

The Servants of Unity

By Marthe Westphal

The Apple Trees of Grandchamp

At Grandchamp, there are lots of trees: fruit trees, flowering trees, trees hundreds of years old, European and exotic trees, ash, lime, ginkgo, apple, pear, cherry trees...this variety rather reflects that of the community and other groups that have come into being from it. All are nourished by one and the same earth, and draw from the same source.

So it is for the Servants of Unity, born out of the intuition and hope of two people: Mother Geneviève of Grandchamp and Brother Roger of Taizé. At the end of the 1950's, Brother Roger was hearing about the difficulties experienced by Czech monks, nuns and religious people in living out their vocation in a country where the Church had been reduced to silence. It became clear to him that the only way for them to survive was to live out their vocation discreetly, on their own.

At the same time, Brother Roger wondered if it was suitable in Western countries to offer the possibility of making life vows to men who did not have a call to community life. These brothers would live out their vocation, on their own, in their working life right there where they lived. He wrote a text for this purpose called: 'Servants of Unity.' [1](1959)

As for Mother Geneviève, she saw single women coming to the Community of Grandchamp who evidently had a vocation to contemplative prayer but not to community life. These were often widows or divorced people as well as unmarried women. So, Br Roger's text was adopted as a basis – we call it the 'Basic Text' – and as a 'Rule of Life' for these women.

Here are some sentences from the beginning of this Text:

'In view of visibly uniting Christians separated by century-long divisions, we need to support men (women) to live out their vocation in their own Church and life situation, in a society where people have become deaf to the Gospel, partly because of the inconsistency of our Christian divisions.

Nothing spectacular, but people that Christ Himself has inspired to live out the call to the visible unity of Christians in the One Church of Jesus Christ, in the here and now. Only by living a hidden life with Christ in God can one persevere day after day, for the call to unity lived out to the full involves a struggle both within and without.'

It was Rosette Genton, with the first group of women, who were responsible for exploring how to discern and to express this vocation, helped by Mother Geneviève and Roman Catholic women who belonged to religious congregations or secular institutes. Thus the ecumenical dimension was there from the start.

The vocation of the Servant of Unity, today, can be described as one way of living out a life dedicated to the Lord without any outer sign that distinguishes that person from those amongst whom she lives. So, it is a contemplative life right in the world, marked by a solitude that is wholly turned to the Kingdom of God. This solitude is accepted for the sake of the unity of believers, that will only be fully realised when God is all in all and when it is at the service of all. This unity of believers also implies unity of all humanity in a creation that is reconciled, as well as the inner unity that is so necessary for people to accept others in their differences.

This vocation is lived out in a spirit of attentiveness to the Word of God, to the people around us. It is lived out in solitude and with receptive discernment for the signs of God's presence in the world and for his call to us to work with him in his plan for the whole of creation.

We live our Baptism commitment through the three traditional, monastic promises of chastity in celibacy,

poverty and obedience, whether they be vows taken publicly or in the heart. In our day this can seem a mad, unbearable demand, but we receive it as a gift offered to us, and we embark upon it with Christ and in his prayer: 'That they might be one so that the world may believe that you have sent me' (John 17).

So we always seek this communion with Christ and the Father through the Holy Spirit, by listening to the Word, by prayer, and sharing in Holy Communion, for that is where the real source of our consecrated life lies. There are also visits, meetings and exchanges with other Servants, as well as the annual week together and occasional weekends and meetings with a minister, priest or religious from outside.

We are scattered in many countries, but we have a minimum of structure to link us with one another: there are the times together, the circular letters, visits and telephone calls.

An elected 'Collegiate Group' is responsible for the running of the whole. These people see that decisions taken in the various meetings are carried through and they are attentive to what the other Servants say. The 'Recueillante' or Contact person is elected by the whole group and is charged with the Collegiate group to keep the unity of this body which we form as Servants of Unity. She keeps in touch with Grandchamp and in particular with the Prioress, especially when a new member wishes to make her commitment. The Community of Grandchamp is our church reference point together with our chaplains, both Protestant and Catholic. The Servants of Unity are thus born out of this terrain that is common to Grandchamp and Taizé, and are rooted in a similar spirituality of joy, simplicity and mercy.

Why did we start by mentioning the apple trees of Grandchamp?

In a text called 'The Parable of the Apple Tree,'^[2] Daniel Bourguet has a conversation with an apple tree! After noting that the apple tree never feeds on its own apples, as these are for others to enjoy, he asks again: '*Dear apple tree, tell me just one more thing...what is your food?*' – '*On this point I will not tell you everything,*' replied the tree. '*Just know that my food is given to me in secret. I draw it with roots you cannot see and my roots have to remain hidden; with those I draw my nourishment in the shadows of the earth, all the time. Without this food, I would not produce any apples. Know too that my fruit comes from what I draw with my roots and that is the reason no doubt that the fruit looks nothing like me. In fact the fruit doesn't come from me at all. That's enough explanation just remember that it is the same with you human beings. What you need in order to love is drawn from God in the secret place of your prayer. I shall not tell you any more: apply yourself to prayer and you will be covered in fruit!*'

To this, we as Servants of Unity can say: 'Amen'.

In: Soeur Minke, *Vers une gratuité féconde. L'expérience oecuménique de Grandchamp*.
Parole et Silence, 2009

[1] Gradually he gave up this project: leading a new community as well as trying to form a new group for lay brothers seemed too difficult to him at the time.

[2] In his collection of letters called: 'Dieu au Coeur de nos vies' Veillez et Priez, éd. Réveil, Lyon, 2002, p.22ff.