

22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday 2017, Abbey

From last Sunday's gospel: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Fortress mentality. A power model, requiring submission in crisis. It *has* worked in the past. From next Sunday's gospel: "Where two or three gather in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The people of God, affirmed by Vatican 2 but dismissed by some Catholics today. From today's gospel: "The son of man must suffer, be killed, then raised; you too must take up your cross and follow me." The realities of sacrifice and discipleship, which we may wish to ignore. The triumphant institutional church, the humble local assembly, and discipleship on the personal level. Three levels of church, delineated by Matthew, an ecclesiology if you prefer a fancy term (which I don't). What does it mean for us who step out of official church structure to live in or connect to a monastery? We are outside the official hierarchical framework. But, news flash: we do not entirely avoid problems of the three-tier system.

Recently I returned from the quadriennial 98<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Chapter of the English Benedictine Congregation (EBC), near London. Tough life, you say. It *is* a great privilege that my brothers in our local ordinary annual chapter (all these jargon terms!) have elected me, twice, to represent them. I was chosen in an esoteric form of discussion called the tractatus (more about this later). But the EBC general chapter worked hard. Three hours each morning, three after lunch, three hours of liturgy through the day, insufficient toilet time: eight days. At night we slept on school dormitory pallets without a box-spring in walls so thin I heard the snorer next door.

Founded by a British monastery, Saint Anselm's belongs to the EBC despite American antipathy to foreign governance from some of us. Kinglike, our Abbot President wears a ring and miter, symbols of authority, like our cardinal archbishop. He has power to summon us to work through a merciless agenda. This year's was less perfunctory than most chapter agendas. We discussed declining numbers, aging communities, difficulty in electing superiors, crisis of leadership, crisis of followership, public scandal. The three American monasteries have been spared sexual transgression. That is not true for seven UK abbeys. A monastic congregation should *not* be centralized. But in our interdependent times even autonomous abbeys sink or swim together, in the ocean which separates us. We feel fragile, impermanent.

The abbey where we met was not impermanent. Originally it was a great house like Downton Abbey. Sitting behind white linen tablecloths, under sculpted marble, we spoke across a gleaming ballroom floor. The recorded minutes, transcribed by two non-delegates, are like the congressional record. Official titles are used. We take ourselves seriously; our behavior is very "proper." Abbess of Stanbrook, delegate of Downside, procurator in Curia, censor librorum. Each professed monk is called Dom, short for Dominus, or Lord; nuns are called Dame or Lady. As counterparts to the (Anglican) spiritual lords of the realm, we could have met the Queen.

On one occasion, I, Reverend Dom Gabriel, delegate of Washington (as identified on the name-card at my assigned place), behaved subversively. I was appointed one of the auditors of congregational accounts. Though very unqualified, I was asked to read out some of what my colleagues had written. To this I appended my own material, a tribute for the real financial mastermind. Instead of the conventional words, "Thank you, Reverend Dom Inspector of Accounts," I described his virtues in a witty way. Then I omitted his title, in violation of our holy Rule chapter 63: "no monk should presume to call another simply by name." I concluded, "And so, dear Francis, this little Academy Awards moment is for *you*." Dozing members awoke; heads popped up from electronic devices; the room erupted in cheers; Francis turned bright red. Someone said, "Jolly good. Only an *American* could cut through our pomposity." The Abbot

President, Most Reverend Dom Abbot Richard, most proper of all, said, “Only *Gabriel* could do that.” Not Dom Gabriel.

Finally came the last day, and election of an abbot president. I must mention that the abbot of Washington, our Abbot, Abbot James, with only a little backroom politics from me, was overwhelmingly elected an assistant to the abbot president, after two more obvious candidates were chosen. He is in the first of those tri-annual meetings as we speak. He will be too modest to mention this burden, this honor.

More controversial than electing assistants was electing an abbot president. Four years ago Abbot President Richard was re-elected with no opposition. After an early lunch we caught our trains. This year was different. Richard has been our congregation’s foundation-stone for sixteen years. He is very formal. Near him I sometimes feel clumsy and immature. He addresses problems correctly, very correctly, but *can seem to* lack the common touch. Viewing him behind the scenes, I would definitely qualify this: he has a lot of heart without, maybe, wearing it on his sleeve.

The election is like a papal conclave. We sing the *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come, Holy Spirit). We swear on the crucifix to vote wisely. We hold the tractatus secretly after candidates have left the room. This year’s discussion went past lunch; we missed our trains. We spoke at length, in detail, weighing flaws and strengths. I praised a worthy (British) candidate as “one of the few fully authentic people I know.” Some agreed; *others* differed. When Most Reverend Dom Abbot President Richard was considered, even opponents spoke with appreciation and respect.

Three of us were appointed to count ballots. Again we swore honesty on the crucifix. The first ballot was decisive. Not my candidate. As senior scrutator, I read out the official declaration, “At Worth Abbey in Sussex on the first day of August 2017, I Dom Gabriel, Delegate of Washington, declare that the 98<sup>th</sup> English Benedictine Ordinary General Chapter has elected, as president, Right Reverend Dom Christopher Jamison.” The new abbot president looks like Gregory Peck. He has some ego, but who can blame him? He could not have been entirely surprised. He had spoken earlier about the Rule describing the abbot as needing many C.E.O. qualities. But his eyes were wet as general chapter swept to its feet in acclamation.

After a desperately needed toilet break, we gathered in church to install him. We sang the *Te Deum Laudamus* (We praise you, God: the church’s great hymn of thanksgiving). Then the organ pealed. Unlike our great-house meeting room, the church is round, modern, austere. All brown but the flowers. English monks process differently from our informal (I won’t say “sloppy”) Saint Anselm’s style. Slowly and in perfect pairs; down the center aisle, around the curving wall. We swayed in step like soldiers, like Mark Morris dancers.

Suddenly I thought, I am part of this great procession, the monks of the Roman church! Son of a man who called himself a dirt-farmer, I was a delegate to the 98<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Chapter of the English Benedictines with its 52<sup>nd</sup> abbot president! The first general chapter, in 1625, followed the period when monasteries were abolished by Henry VIII. Before him our English Benedictine line goes back to the year 600. Peter’s successor, Gregory the Great, sent that first monk to lay the foundation for the great house of which I am a little pebble. Unseen monks below me had done their duty erecting the edifice. Now my generation must keep it standing against destruction (from forces within and without). Whatever scandals and fragility, we must be firm for future stones to be cemented atop us.

You, oblates and friends of Saint Anselm's, are at a remove to the English Benedictine Congregation. You do belong to the one, holy, catholic, apostolic church, which is more important than any English Benedictine Congregation. It is harder to be a Catholic on the street, outside the luxuries and security of a monastery, and I salute you. Within that church you belong to families, cultures, and guilds of brilliant talent. Ordinary people who have preserved faith, hope, and love in terrible times, times like Henry VIII, American slavery, terrible times like now. You are a stone in a palace of faith and power. Atop the glorious apostles of history, below the happy citizens of heaven, supported by the gathered two or three, carrying your cross, trusting in Christ. Do you *feel* that? Do you really *feel* those connections as you receive the sacred host? That *you* have faith sufficient to save our troubled world? That *against you* the gates of hell will not prevail? In our time, the Catholic church is in grave danger, from secularism and apathy outside, from more deadly polarization inside. Yet we have the promises: the cross bringing the crown, Christ's presence where two or three are gathered, and the rock of faith on which Christ builds his church, even now. It is for *us* to rediscover these truths and live them out.

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