

On the Call

On the Call We have received to be Canons Regular

A Letter from the Abbot Primate on the Call We have received to be Canons Regular

Christ Church Priory, Eltham, November 2003 My Dear Brother in Christ, As I come to the end of my period of office as Abbot Primate I reflect on my contact with the Congregations that go to make up our Confederation, the links that bind us together and our place in the life of the Church. With the death of Abbot Egger we have come to the end of an era. All the great men who brought the Confederation into being are now dead. I think in gratitude of Bishop Haller, Mgr. Lovey, Abbot Koberger and Abbot Egger; all men of outstanding ability, deep spirituality and with a great love for St. Augustine and the Canonical Order. They left behind a rich legacy which it is our privilege and responsibility to nourish and care for. Obviously our diminished numbers make the task all the more difficult and over the years we have lost many Canons who were fired by their vision and tried very hard to keep the flame burning. This letter cannot pretend to be a solution to the many problems that beset us. I have not got an instant answer to the decline in vocations, nor a remedy for survival in a society that seems so increasingly secular and out of touch with the divine. All I can do is to reflect with you on my experience of the Canonical life as I have lived it among you and to offer a theological reflection on our calling which may help. Each Congregation offers its own version of the Augustinian calling to share all things and to live together in brotherly unity for the sake of the local church. Visiting the various houses I have witnessed outstanding examples of dedication to pastoral ministry, of teaching, missionary work and preaching. But I have also been aware of the tensions that living can bring, of the problems that can arise when changes have to be made, houses closed, new superiors appointed. My own English Province has been sorely tested and other provinces have experienced similar difficulties. Sometimes the problem can be solved by reconciling personalities, sometimes by the appointment of a new superior, but there will be times when we need to go much deeper and call on the riches of our biblical and theological tradition. Just recently I was greatly helped by observing how the Church of England began to cope with the very real problems it is called on to solve, particularly in the area of human sexuality. The argument still rages (it can be found in the Catholic Church too!). By way of initial response the Archbishop of Canterbury (theologian and patristics scholar), Rowan Williams, addressed the Anglican Synod and reminded them of the call to be Church. I would like to quote him at some length. He begins by asking what makes us a Church. In the following quotation for "Church" read "Order": What makes a Church is the call of Jesus Christ, and our freedom and ability, helped by grace, to recognize that call in each other. The first reality is God's action in summoning us together as a people -- in the words of Jesus, which make it clear that we can belong to God's people if we trust what Jesus says about God and does in God's name, and in the death and resurrection of Jesus, which actively remove the barriers we set up by our sin to communion with God. To announce all this is to announce God's invitation. To accept the invitation, with all its carriers of acknowledging what Jesus has done, is to be taken into Christ's living Body, finding there a company of unlikely people who have received and answered the same invitation. The Church's life develops as we slowly and clumsily start working on the ways we recognize others as called by the same God and Savior; let me repeat that: start working on the ways we recognize each other as called by the same God and Savior. Our language, our doctrine, our worship all seek to be effective assurances that we are stepping to the same dance. At the center of everything, the Scriptures provide the first test of that unity and coherence, to which all else is brought to be judged; then there are the basic identifying acts of the community which tell us that the life of the Risen Christ is promised if we once let go of the self-protection we cling to (baptism) and that it is celebrated and deepened as we finally respond to the invitation of the Risen Lord at his table (Holy Communion). (Presidential Address. General Synod, York. 14th July 2003) Obviously, the Church is more important than the Order but I think we can discern some of the important elements which bind us together. We belong to the Order because of the Call of Christ. Augustine heard the call of Christ and was baptized. In the call of Christ he discerned a way of following Him whereby the clergy could find a holy way of life in living, fully and generously, the *vita communis*. The founders of our Confederation were aware of the Call and were aware of the mutual help we can offer each other by being more closely united; sharing the rich treasures of our individual congregations. I count myself fortunate that I was present at the beginning of our Confederation, that I knew personally our founders, that I benefited from the experience of living the Canonical life in the International College of St. Victor in Rome, and from the many opportunities I have had of sharing in the life and worship of so many of our houses. I thank you all for

all that you have shared with me. Terms of office come to an end, the obligation to pray for one another continues and never ceases. While I have not been able to do all that I would have liked for the Confederation I have never ceased to hold you in my prayers. As I draw near the end of my term, I commend myself to you. As St. Augustine wrote in his letter to Proba: Intensive prayers means beating on the door of him to whom we are praying by long and devout stirring of the heart. Often this task is carried on more by groaning than by speaking, with more tears than breath. He sets our tears in his sight, and our groaning is not hidden from him who created all things by his Word, and does not require the words of men. (Letter to Proba, Ep. 130, 9,18-10,20) As I look around our Confederation I see signs of hope; in the missionary efforts being made in the Far East, Africa and South America; in the return of Canon Regular life to Scandinavia; in the hope being nourished in Austria of a new foundation in the United States; and in the efforts being made in Europe not just to survive but to attract vocations. May God bless our efforts. May the prayers of St. Augustine, St. Monica and all the Saints of the Canonical Order accompany all we do. Feast of All Saints of the Canonical Order. + Anthony Maggs C.R.L. Abbot Primate.