

MONKS FROM THE LAND OF SANTA CLAUS

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You need to drive slowly on a snow-covered road, coming out of Levanger, in central Norway, located on an icy plain, dotted by large farms, whose buildings are made of wood, painted in ochre and red which give an impression of glowing embers in the black of winter. At the junction, you do not follow the sign which reads: Church Ruins. It would bring you to an icy valley, the resting place of some blue stones: those of an abandoned Cistercian monastery from eight centuries ago. Instead, follow the sharp ascent up to a house built of stone, wood and glass. That's where they are. Go in without ringing. You are now at the monastery of Munkeby ("hamlet of monks"), the first Cistercian foundation dared by Citeaux in the past five centuries.

Don't let the odor of rancid milk dissuade you. (The cheese factory is located in the basement.) Follow the hallway. Sit in the back of the small chapel under a pine ceiling. Behind the bouquet of lilies and the small altar, a glass bay window opens to a view of the white sky. Four monks in white robes sing a hymn for daybreak, borrowed from Citeaux. Then they intone in Norwegian: "Miskun deg, Herre, miskunn deg over meg." – "Have pity on me, Lord, have pity on me."

There is something strange about watching these four Frenchmen praise God in a language that they have learned, conscientiously, with the Assimil method. And besides that, except for some passing visitor, no native person is around to hear them.

This is part of the contract. Having left for Norway, in 2006, for a six month sabbatical with the Sisters of Tautra - Cistercian nuns who have been established

themselves at the edge of the fjord, fifteen years earlier- Fr. Joel was searching for a more “simple” type of monastic life. At Citeaux, he muses, “the massiveness of the buildings and their maintenance, weighed upon an ageing community.” He hoped to find a new wind, but which one? For two months, in the dead of winter, this inured monk left the sisters of Tautra to enclose himself in a wooden cabin, near a Trappist brother.

From there, on the 20th of November, by candlelight, he wrote to the Abbot General of the Order, Dom Bernardo Olivera, in Rome, to confide his “call”, “that of Norway, the desert of the North .” And he adds: “ I do not conceive it as a foundation of Citeaux, or even of a foundation at all, but as an experimental cell.” The Abbot General’s response to him arrives on December 12th: “We must clear new paths, to take risks in faith without expecting to see their fruits. These fruits are already present in the act of believing.”

It remained to convince F. Olivier, abbot of Citeaux, to allow B. Joel a period of absence “to prepare the way.” He arrived at Tautra on Monday, the 22nd of December. Behind the monastery’s walls, covered with its shining slates, Father Joel revealed his request to F. Olivier, and he replied “no.” How could the community endure the loss of its prior (number two), of its master cheese maker, (the means of subsistence for the 40 monks of Citeaux), of its master of studies (there were six monks in formation)? No, definitely, no.

That night, Father Joel was demoralized. But the sisters of Tautra around him, beginning with Sister Rosemary, a superior with a joyful personality, did not want to leave things rest there. She also felt that the Order should take risks if it wanted to survive. She desired, in fact, and ardently, that a monastery of men would install themselves in the proximity, as was in accordance with the best Cistercian tradition.

And so, the next morning, she brought F. Olivier to visit many sites which “could sustain a monastery.” How were they found? By simply posing the question to their gardener, Rannveig Munkeby, who telephoned her father, Johannes, a man who was keen on history. He indicated three places!

During the visit, a hill that was surrounded by a screen of pine trees and Birches , captured the soul of Brother Joel. It was called Munkeberg – the hill of the monks. Then, the old Johannes received the small group in his red house, with coffee and cake. Sister Rosemary then presses the process forward: “Can you call the owner? Yes. Right away? Yes.” And then, curiously, in this Lutheran kingdom of five million inhabitants - where Catholics are only a handful, where monasticism has disappeared since the Reformation (1537), in this country of stone, forests and fjords where there is arable land on only 3,4 per cent of the surface – the owner, Ole-Petter Munkeby (no relation to Johannes) murmurs: “I am interested.”

The following day, F. Olivier flies back to Paris, having confided that he is “open” to the venture, but that he must first obtain the consent of the majority of the brothers of Citeaux. This was not to be an easy accomplishment.

Still some more signs? There was the one on January 3rd, 2007. That day, Ole-Petter Munkeby, who raises 20 milking cows, received Brother Joel and a few sisters with coffee and cake in his yellow wooden house. The monk introduces himself: “prior and master cheese maker of Citeaux.” Ole-Petter gives a start. A practicing Lutheran, he has studied St. Bernard, who in 1112, gave a decisive thrust to the Cistercian Order, and who also inspired Luther. A collector of folk objects, he was nostalgic for cheese produced in the old fashioned way before Norway became an oil nation dedicated to industrial products. He had even written to a French nun from the abbey of Port-Salut to ask her for her “original recipe.”

It was the ruins of blue stones, at the bottom of the valley that had inspired him with this double passion. And here, in his kitchen, he found himself face to face with the “prior and master cheese maker of Citeaux!” “With our ruins, we have the history, but it is only in stones, he told himself. They come bringing it to life!”

Two months later, he is ready to sell Munkeby to the monks of Citeaux. From then on, everything would progress at a gallop, stimulated by the sisters of Tautra, and the wisdom of a business man, friend of Brother Joel, who dedicated himself, body and soul, to the project.

During this same period, at Citeaux F. Olivier progresses prudently. It took the visit of the abbot General, Dom Olivera, in March, 2007, for the question to be formulated in the following way: “Should we, or should we not, envisage a new foundation?” On the 30th of November, 2009, after numerous trips of the monks to Norway, and of Norwegians, to Citeaux, the brothers dropped into the urn, a majority of white balls, therefore giving the Father Abbot the authorization to begin organizing a “pre-foundation” in the desert of the North.

This is how it came to be that on a morning in November of 2010, in -15 degree Celcius weather, four monks in white robes, face each other under a pine ceiling, singing Psalm 56: “Miskunn deg, Herre, miskunn deg over meg.” Afterwards, Brother Joel raises his hood, does the dishes, and goes down to the cheese factory, where he turns, palpitates and moistens the rounds of yellow cheese with the care of a father for his baby. At the same time Brother Arnaud, a tall, young monk, pulls a jumper cable to the car, to reheat the motor, while Brother Bruno, a brilliant jack of all trades, hangs a curtain behind the entrance room that will protect from the wind, made from a thick blue fabric. Brother Cyril, the senior, wraps the most recent batch of cheese for delivery, and, in his white boots, makes a tour of the monastery and contemplates, pensive and in wonderment, the crest where the sun has just appeared.

The blue stones of the monastery ruins have come to sustain their uncertain steps. Take the case, for example, of Brother Bruno. He is responsible for the sewing (liturgical linens and the mending), the kitchen, the accounting and the liturgy. He is in the process of transcribing liturgical hymns into Norwegian. Two big helps have come his way. One is named Mette, a psychiatrist from Oslo. She offered to translate the texts. The other is Ulf, a composer. He has agreed to make the musical arrangements. Then there is Brother Joel, the father abbot of Munkeby. Thanks to a restaurant specialist with the name of Bjørn, the soft curd Munkeby cheese has even made its way into the Royal Palace. This allows them to live by the work of their hands, as required by the Rule of St. Benedict.

Still some more signs? Monday evening, November 22nd, standing in the kitchen, Brother Joel presents the plans of the future monastery—square cloister, church

with room for 50 guests -- to five Norwegians dressed in black and grey. This building would be a complement to the already standing guest house where the monks moved in on September 14th, 2009.

“What are your requirements, your stages?” asks Olav Salater, a banker. “The money and the monks” answers Brother Joel, bringing on laughter. “It’s a question of investing 4 million Euros.** But we also must be at least five monks in order to begin the building process. Otherwise, it won’t work. It will be up to the Father Abbot of Citeaux to make the decision.”

The mayor, Rober Svava, then begins to emerge forth from his mutism): “Send the Father Abbot to see me! I will tell him how much the kommune and the people are interested in this monastery.” The other banker, Asbjorn Norberg, further adds: “It must be an open church, where anyone can come at any hour to pray.” “It should be a monastery where we can make retreats! We have common Christian roots,” continues Olav Norberg, the engineer.

There are signs. There are doubts. How long, Brother Joel asks himself, will the restrictions continue? The following evening, Kjartan Bergslid, Lutheran Pastor in Levanger, receives him at his office. The young, talkative man is finishing a series of studies on...Ignatius of Loyola. He wants to be reassured: Will the monastery really see the light of day? As he says, “In our materialistic society, people need this type of spirituality in order to find peace, God, silence. Do you want to hear a prophecy? Before ten years have passed”, he says, “you will have a Norwegian monk.”

**Send donations to Brother Raphael, Abbey of Citeaux, 1700, Saint-Nicolas-Les Citeaux. Website: www.munkeby.net