

LENTEN CONFERENCE

Feb. 19, 2015

This will not be a Lenten talk in any traditional sense of the term. However, it will focus on some important aspects of monastic life at this particular monastery at this particular time. Let me begin by recounting something that one of the superiors said in informal conversation at the recent meeting in Cullman, Alabama. This was a sister who is prioress of a relatively small community in a rural part of the country, and she told me that she and the other sisters are very seriously considering a move to an urban area, apparently in the hope that they might thereby become more visible and attract more vocations. By some traditional standards, that might sound like a wrongheaded move. After all, the early monks back in the third and fourth century intentionally fled the cities for the solitude of deserted areas, giving rise to a phrase that captures the change they wrought and that became the title of a rather well-known book about early monasticism: *The Desert a City*. I also recall several decades ago that Rembert Weakland, when he was abbot primate and visiting here from Rome, gave us a talk about urban monasticism, certainly mentioning its values but also implying that the very existence of a monastery like ours or Newark Abbey might have to be justified in light of the fact that most monasteries in history have been located in more isolated areas (even though towns often grew up around them).

Now there are obviously many ways in which we could improve our own way of life, above all through what we often call “ongoing conversion”—trying to take on every more closely the mind of Christ, as St. Paul says at the beginning of the second chapter of the letter to the Philippians. Just as obviously, there are some ways in which the city around us offers temptations to laxity that would not be so evident if we were located in an area as relatively remote as, say, Christ in the Desert or Valyermo or Weston Priory. But there is also a sense in which we could rightly be said to have the best of both worlds if only we take advantage of all that our location offers us. First-time visitors regularly remark on the relative quiet of our

property, despite the occasional sirens of ambulances and fire trucks and the noise of motorcycles on South Dakota Avenue. Some of our guests even use the word “oasis” of our property. And however busy we can become at times, I expect that the hectic pace followed by some businessmen or lawmakers downtown is normally not reflected in our own lives. There is a real value in the balanced round of prayer, work, rest and recreation, and if sometimes it can be a chore to put aside what one is doing in order to come here to our church for Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours, on the whole this should be seen as a blessing. I mentioned the other evening at recreation that I met Fr. Ed Markley down at St. Bernard a few weeks ago. He recalled a lot of incidents from his three years here, and one thing that he said he never forgot is what another student guest, Hugh Feiss, said to him one evening at the end of recreation when the buzzer for Compline sounded. Ed said, “Well, I guess we have to go to choir now,” to which Hugh replied, very seriously and not at all jokingly, “You mean, we get to go to choir now.” Even if we may not always feel that way, to pray in common with one’s brethren several times a day really is a privilege that most people don’t have.

If that is among the blessings of the more secluded aspects of our life, we should also keep in mind the genuine blessings that come from living in a world-class city like Washington. As a somewhat minor example, I think we’d all agree that exactly a week ago Ayatollah Ahmad Iravani gave us a very informative and inspiring talk about his work in trying to bring about understanding among people of different religions as well as working to overcome extremism among his fellow Muslims. If we were located somewhere in the midst of the Great Plains, there’d be little chance to hear someone like that without a lot of difficulty, including expensive travel, whereas this man’s office is right here in Northeast Washington, just a fifteen-minute drive away. So, too, near the end of March a former colleague of mine from CUA who is one of

the world's leading authorities on an important social and educational movement led by a prominent Turkish scholar and preacher will come speak to us about that, again something that is easily possible because we are just a few minutes away from the campus where Professor Valkenberg teaches. And then there are all of Washington's magnificent museums that people travel hundreds and thousands of miles to visit but that are right at our fingertips, many of them with free admission either every day or at least on some days each month. As I've said before in one or another homily, Pope Benedict once wrote that the two things in Christianity most apt to attract others are the saints and Christian art, and of the latter there is an abundance not only on permanent exhibit at places like the National Gallery but also in occasional exhibitions such as the wonderful show *Picturing Mary* that some of us saw last month at the National Museum of Women in the Arts.

It would be easy to go on and on, but my main point is one that was summed up several decades ago in Pope Paul VI's important encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. Despite the fact that some narrow-minded spiritual writers have at times scorned the monuments of human culture, Pope Paul was clear that since we are not pure spirits, we should never neglect those areas of human life that he called "the growth of knowledge [and] the acquisition of culture." It is also a privilege for those of us who teach in our school to be able to open up such treasures to our students in all the different fields of study that are available to them: literature, languages, the fine arts, the social and natural sciences, math, theology, and any that I might be overlooking. To be sure, as Pope Paul said in that same encyclical, the supreme values are those covered by the theological virtues—the faith, hope, and love that have God as their direct and immediate end—but any life that focused only on those would surely be truncated.

As I said at the beginning, this doesn't sound like a traditional Lenten conference. St. Benedict rightly says in chapter 49 of his Rule that there are certain things one should deny oneself during this season, but it would not be wrong to add that there are also some things that one might add: not only somewhat more prayer and spiritual reading than at other times, but also somewhat more of those values that Pope Paul included under the rubric "acquisition of culture." We are undoubtedly blessed by the riches around us, and if we can partake of them in a balanced way, we will surely grow toward the full humanity that God wishes for every one of his sons and daughters. That so many people in the world are deprived of the very possibility of so partaking is tragic: I think of the tens of thousands of refugees living in tents, suffering from terrible diseases and from threats of unspeakable violence, and we should do whatever we reasonably can to assist them, even as we gratefully recognize that the blessings that we enjoy are undeserved and could indeed be taken away in ways unforeseen. And since we cannot possibly know if what we now have will last, we should make our own the prayerful words of Dag Hammarsköld with which I will conclude: "For all that has been — thanks. For all that will be — yes."