

Introduction

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN to preserve a small part of the history of the church; not a scholarly work, without literary or even spiritual pretensions, it is simply a witness to Life. As such, it contains all of these layers of understanding and others even more personal. The act of writing it is an act of faith, my testimony that God is at work everywhere and at all times.

In 2004 I was invited to contribute to the ecumenical roundtable of Milan. I said “yes” and found myself in the company of two pillars of spiritual theology and ecumenism: Monsignor Georges Khodr, bishop of the Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch in Lebanon, and Dom André Louf, a French Cistercian monk. Both of them, without knowing it of course, had been very influential in my life. I was very moved to be there with them.

I was there to share my perspective on “the spiritual journey and the birth of religious communities within Protestantism—the fruit of a renewal in spirituality and of ecumenical openness.” Following my contribution, the publisher Paoline of Milan asked me to write a book on this topic. The theme was to be “the ecumenical experience of the Community of Grandchamp.” Again, I said “yes,” without knowing I was setting out on an adventure well beyond my capabilities.

In the first place, at age seventy-seven, my physical energy is limited. And the writing of a book is a whole new learning experience, invigorating but demanding. Then there is the theme: it is a perilous exercise to write as a sister of Grandchamp and former prioress (1970–1999), about my own community. It is only possible by keeping this essential thought in mind: the community is not an end in itself. What is important to grasp is what the Spirit is impressing upon the church.

Writing this book just seven years after handing off leadership of Grandchamp to another sister, I feel a little like I’ve arrived at the summit

of a small Mount Horeb;¹ the joy of a look back, the joy of sensing the outpouring of Life there. What an extraordinary experience it has been to see gathered together all the wealth of my experiences since coming to Grandchamp. Some connections between events, encounters, and aspirations of the moment, which I barely suspected at the time, now appear with clarity. I've been given the gift of a long-range perspective on things we experienced from day to day through many years.

At first, I didn't know where to start. I wrote parts of the story as I was inspired, as the liturgical calendar or requests from outside the community brought them to mind. Later I was greatly helped by Marie-Laure Ivanov, an Antiochian Orthodox friend of the community and a trained writer, without whose help this book would never have been seen the light of day. She arranged the texts, gathering and drawing inspiration from other writing I had done for conferences and retreats when I was prioress. She also collected testimonies. Most importantly, she encouraged me in the birthing process.

The writing of this book carries traces of this entire editorial process. It is part of a movement that extends from the beginnings of the community through persons and events (chapter 1), continues by sharing what shapes the community (chapter 2), which opens onto our solidarity with this world (chapter 3), and gives other sisters and friends a chance to bear witness to what connects us all in our otherness (chapter 4). To illustrate our close relationship with the world, I sought these ecumenical—in the larger sense—perspectives. I wanted to reveal the backdrop that is the context of our ecumenical vocation of prayer and reconciliation. The first person, “I,” is used as a way of highlighting my personal and unique experiences as a Christian, invited to follow Christ to the fullest. I use “we” as a sister of Grandchamp taking part in community life, a reality all the more intensely lived as long-time prioress. This “we” does not make the community responsible for my words, but rather indicates the way I see the Spirit working through our community. This perspective relies on some very concrete points in our history and our experience of community life, of the Mystery we carry, but always setting it within a larger reality—that of the ecumenical movement and of the recent history of the church and the world. I should point out another particularity of this book: its first edition was not in the original language, French, but in Italian as translated by the publisher, Paoline.

The Spirit sent us people, first of all our sisters, and helped us to discover many other brothers and sisters. So many were sent to us along the

¹ Deut 4:15; 5:2.

way. We were surrounded by the well wishes of people imbued with the wisdom of God, among them Brother François of Taizé, Rosette Genton, Frau Vera, and others who are filled with the foolishness of God (1 Cor 1:25): I think especially of our brother Jean Goss, and of many others. All look to the future. They love the church and take her challenges to heart.

I would also like to express here my gratitude to Sister Gianfranca of Paoline, who had the courage to suggest that I write this book; to Father Enzo Bianchi of Bose, Father Franz Müller, O.P., and Sister Lorraine Caza, CND, for their encouragement; to Gottfried Hammann, Hans-Ruedi Weber, Father Michel Froidure, O.P., and so many others for their helpful comments; and, to Colette Joray, Fernand Trabaud, and Father Matthias of Bose for their attentive editing. I am also grateful for the kind hospitality of the Abbey of Maigrange, the Monasteries of Eygalières and Bose, and the Oltramare families, and especially the attentive and prayerful support of my sisters throughout the writing of this work.

I am in the evening of my life. Little by little, I have become overwhelmed with gratitude for all that has been given me. I know how insignificant we are in this ecumenical experiment that we try to live each day. And yet God needed our “yes” to get us started in spite of our limitations, and to remain open with the same openness that characterized Mother Geneviève and our first sisters.

And so I have come to a place of inner rejoicing in discovering the extraordinary fruitfulness of the experience of this community. I am so grateful for it and ardently desire to share it, first with my sisters, but also beyond, with those whom God wishes to strengthen in their call to a living ecumenism. This is the hope that fills me. In witness to his grace, I know that truly, *when the world is troubled . . . God acts!*

Sister Minke

2008