

Twenty Years of Priesthood, Ten Years of Foundation

An Interview with Monsignor Gilles Wach, Superior General and Founder of The Institute of Christ the King Sovereign Priest

Conducted by Michael Davies in March 1999

Q: This Year you are celebrating your twentieth anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, which you received from the hands of Pope John Paul II. Tell us a little about the ten years you spent in Rome.

It was for me a special grace, full of meaning, to have been ordained priest on the tomb of St. Peter, by the actual successor of St. Peter. He is the guardian of the faith and unity in the Church. That made a profound impression on the young priest that I was then which will endure for the rest of my life. Without fail, I shall be attached to the Church of Christ and her Supreme Pastor, who has been given the task of feeding His sheep. I spent the first years of my priesthood in Rome, where one perceives better the universality of the Church. The message of truth and charity goes out to the world from the throne of St. Peter, and all peoples, all races, and all nations benefit from this incommensurable magnanimity.

It was in the Eternal City that I prepared my thesis on St. Francis of Sales, described by the venerable Pope Pius IX as “the Doctor of Love.” His spirituality is too little known these days, and yet is very up to date. The holy doctor had a great care for the souls of men. He used every possible means to approach them, but did not fall into subjectivism. He employed a teaching full of charity, adapted to each person, with the aim of leading them to the summit of the Love of God. He has therefore, as one would say today, ‘opened his ears’ to men. But his aim is to bring back a man who is sick, a man who thirsts for truth, to his God, a God who is Creator and Saviour, and a God of love.

St Francis, as Bishop of Geneva, did not betray either the person, or God. There is a similarity between Romanita (love of and devotion to Rome) and this great doctor of the Church. The sublime truths that he teaches act like grace “Sanans et elevans”, healing and uplifting. The individual with his gifts and sorrows is first attracted and then transformed and purified by the teaching of St. Francis of Sales, This teaching is universally true, and his knowledge of human nature and psychology can be applied

to anyone, just as different peoples are enlightened and progress, whilst directed by the teachings of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. The obstacles in receiving this teaching come from us. These obstacles are our passions and egoism, for nations the conflicts, wars and difficult historical legacies. I therefore learned in Rome that truth can only be taught with charity, and that their union is universally efficacious.

Q: Well before 1988 you worked for a reconciliation between “traditionalists “ and the Holy See.

I had always suffered greatly from that which tears apart or divides the Church. St. Francis of Sales worked for reconciliation in the Chablais, and recalled to the Church numberless lost sheep. He is a model to follow. With several Roman Cardinals - Cardinal Martin, Cardinal Mayer, Cardinal Oddi, and Cardinal Stickler - we sought to establish bridges. I thus collaborated in the reconciliation with the Church of communities and clergy. This sometimes is not understood, for the mediator is never partisan, and the French spirit tends to fall into extremes, so that discussion is no longer possible, and one only hurls anathemas. What counts is to serve the Church, to love Her and to make Her loved.

Q: How does your Institute, which is missionary in Spirit, adapt on a local level?

The Institute of Christ the King, Sovereign Priest has indeed a missionary vocation. We possess important missions in Africa, but today are we not in missionary lands everywhere? It is therefore with this outlook that our priests work on a local level, be it in Africa or elsewhere, wherever a bishop has called on them. Cardinal Siri, under whom I was formed, taught us that “without the bishop the local church does not exist. The bishop is the essential and necessary centre of the Christian community. Directly or indirectly he is the source of all the sacraments; he is the true representative of Christ, he is, in perfect submission to the Roman Pontiff, master and authentic doctor of the Church; he has all the legislative power in the context of the general laws of the Church. Without the bishop, the local Church does not exist.” The “new evangelisation” which the Pope asks of us cannot be carried out without this spirit.

Different spiritualities can only enrich everyone when they are lived in true ecclesial communion, under the authority of the bishop. “The gift of religious life in the diocesan community, when it goes hand in hand with the sincere esteem and

respect of the particularities of each Institute and each spiritual tradition, enlarges the horizon of Christian testimony, and contributes in different ways to enrich priestly spirituality” John Paul II: *Pastores dabo vobis*.

For example, in the United States we have received an excellent welcome from bishops who have edified me greatly on account of their great pastoral concern; they have asked for our priests, so that the faithful attached to the Traditional rites may benefit from their fruits in perfect ecclesial communion. The American bishops have given the Institute parishes, and I am happy to visit our priests in the United States and to see that the spirit of dialectic and radicalism does not exist across the Atlantic.

We are often asked to come to Great Britain, it is the Island of Saints, and the Institute will go there if a bishop invites us. Our Institute does not want to create problems, but wishes to serve the Church in obedience to legitimate authority

Q: In Gabon, you have constructed three churches and restored others. You were there yourself as vicar general, which is why one calls you “Monsignor”. Could you tell us about your African experience?

It is quite true that I was vicar general during five years, under two different bishops. The first of them, Msgr. Obamba, a man of faith and great culture, invited our newly born Institute into his diocese. Our first days with Father Mora, and Father Audin were very difficult on a material level (missions without water or electricity, unusable roads, thousands of small and large animals unknown in our climates). On a spiritual level we had countless consolations such as Masses, sermons, catechism, and visits to missions which had remained without priests for several years.

The second bishop was Msgr. Basile Mve, a great servant of the church, and man of dialogue, who has recently been named Archbishop of Libreville. He has always been a great friend of the Institute. We are happy to have served him for two years. On several occasions he has ordained our seminarians, either in Africa or at Gricigliano. Today I am Vicar General emeritus, and my title was only *durante munere*. It is by courtesy that one still gives it to me, and those with whom I speak are habitually courteous.

Black Africa is a fascinating country, but today in a very sad state. The church has a great role to play, and I admire the missionaries, priests and religious, who consecrate their lives to it. They are witnesses to the Gospel in a world that is still very cruel. Our Institute has sent several priests and seminarians to Gabon. Their missionary work is without doubt a source of graces for all the members of our Institute.

Q: You work, therefore, in different continents?

As you say, our priests are at the service of several dioceses across the world, and their faithfulness to the teachings of the Pope and to our Salesian spirituality greatly facilitates their apostolate. Outlooks are very different, so are the cultures, as are the wounds. One has to know how to listen, and love before evangelising. How great are the differences between the church of Port Marly in the diocese of Versailles, and the parish of Mayumba in the African bush. In the former it was necessary to restore ecclesial communion, and that has been achieved. In the latter it was necessary to supply water and electricity, then build a church, and that also has been achieved. We have also built two other churches, and another is in the process of construction. Three more have been restored. We have also had to look after the parish schools, which are of great importance for human and Christian development.

In the United States the situation is very different. The fervour of American Catholics has always impressed me. Five of our priests work there in three dioceses, where our houses are canonically erected by the bishops. Our apostolate is essentially parochial.

In Europe we are in France, Italy, Spain, and Austria, where our work is developing rapidly. In Montpellier, after five years of ministry, the Institute has been entrusted with a new apostolate in Beziers.

Q: How do you justify your attachment to the Traditional rite, and how is it lived in the diocesan apostolate?

This rite is an enrichment for everyone. It is not the only rite in the Catholic Church. Let us recall what Cardinal Suenens said: “unity is not uniformity”. We have chosen St. Benedict as our principal Patron due to the pre-eminence he places on the liturgy.

Our priests are not normally alone in a presbytery. According to our constitutions there is a common life so that our members, even though we are not a religious order, recite the divine office together. Our priesthood is lived and understood in the light of the documents of the Magisterium, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and liturgy is the *Optatam Totius*. The Latin and Gregorian liturgy is the foundation of our spiritual and community life. The church has other rites, other liturgies that come from her ancient or more recent traditions. The practice and love of a rite opens one's heart and mind to better know and understand the other rites of the church.

Q: Speak a little of your seminary at Gricigliano - of the family spirit which reigns and of the high quality of the teaching.

What You say is true, but this has not come about without great difficulties. One does not easily install dozens of young men in a beautiful but crumbling Tuscan Villa in mid-winter. In addition, as in any foundation, all sorts of candidates presented themselves. One had to make a choice, especially in our epoch when so many men are sick, and souls wounded. We have not lacked crosses. Cardinal Mayer encouraged me and said that this was a good sign.

It has taken us years build up the seminary and to form our seminarians in the spirit of St. Francis of Sale imbued with love of God, love of the liturgy, and love of neighbour. Thanks to our benefactors, the material situation has improved, but we are still in need of help. Providence has sent us very good professors, it is impossible to name them all but I would underline the presence of Father Bley S.J. for history, of the Provost Andre Clement, Mr. Assaf of the Sorbonne for Philosophy, Father Lucien and Msgr. Schmitz for theology. The formation should be complete, human, cultural and spiritual. We have had real surprises with the current generation - even if all the aspirants to the priesthood have degrees. "Reconstructed families" and today's schools do not always give solid foundations. Even when the young are generous, they are often fragile.

To honour our first patron, St. Benedict, manual labour, after a life of prayer, has an important place at Gricigliano. All our housework is done by us, and in addition we make our own bread, wine and oil. This Benedictine touch permits us to test the generosity of everyone, and helps build cohesion and a family spirit. The institute now numbers 35 priests and 60 seminarians.

A conclusion?

Twenty years of priesthood, ten years of the Institute -only graces! I invite your readers to pray that we may always be better disposed to receive God's grace, and to conform ourselves to His Divine Will. To love God and to serve His Church - there you have our life.