand-crafted banners.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *There is a temptation that looms over consecrated life: seeing things in a worldly way. This entails no longer seeing God's grace as the driving force in life, then going off in search of something to substitute for it: a bit of fame, a consoling affection, finally getting to do what I want. When a consecrated life no longer revolves around God's grace, it turns in upon itself. It loses its passion, it grows slack, becomes stagnant. And we know what happens then: we start to demand our own space, our own rights, we let ourselves get dragged into gossip and slander, we take offence at every small thing that does not go our way, and we pour forth litanies of lamentation about our brothers, our sisters, our communities, the Church, society. We no longer see the Lord in everything, but only the dynamics of the world, and our hearts grow numb. Then we become creatures of habit, pragmatic, while inside us sadness and distrust grow, that turn into resignation. This is what a worldly gaze leads to.*

8.

EPISCOPAL CONSECRATION OF

DOM LODE VAN HECKE

Ghent, Belgium (Feb. 23)

THE JOYOUS OCCASION of Dom Lode van Hecke's consecration as bishop of the Diocese of Ghent in Belgium takes place on Sunday, February 23rd. I consider it a part of our visit to Nazareth Abbey because we drove to Ghent with M. Katharina for the ceremony and returned with her to Nazareth that evening for our last night with the community.

The genial Dom Lode is well-known in the Order because he was secretary to Dom Bernardo Olivera for several years, and then Abbot of Orval (Belgium) for 12 years, from 2007 to 2019. However, during today's festivities his Cistercian brothers and sisters become aware of how renowned a personality he also is beyond the Order, within the Belgian Church.

We arrive at noon in Ghent, a beautiful medieval town whose center is, naturally, packed tightly with ancient buildings and where streets are very narrow and parking places scarce. On arriving we proceed at once to the scheduled lunch. Cardinal Jozef De Kesel, Archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, several Bishops, a good number of diocesan priests, as well as many members of our Order, have come to the celebration. We are treated to a first-class banquet served in the dining room of a large Catholic school located behind St Bavo Cathedral. This wonderful assortment of monks and nuns, bishops, diocesan clergy and some laypeople is a true reflection of the whole Church, present to witness the important event.

The enormous Gothic cathedral is filled to the brim; even Countess Anna Maria, the Queen Mother of Belgium, is gracing the event with her presence. On entering the vast church you'd think you have arrived at a first-rate concert, so excellent is the music already resounding in the vaults during the long wait for the ceremony to begin. Dom Eamon takes his place in the sanctuary amidst the abbots, naturally, while I go around to the back choir, behind the high altar, to join the clergy of the diocese. The language of the region is Flemish, but I am grateful that many people speak English. The priest sitting next to me is a case in point.

This friendly neighbor kindly translates passages of the greetings and homilies for me, in discreet whispers. I in turn ask him what he thinks of a monk being selected by the Holy Father to become the local bishop, a bit of a risky question. But what this animated priest tells me strikes me as significant. With the look of someone who has been giving thought to the matter, he responds without hesitation: "We have had too many bishops who are mere administrators. What we most need now is a deeply spiritual bishop who will lead us to Christ. A bishop who is also a monk is full of promise! This happened often in the early Church."


After the ceremony is over, Dom Lode, now transformed into the brand-new Bishop Van Hecke, makes the rounds of the spacious cathedral to dispense his first blessing to his flock. During the 20 or so minutes this tour of all the aisles takes you hear loud and incessant applause, and the looks on people's faces during this lengthy ovation express genuine delight and satisfaction. Bishop Van Hecke's motto is *Cum gaudio Spiritus Sancti* ("With the joy of the Holy Spirit", 1 Thes 1:6).

This occasion of our brother Dom Lode's episcopal consecration will certainly remain ingrained in my memory as one of the more enjoyable and unusual experiences afforded by traveling with Dom Eamon on his pastoral rounds throughout the Order.



MARY OUR REFUGE ABBEY

Klein Zundert, Netherlands (Feb. 24-26)

 ON THE AFTERNOON of Monday, February 24th, we make our leisurely way from Nazareth Abbey in northern Belgium to the Abbey of Mary Our Refuge, commonly known as “Zundert”, in the south of the Netherlands. Here we are received in the most friendly fashion by the superior, Dom Guido van Belle, in this office since 2018.

The monastery was founded in 1900 when a dozen monks were sent here from Koningshoeven (Tilburg). Originally the new foundation was to serve as a place of refuge for monks possibly having to flee France due to anti-religious legislation. This historical background is reflected in the name chosen for the new community: “Our Lady of Refuge”. In fact the monastery never did serve such a purpose. After a series of initial difficulties the foundation began receiving a considerable number of vocations and was raised to the rank of Abbey in 1938. In the 1950s the community peaked numerically at some 80 members. At present there are 10 brothers in the monastery, one of whom is simply professed.

In the early 2000's the community undertook a massive renovation of all the buildings, particularly the guest house, which steadily attracts many retreatants. Even in normal times (that is, in the days before the Coronavirus pandemic) this guest house is closed every week from Sunday afternoon to Tuesday afternoon. Such a schedule was conceived to allow for the cleaning of the guest quarters but above all to diminish the busyness around the community on Mondays, which is intended as a day of particular recollection. Another major aspect of this building project was the construction of an entirely new cloister quadrangle, added to the old buildings. This new cloister has an ultra-modern design, with lots of glass surfaces letting in the light everywhere, a feature much appreciated in the relatively Nordic Dutch winters.

The renovation of the church was the center piece of the architectural project launched some 20 years ago. The result is truly stunning. The church strikes us by its denuded style, which allows the eye to follow both horizontal and vertical lines free of the clutter of extraneous decoration. The furnishings as well, done in light wood, show a remarkable creativity of line that delights the eye. The chapel of the Blessed Sacrament and the chapel of Our Lady have their own separate spaces in the rear of the abbatial church.

We are at Zundert for Ash Wednesday, and the burning of the previous year's palms for ashes on the altar steps produces a crackling conflagration of several minutes that enables us to *see, hear and smell* the passing nature of all worldly things. The liturgical style of the community reflects the architecture: it is both simple and prayerful, with good strong singing and hearty participation from all the brothers.

In addition to the guest house, the other income-generating work of the community is the brewery, which produces a Number 8 and a Number 10 brew. The cellarer, Fr Christiaan, also runs the brewing facility, with a master brewer who comes in to supervise production on brewing days. Though Zundert Trappist Beer sells extremely well, the brothers here have decided, as at Sint Sixtus, to limit production to a level that does not interfere with the kind of monastic life they wish to lead.

Dom Eamon meets informally with the Zundert brothers around a large coffee table, and conversation flows easily and humorously. Then, in the afternoon of Ash Wednesday, February 26th, we drive the short distance from Zundert to its motherhouse, the Abbey of Tilburg.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *If consecrated life remains steadfast in love for the Lord, it perceives beauty. It sees that poverty is not some colossal effort, but rather a higher freedom that God gives to us and others as real wealth. It sees that chastity is not austere sterility, but the way to love without possessing. It sees that obedience is not a discipline, but is victory over our own chaos, in the way of Jesus.*

10.

OUR LADY OF TILBURG ABBEY (KONINGSHOEVEN)

Berkel-Enschoot, Netherlands (Feb. 26-29)

CHOOSING WHAT NAME to call this monastery can be a bit confusing! “Tilburg” is the name of the closest big city (around 220,000 inhabitants). “Berkel-Enschoot” is the name of the village of some 11,000 people east of Tilburg within which the monastery is located and that figures on the community’s address. And “Koningshoeven” is the name of the actual property on which the community was founded. The word *Koningshoeven* means “king’s farmsteads”. The place in question had been established in 1834 by the Crown Prince who subsequently became King Willem II. The Order at large has opted for the simpler name “Tilburg” to refer to this community, while in Dutch the longer name is used because in that context “Tilburg” naturally refers to the nearby city.

So in the afternoon of Ash Wednesday Dom Bernardus Peeters welcomes us with his friendly and easy-going manner, so familiar to us. We barely have time to drink a cup of tea against the cold weather and off we go to Vespers. There are 20 brothers at present in this Dutch community, which was founded at the end of the 19th century from the Abbey of Mont-des-Cats in the north of France, just south of the Belgian border.

In the 1880’s many monastic communities in France feared the ultra-secularist government’s very hostile attitude toward our way of life. The probability of monasteries being shut down and their monks driven into exile worried everyone in monastic life. The abbot of Mont-des-Cats began searching for a place outside France that could serve as refuge for his community in case of need. With this purpose in mind he sent Father Sebastian Wyart (1839-1904) to the Netherlands because this former high-ranking military officer had many significant contacts there.

Fr Sebastian was successful in locating the suitable property called Koningshoeven near Tilburg already mentioned, and was also able to persuade his abbot to make a regular foundation there rather than simply setting up a place of temporary refuge. Under the aegis of Fr Sebastian the foundation was made in 1881. However, he did not himself remain at the foundation because he soon became abbot of Mont-des-Cats and then of Sept-Fons. Later he worked hard in Rome for the unification of the three separate Trappist congregations, and became our first Abbot General in 1892.

In 1884 a brewery was set up at Koningshoeven and this move stabilized the community financially. Many candidates for the life began arriving, and by 1891 there were 57 monks present. In this last decade of the century, too, the massive building project for the new monastery was undertaken, with the impressive results we see today. A memorable and painful event from the community's history was the deportation in 1942 of the three Loeb brothers, of Jewish descent, to Auschwitz, where they perished together with their two sisters from Koningsoord, as we have seen. Then in 1953 Koningshoeven founded the community of Rawaseneng in Java (Indonesia), which presently is quite larger numerically than its mother house!

On the morning of Thursday, February 27th, Dom Bernardus very kindly invites me to go on a tour of the monastery, which turns out to be quite thorough. He knows I have to leave this afternoon, while Dom Eamon is staying on for another two days. I am quite astounded by the number and quality of profitable industries the community sustains, all except the brewery manned by the brothers themselves. Besides the famous brewery there is the cheese factory, which produces the largest rounds of cheese I have ever seen. Here the laborious process of ageing the cheese is all done by hand. Then there is the chocolate factory, which confectioners an exquisite product. Nor must we forget the bakery and its delicious cookies, or the honey and jam production. The spacious guest house is not of course a "product" but it is labor-intensive as an extension of monastic life and a means for the monks to share their lives with visitors for a few hours or days.

Soon after lunch on this day I must part from Dom Eamon due to a previous commitment back in Italy. I will drive south into Belgium and catch my flight back to Rome from Charleroi Airport. This is therefore the end of the more detailed, personal chronicle of this trip. Dom Eamon will still visit four more communities in the area before he returns to Rome on March 9th. Since I will unfortunately not be able to visit these four communities myself, my description of them will have to be more summary and factual.


Pope Francis speaks to us: "My eyes have seen your salvation." Simeon sees Jesus as small, humble, the one who has come to serve, not to be served, and defines himself as servant. Indeed he says: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace." Those who see things as Jesus does, learn how to live in order to serve. They do not wait for others to take the initiative, but themselves go out in search of their neighbor, as did Simeon who sought out Jesus in the temple.

11.

SCHIERMONNIKOOG MONASTERY

(formerly "Diepenveen")

Schiermonnikoog Island, Netherlands (Feb. 29-Mar. 4)

 ON SATURDAY, February 29th, Dom Eamon travels alone by train from Tilburg to the town of Zwolle in the north of the Netherlands, where he is met by Dom Alberic Bruschke, abbot of the Schiermonnikoog community. From there they travel together by bus and then by boat to reach their destination in the late afternoon. The island of Schiermonnikoog lies a mere 10 km away from the Friesian mainland. There are at present 5 brothers living in this community.

This small group of brothers on Schiermonnikoog Island in the North Sea arrived here in 2015, after selling their original property of Diepenveen in the Diocese of Utrecht. At that same time several other Diepenveen brothers opted to go live at Westmalle, the mother house of the Diepenveen community. Diepenveen had been founded in 1833 from Achel Abbey. Interestingly the tongue-twister *Schiermonnikoog* means “island of gray monks”. In the Middle Ages Cistercians were known as “the gray monks”, and so the word reminds us that there had been a Cistercian monastery here before the Reformation.

This monastic presence thus gave the island its identity in past times. As has also happened in Norway at both Tautra and Munkeby, where Cistercian ruins also exist, the present 21st-century Cistercian transfer of the brothers from Diepenveen to this island is truly a re-foundation of sorts after many centuries. For the moment the brothers are living in temporary quarters, but work is advancing on the construction of the permanent monastery.


Dom Eamon tells me that he spent three splendid days here, enjoying the bracing late-winter climate of the North Sea, meeting with the brothers both in community and individually, and relaxing a bit by cycling and hiking around the island.

***Pope Francis speaks to us:** The grace must be sought to know how to seek out Jesus in the brothers and sisters we have been given. And that is precisely where we can begin to put charity into practice: in the place where you live, by welcoming brothers and sisters in their poverty, as Simeon welcomed Jesus meek and poor. Today, so many see in other people only hindrances and complications. We need to have a gaze that seeks out our neighbor, that brings those who are far-off closer.*

12.

OUR LADY OF ST JOSEPH ABBEY (*LILBOSCH*)

Echt, Netherlands (Mar. 4-7)

 ON THE MORNING of Wednesday, March 4th, Dom Eamon and Dom Alberic take the ferry and then the train to travel south across the whole length of the Netherlands, intending to visit St Joseph's Abbey near the town of Echt. This spot is located in the narrow southeastern pocket of the Netherlands, sandwiched between the Belgian and the German borders. Dom Eamon is welcomed here by Dom Malachias Huijink and the community of some 14 brothers. Dom Malachias has been abbot of Echt since 2009.

“Lilbosch” Abbey, as this community is known locally, was founded from Achel in 1883, at a time when the motherhouse was receiving many vocations. The brothers' work still keeps them close to the land for the most part. They engage in such demanding activities as the

cultivation of crops, the keeping of free-range pigs, calf-rearing and apiculture, and they use organic farming techniques to the extent possible.

On Friday, March 6th, Dom Malachias drives Dom Eamon across the border into Germany to visit our sisters' community of Maria Frieden in Dahlem, about 130 km away. They return on the same day for Dom Eamon's final night at Echt.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *Consecrated persons, who live to imitate Jesus, are called to bring their own gaze into the world, a gaze of compassion, a gaze that goes in search of those far-off; a gaze that does not condemn, but encourages, frees, consoles; a gaze of compassion. That repeated phrase in the Gospel, which, speaking about Jesus, says: "He had compassion". This is the stooping down of Jesus towards each one of us.*

13.

OUR LADY OF PEACE ABBEY (MARIA FRIEDEN)

Dahlem, Germany (Mar. 6)

IN 1952 THE MONKS of Mariawald acquired a property in Dahlem which they envisioned as the first OCSO monastery of sisters in Germany. The spot had been the site of a model sheep farm under the Nazi regime, but it now belonged to the British occupation forces. Some Mariawald brothers arrived first on the property and worked hard to help prepare the place to welcome a group of Dutch sisters from Koningsoord Abbey near Tilburg.

The new community was officially inaugurated in 1953 by the 16 founding sisters. Emerging out of the terrible conflicts of World War II, the community was put under the patronage of Our Lady of Peace ("Maria Frieden"). Indeed, praying for the peace of the world has always been the central focus of the sisters' lives. Fittingly the community's symbol is a dove bearing an olive branch in its beak. At present the community numbers 11 sisters.

On this day Dom Eamon and Dom Malachias are welcomed to Maria Frieden by Mother Gratia Adler who has been its abbess since 2012. Together, community and visitors enjoy a festive meal and several hours of gleeful fraternal conversation. From early on the sisters have produced a well-known herbal liqueur reminiscent of Chartreuse, and later on they also opened an atelier for the production of liturgical vestments. This second endeavor, however, was discontinued in recent years. Maria Frieden eventually founded Gethsemani Priory in the Palatinate, our second women's community in Germany, atop beautiful Donnersberg Mountain, just outside the town of Dannenfels.

Pope Francis speaks to us: *"My eyes have seen your salvation." The eyes of Simeon saw salvation because they were expecting it. They were eyes that were waiting, full of hope. They were looking for the light and then saw the light of the nations. They were aged eyes, but burning with hope. The gaze of consecrated men and women can only be one of hope. Knowing how to hope.*

14.

OUR LADY OF KLAARLAND PRIORY

Bocholt, Belgium (Mar. 7-9)

DOM MALACHIAS DRIVES Dom Eamon on the morning of Saturday, March 7th, from Echt in the Netherlands to Bocholt in Belgium, slightly to the northwest, all of 32 km away. The destination is Our Lady of Klaarland Priory, Dom Eamon's final stop on this month-long journey. He is given a most cordial welcome by Mother Rebekka Willekes, prioress since 2011, and the community of 16 sisters. This youthful superior also happens to be a medical doctor.

The monastery was founded in 1970 by six sisters coming from Nazareth Abbey. The community was first established near Hasselt (Belgium), but in 1975 it moved to its present location near Bocholt. The name "Klaarland" means *bright land*. The sisters explain that they chose this name remembering that Cistercian monks coming from Clairvaux had, already in 1165, made a foundation named "Klaarkamp" in Friesland, the northernmost region of today's Netherlands. Monastics do have a long memory! And a stone from the ruins of that ancient Friesian abbey is ensconced, just behind the tabernacle, in the outer wall of the present church. In addition the sisters add: "We love the *bright light* in all its aspects, and believe in the bright side of our existence. In our house the light also floods in through many large windows."

Over the years the sisters have developed different lines of work that generate income. Some of these products are: artisanal jam, craft biscuits, brewer's yeast, hand-woven liturgical vestments, candles and greeting cards. Guests are also welcomed in a small guesthouse.

Around midday on Monday, March 9th, M. Rebekka drives Dom Eamon up to the Dutch city of Eindhoven, where he is to take his Ryanair flight back to Rome. He arrives at the Generalate just in time to join the Casa's other 11 members in the sudden Coronavirus lockdown. Needless to say, neither Dom Eamon nor any other member of the Casa has left Rome since. Only since May 4th, as Italy entered Phase 2 of its lockdown, have we ventured to show our faces even beyond the front gate. May God have mercy on us and on our world by the power of Christ's Resurrection from the dead!

But I leave the last words to the Holy Father:

Let us look to the Gospel and see Simeon and Anna: they were elderly, alone, yet they had not lost hope, because they remained in communion with the Lord. Anna "did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day". Here is the secret: never to alienate oneself from the Lord, who is the source of hope. We become blind if we do not look to the Lord every day, if we do not adore him. Let us adore the Lord!

*f. Simeon of Spencer,
Rome, Pentecost 2020.*