

**Chronicle: Going Back to Our Roots – Pilgrimage to Vaise**  
**28 September – 1 October 2017**

The day after the General Chapter M. Rosaria of Vitorchiano and 9 superiors of daughter and granddaughter houses flew to Marseilles where they were surprised to be welcomed at the airport by 2/3 of the community of Blauvac. The celebration of their bicentenary was under way. After introductions and a refreshing snack we all boarded a comfortable bus and began our pilgrimage to our roots with the singing of vespers thanks to the first of the beautifully prepared leaflets that were to accompany all our liturgies. Our destination was Aiguebelle where Dom Eric, M. Anne-Emmanuelle, M. Michèle and Sr Alexandra of Bonneval, M. Marie-Rose of Chambarand, M. Marie-Christine of Rivet, already arrived by car from Assisi and warmly welcomed us. After a cordial family supper in the guesthouse, all were glad to retire to their rooms without delay since an early departure was scheduled for the pilgrimage of the next day.

The bus left punctually at 5.30 and after silent prayer in the dark, we sang lauds before arriving approximately at 7.30 at the site of the Vaise community that was started in Lyons on May 13, 1817. A small private Catholic school of a traditionalist nature, called St Francesco and St Jacinta, now occupies a part of the property. The students and teachers, the director and the Vicar General of Religious of the diocese of Lyons were there to greet us and show us the remaining signs of our Trappist forebears whom they honor and remember, desiring to maintain its spirit as a place of prayer. The enclosure wall still stands with a memorial plaque that tells us that this was the home of the Trappists of Bon Secours and that Dom Augustine de Lestrangé died in this place. There is also the original front gate, a stone cross and the bell while what were once the dormitory buildings are now used as apartments. High above one of the external walls we see the statue of Our Lady of Bon Secours from the street, which leads us past the bus station still named 'La Trappe'.

Our amazingly well organized trip kept us to a tight schedule: we must definitely leave by 9.30 if we are to get to Aiguebelle for sext and lunch. But one more thing must be noticed: exactly on the other side of the wall, which bears the memorial, inscription there is a brightly colored painting of the miracle of the dancing sun of May 13, 1817. The enlarged Vitorchiano family could not help but be struck by the fact that exactly 200 years from the date of the installation of the community of Vaise, the community of Vitorchiano voted to make a foundation in Portugal, fruit of the fecundity of these sisters who travelled across Europe to remain faithful to their monastic vocation.

Upon our arrival at Aiguebelle, we had a few minutes to visit the very tastefully done Memorial to our Tiberhine brothers in the guest area, with only a bit of regret that we could not spend more time there in silence and reflection. But Sext in the incredible beauty of the 12th century church brought a new experience of past in the present, illuminating our souls with the grace flowing from centuries of prayer and inspired architecture. Then a magnificent festive meal shared with the community in the awesome refectory gladdened our hearts and our palates. A quick tour of the monastery took us to the archives in the library where we read and touched manuscripts and books that had been to Russia and back on the odyssey. We were just able to get to the cemetery and commune with our forbears in gratitude for a few minutes before it was time to climb back onto the bus of our own odyssey.

This time the trip was short, to the nearby site of Maubec where the Vaise community had moved in 1834. They remained until 1991 when the monastery was sold to an entrepreneur who transformed it into lodging for more than 150 families, keeping intact some of the monastic style and atmosphere but in somewhat rundown exterior conditions. We stopped at the front portal and once again sang the Magnificat in communion with our sisters who had lived, prayed, worked and died there. We visited the cloister garden and what was formerly the novitiate and the cemetery before joining with a few residents who try to keep up the Cistercian spirit in the complex for a snack, a prayer and a friendly chat.

Back on the bus we sang vespers as we headed to our principal and final destination, Blauvac, the present home of the Vaise community. All this time there was much discussion of history and family trees which were and continue to be too complicated to record here but which led us to fascinating discoveries of how our communities are connected and form one large family. Things we had only read in books came alive in our encounter with each other and these places of our common roots and heritage.

Before being given our rooms, we stopped at the statue of Our Lady of Bon Secours that had been brought from Maubec after the transfer, to sing once again the Magnificat for all of God's *opere mirabili*. M. Geneviève-Marie of Echourghac and Marie-Christine of Rivet and several sisters had arrived and were there to welcome us. Then a brief moment to settle in and it was time for mass at 19.30 in the luminous church. It was good to offer thanks together for a long and full day that had brought us together in a new conscientious of our unity. Another family style supper and we were off to bed.

Lauds at 7.00 were followed by a short chapter talk by M. Anne-Emmanuelle about the significance of this Bicentenary Feast day and then we were off in 2 groups to see the house. Yes, 2 groups because that morning some more sisters from Bonnval and Chambarand had come to join us. A beautiful solemn mass of joyful thanksgiving, with an impressive entrance procession of all there present, was celebrated by a former bishop who is now the chaplain at Blauvac, assisted by Dom Eric, Dom Jean-Pierre of Midelt and Dom Etienne of Koutaba who had come from Aiguebelle for the celebration. also came as the representative The rest of the day was full of surprises, certainly prepared for us by the Holy Spirit. First of all, as we gathered to eat in the guesthouse, a neighbor with a truck full of homing pigeons put one in the hands of each of us and then at the signal, we all released them together. They took to the sky with enthusiasm and circled around several times in perfect formation - a symbol of unity in movement that delighted us - before taking off for their nearby home.

Fr. Jean, a monk from Sénanque, a nearby Cistercian Order monastery of the Middle Ages joined us for a superb festive dinner. After a short break, we gathered together under the porticos of the terrace of the former castle whose ballroom is used as the community refectory. It was the perfect place for the very creative performance that reenacted the monastic odyssey, beginning with the expulsion of the religious by the revolutionary army right down to the foundation of all the houses under the inspiration of a dancing Holy Spirit.

It was time to go indoors and into the former ballroom where the chairs were already arranged for an informal sharing of our impression, experiences and hopes. Just as we

were about to begin, Dom Eric and company had to leave for Aiguebelle and Fr. John for Sénanque. So we women were left alone to open our hearts to each other, and open our hearts we truly did. Joy, wonder at the work of the Spirit who had brought us together in this freedom of communion. Desire to continue the encounter, to keep in contact, to pray for each other in some concrete shapes and forms. To pray also for our sister houses that hadn't been able to come. Something new has been born: Vaise III and we have to let it develop and revitalize all of us. And so the decision that this chronicle should be written for the Order's website.

But our sharing was not finished and we continued during supper - so much so that after eating we quickly got rid of all the dishes and brought the chairs together in a circle to continue sharing our intuitions, ideas and desires, connecting it all with what was expressed at the General Chapter about abbesses and nuns participating more, communicating more, bringing our gifts to the building up of the communion in the Order. Without any plans or votes or commissions, a new experience of communion was being born, that freed us of fears, wrong impressions, and hesitations, even prejudices. A new appreciation of the value of filiation, of maternity and fecundity that we all shared. We sang the Salve with small candles in our hands, circled around a small statue of Our Lady to whom we wished to confide our hearts and our friendship.

I was surprised to learn that I had been chosen to give the chapter the following morning. I could only obey and trust in the Holy Spirit to help me say what he would have me say. In the wee small hours of the morning I tried to gather together our inspirations and realizations into some kind of concluding synthesis - in French no less which I speak only about once every three years. And with His grace, it was done.

We had little time after that for packing up and then getting ready for Sunday mass at 9.30 to be followed at 11.15 by a light dinner in the ballroom refectory. We ate in welcome silence with accompanying music that was most appropriate for the conclusion of our encounter as we each reflected on the unexpected gift of these precious days together. Immediately after our lively discussions continued as the community and remaining guests accompanied the Italian contingent to the bus that was to take us back to the airport in Marseilles. Hugs and embraces all around and yet another chorus of the Taize Magnificat as our little bus took us out of sight of our waving sisters, mothers and cousins.

As one superior said in the sharing, "This is a marking point in our history which separates all that was before it and all that comes after it". And in so doing it connects us more profoundly with all that was before and with all that will come after, in the eternal now of communion gratuitously given, of mutual dependence and mutual gratitude. Trust in the presence of our incarnated and resurrected Lord, the Lord of all history who give to each one of us a uniquely wonderful part to play.