

REPORT FROM DOUAI ABBEY

After the sounds, noises and images of our journey, our arrival at a Benedictine monastery situated in the green and silent Berkshire countryside was an extraordinary and inspiring experience. It boded well for the beginning of an intense meeting in which important decisions had to be taken. This joyous feeling was confirmed by the welcome we received from our hosts, and we were immediately struck by the existing well-structured organization. What followed proved to be a further confirmation of our first impressions: the silent functioning of the elevator, the automatic switching-on of the lights, the sharp sound of the electric door locks, the resilient sun rays that illuminated our surroundings and warmed our stay. Further on we could appreciate the paintings, the glass windows and the parlours, until we arrived at our rooms, simply furnished yet welcoming, seemingly eager to host the travellers who came from afar. These surprises were just the beginning, and together with the intense emotions we felt were a very pleasant experience for us. Our first surprise was on seeing the Abbey Church, a sort of giant lying on the ground, with its solid and well-balanced structure. The unfinished nature of the project does not diminish the surprising harmony of the daring solutions adopted by an inspired architect. The appropriate use of materials and well-conceived techniques amalgamate perfectly with the previous handiwork, in particular the architectural contrast obtained through the use of solid wooden beams and marble joints. The unfinished state of a work of art is nothing new as it depends on various circumstances. However, I was very surprised to find one in England.

The inside of the main nave and the surrounding spaces are filled by the rays of the sun, coloured by the polychrome glass windows and enhancing the imposing presence of the two organs. The forms of the metallic organ pipes are made more evident by the oak supporting structure. The music spreads all along the nave and in the surroundings. The mechanism is brought to life by expert hands that do justice to the expressiveness of the music and the skill of the organist, at times in grave and choral tones, at others through intense and meditative movements.

During our stay at the monastery we put into practice the motto 'ora et labora' by alternating prayer and work. We prayed with the community in the monastic choir, where participation was intense and moving. It was therefore possible for us, through a palpable naturalness of movements, to experience a deep silence and to render our prayer effective through Gregorian chant.

Work was done with the oblates present for the meeting, in order to put together a common vision, share our experiences, smoothen differing positions, and to arrive, step by step, to positive and workable solutions. Everyone took part in the consideration of the various topics discussed; all had the opportunity to give their opinion and contributed to create a serene and constructive atmosphere. It was a truly encouraging demonstration of maturity and competence that augurs well for the future. Truly, there had never been any doubt on this point, but it was very important to have yet more proof of it through the attitude of those present at the meeting.

We also experienced how the gift of silence puts us in a better position to listen. This confirmed that the choice of the topic of the Third World Congress of Benedictine Oblates, “ **Obsculta: The Oblate Listening in the World** ”, was indeed a good one.

The end of our stay could not have been better. We all attended an evening concert held in the large church, and had the opportunity of listening to the musical group called “His Majesty’s Sagbutts and Cornets”. The group specializes in Renaissance and Baroque music, and the performance was very much appreciated and admired by those present. The loud sounds of the trumpet and the horns provided a perfect musical background for admiring the Gothic architecture of the church, with its wide cross vaults, its impressive height, the lancet arches, the large reinforced columns. The picture was completed by the magnificent large glass windows, whose white glass was enriched by a delicate and complex grid pattern.

We would like to thank all the monks and lay people who welcomed us with fraternal kindness and exerted all their efforts for the successful outcome of our meeting.

Giorgio Marte

20th May 2012