

4th Casa Chronicle: October 2022-August 2023

Hello everyone, after a (too) long break. We are back to recounting the Abbot General's travels. It is easiest to try and do them in chronological order, and we will resume after the General Chapter until the summer vacations of 2023.

Germany Belgium and France October 30 - November 8 2022

The program includes two communities in the closing process and three that are continuing their journey:

We arrive in Düsseldorf on October 30, first to visit the sisters who remain at **Clairefontaine** in Belgium, eager for a meeting with D Bernardus. Half a day of meetings, explanations, and good resolutions, with M Benedict of Arnhem, who remains close to the 6 on site. The issue is complicated by local misunderstanding of the Holy See's decision to close, both for the 6 remaining and for the commune.

We arrive in time for the First Vespers of All Saints' Day in **Orval**. Here we are, a small group welded together by these challenging times, following the episcopal ordination of D Löde and the subsequent departure of several brothers. They are currently discerning with the French-speaking Belgian communities how they can help each other.

We are now on our way to the new home of the **Maria-Frieden** sisters. The sisters have moved into a former Benedictine monastery, renovated, and adapted to a medium-sized community. The community has benefited greatly in its community dynamics from the work of discernment conducted beforehand, and now has a setting adapted to the reality of the community.

We then visit **Mariawald** Abbey. D Bernardus has known the Abbey for many years, both before and since its closing, being responsible for it. The guide's enthusiasm made us want to see a men's community flourish there again, when God wills.

We arrived in **Les Gardes**, in the west of France, ahead of schedule for the abbatial blessing. The community elected M Annie, who had exercised important economic responsibilities in her original congregation, the Daughters of Wisdom. In addition to her economic experience, she added her pastoral experience as Novice Mistress.

A visit to nearby **Bellefontaine** was the obvious thing to do, and we spent a day there, discovering a Trappe that has kept its roots and is trying to persevere in this new millennium. It was a particularly fitting place to sign the Covenant with our **Merci-Dieu** sisters, following the votes of the last General Chapter.

On November 8, we met at **Monte Oliveto Maggiore**, halfway between Florence and Rome, the Mother House of one of the branches of the

great Benedictine family. Don Bernardus was there to give the inaugural conference of their General Chapter. This family of monks and nuns gathers only the monks for the General Chapter, who alone decide on the future of the Congregation. Here, more than at the General Chapter of our brothers of the Commune Observance, we felt a more classical atmosphere, especially as regards the distribution of roles. We are, even more clearly since the last Chapter, on a new, demanding path of close collaboration between the two branches of our Order, a confusing one for some, starting with the Dicastery, which is astonished, amazed, and sometimes struggling to understand our unique path.

From December 3 to 12, we were in Uganda. I'd stuck with Idi Amin Da-da, his imperial coronation, his tragicomic regime and his support for the hostage-taking in Entebbe, where we landed ... Thanks to this trip, I began to understand how one can fall in love with Africa in general and with our communities in particular: for their welcome, their accompaniment, their care at the cost of a day's travel on good roads for a third, back roads for the rest, and finally a more or less passable track depending on the rain of the day in Victoria. Yes, it is raining in Uganda this small rainy season. It only rains in the morning...but a lot, enough to feed Lake Victoria and the Nile. The altitude is high enough to offer a pleasant, almost spring-like climate.

Butende is a lovely community of around thirty sisters, many of them in formation. Their guesthouse is a puzzling mix of rustic simplicity, large and almost empty from the Covid lockdowns. Their liturgy is well mastered, all in English as in Victoria, well accompanied by the organ.

Victoria, whose monastery is nearing completion following the forced departure from Kenya, is almost comfortable, well-designed, with around thirty brothers, including 6 or 7 in training. Their church is simple and imposing, so high that it seems narrow inside, but it is not. Their guesthouse, deliberately reduced in size to encourage silent retreats, has a covered access to the church, which comes in handy at this time of year.

The large surrounding grounds have made it possible to create an elementary school, and a secondary school has been added for the past year to encourage literacy and school perseverance, while remaining close to families. A dormitory is even being set up for those who can only return on weekends.

Monastic life here also provides medical and cultural care, confirming our common concern as a Church for all human beings and everything that helps them grow.

Back to Entebbe, and an impressive view of the UN military airbase and its peacekeeping force in the region. The afternoon's successive

take-offs gave us to understand that their mission, particularly in Eastern Congo, was in full swing, a forerunner of the perilous situation currently facing the Mokoto.

We returned to Rome to celebrate Christmas "at home", almost all together, since only D. Emmanuel had returned to his community in Val Notre Dame.

At the end of January, we went to the United States, first to **Gethsemani** for its 175th anniversary. D Bernardus preached the retreat on the contribution of Benedict XVI to the Cistercians since he had just passed away. It was a good opportunity to discover a community whose founding capacity is still alive in our collective memory, following in the footsteps of its own founding house at Melleray.

An hour's flight north takes us to **New Melleray Abbey**: the community has an imposing building with a spacious guesthouse and a dozen monks. Their industry is coffins, which we hope is not a bad omen for their future.

Mississippi, an hour's drive away, is a medium-sized community, where it is good to be welcomed, especially at evening meals, which we shared each time with small groups of sisters, a wonderful opportunity for more informal encounters.

India, New Zealand, and Australia: February 24 - March 21

Visiting India means accepting to enter a different, bewildering world where so many codes are different. We began with our 6 sisters in **Kunnambetta** in northern Kerala. It is a small community, a foundation in fact. The process of growth is slowed down by the absence of long-term visas for the Belgian sisters, complicated by the control of currency that Soleilmont could send to help the community, by the choice to celebrate in the Latin rite, whereas most neighboring Catholics, sisters and candidates are in the Syro-Malabar rite. The move has enabled them to return peacefully to monastic life, which can be felt in this simple, ingenious monastery, proportionate to the community.

A short day's drive brought us to our brothers in **Kurisumala**. This monastery was founded in 1958 and joined the Order in 1998. It has chosen the Syro-Malankara rite, which is exceedingly small with only one million believers. They are highly respected and even venerated, but also a little feared as they are perceived as very austere. It is like hearing the reputation of St. Alberic's Citeaux, with concerns about their future. The founder, originally a monk from Scourmont, has a chapel where are held worships at None on Sundays, in addition to the festive celebration presided over by the bishop each year. He is

awaiting a diocesan process with a view to beatification, which has already been granted by popular fervor, particularly among the abbey's many faithful retreatants.

We were visiting India on our way to... the end of the world, New Zealand to be more precise. **Kopua** is a modest community of Irish origin, small enough to share a round table for meals. It has just experienced the grace of mutual aid through the gift of three brothers from Rawaseneng, who have come to help. The graft is taking well to the joy of all concerned.

On the way home, a stopover in **Tarrawarra**, Australia, was a matter of course, especially as it had been ten years since the Abbé General's last visit. What an international, intercontinental community! The emphasis here is on personal continuing education: tailor-made to last in the Lord's love.

We plan to visit Spain three times in 2023! Do not be jealous! This is due to the upcoming September General Chapter of the Nuns of St. Bernard.

We visited Spain for the first time in April, with M Rebekka from Klaarland, to assist D. Bernardus. We began with the small community of **Arévalo** on the occasion of M Esther's resignation for reasons of age, to support the decision of the Abbot General and his Council to accept the resignation and provide for a superior. The monastery is new, modern and on a human scale. The sisters live in an almost family-like atmosphere, united around their superior who extends her abbacy as Superior ad nutum. Fragility is embraced, and attention to vocations is reflected in common and personal prayer.

A few kilometers away is our community in **Avila**, which has also been on the outskirts of the city for 50 years. Cor Orans now establishes that when a community of nuns reaches the figure of 5 Professes Solemn, the Supreme Moderator, D Bernardus for us, must send a detailed report to the Congregation. For this, a visit was necessary. The community of five sisters is elderly, apart from one Indian sister, and faces the challenge not only of living the regular life, but also of forming community in this vast modern house rich in a glorious past.

We were delighted to spend a few hours at **Monte Sion**, a monastery near Toledo that helps the elderly: the first brothers join the sisters, mainly from the Congregation of Las Huelgas, a new step in the integration of the Order, a new innovative solution to meet the needs of our elderly. In addition to the outside staff, a strong monastic core helps daily, not only materially, but also through a loving presence in a well-organized regular life adapted to the abilities of each resident. We can truly recommend this place to continue the monastic life when staying in one's home monastery proves too arduous.

At the end of April, we set off to visit our houses in the Czech Republic and Austria.

En route to Engelszell (Austria) from Prague airport (Czech Republic), our journey almost ended up in Germany, which is the quickest route to both places. The Schengen area of free movement makes this possible... though not without occasional spot checks. Fortunately, we were driving along peacefully when German customs stopped us for a routine check. But it became more curious as D Bernardus's passport showed so many borders crossed in recent months. Hence the customs officer's astonished question: "What do you do for a living? Few people actually make their living in perpetual travel. A good opportunity to respond by giving the mission of our Abbot General. He must have been a Catholic, because he understood, relieved that it was not some kind of international traffic ... and didn't even ask to open the trunk!

Engelszell Abbey is a little gem, housing a tiny community on one wing, a Caritas retirement home on the other and a Baroque church in the middle. Its position along the Danube makes it a popular tourist stopover. In addition to the small number of professed members, there was the question of the age and fatigue of the superior, D Hubert.

We arrive at **Novy Dvur** to visit the community before the Regional Meeting. A new monastery, isolated in the middle of the countryside, a new, large, well-organized, and young community. The contrasts are striking. The time seems ripe to combine the heritage of the founding house, Sept-Fons, with the grace of inculturation in the Czech Church. A Regional Meeting of remarkable honesty and frankness, evading neither provocative questions nor desirable clarifications.

We then visited our sisters at **Naší Paní**. Since 2018, this Abbey has been completing the transition of a founding process (since 2007), acknowledging that the founders, who were not elders... have become so, passing on the Cistercian charisma to a new generation happy with its Czech-Italian heritage. Their final historical show exuded the happiness of the freedom of God's daughters.

In June, we spent almost 3 weeks in Spain and Portugal for the (official) Regular Visit of four communities of the Congregation of St Bernard in preparation for the September General Chapter of the Congregation, two one-day lightning meetings with the communities of **Cardeña** and **San Isidro** and the discovery of our latest foundation in **Palaçoulo**, Portugal.

Yes, 4 visits to 4 communities, two of which now live together, all in the same diocese of Burgos! 4 identities rooted in the centuries, even if only Las Huelgas has remained in situ. The Visiting Cards of these communities will be reviewed at the 2023 General Chapter.

In addition to the joy of visiting a foundation, the monastery of Saint Mary of the Church in **Palaçoulo** asked the Abbot General and his Council to authorize the opening of the novitiate. It was therefore

appropriate to travel to the North-East of Portugal, almost on the Spanish border, well protected from its neighbor by a few medieval towers, and to see for oneself that the community was capable of welcoming and training candidates for monastic life. The liturgy is in the tone of Vitorchiano transposed into Portuguese, the monastery is nearing completion with the usual delays, the industry is being set up and the community is united around its Mother Prioress.

We are back just in time for St Peter-St Paul's Day, a public holiday in Rome, where for once we are all home for 10 days. Tasty food and talking coffee on the menu, almost as if it were Christmas or Easter.

D Bernardus also went with D Emmanuel to Sept-Fons and Laval. He visited our three communities along the West Coast of the USA in July, this time on his own, before taking time out in community in Tilburg in August.

Let us pray with D Godefroy and Acey

F Raphaël