

The passing of Dom Godefroy

*Testimony at the funeral of Dom Godefroy Raguenet de Saint Albin, OCSO, Abbot of Acey.
Acey Abbey, 11 August 2023*

Dom Godefroy had told us that he would arrive at the Echelettes mountain pasture, a day late, on 2 August in the early afternoon. As it was a beautiful day, Br. Nicolas-Marie and I had gone out for a walk and when we returned at the end of the afternoon, I saw that Dom Godefroy had arrived, but had surely already gone to conquer some mountain. We saw him come back in the evening, beaming with joy at having been able to climb Gros-Brun: a feat that only he could allow himself to complete in a few hours. He told me that on the summit – where there is a large cross, just like on the summit of the last mountain he would climb – he had lost his hat. Who knew, it would be the beginning of a process of divestment that would take less than 24 hours...

The evening, the meal, with good wine, the cheese from Cîteaux and the tomatoes from Br. Julien d'Acey that he was proud to offer us; the quiet night, the Lauds and the Eucharist celebrated together, the abundant breakfast, right up to the departure around 9 o'clock, everything is now filled with signs and definitive messages that the silence into which his death has plunged us are echoing in our memory, thirsting for meaning in the face of mystery. I feel a sense of urgency, almost a mission, to simply pass on these signs and messages, like a testament that an eager pilgrim would have placed in my hands before disappearing.

At dinner on Wednesday evening, we talked for a long time about our Orders, our ministry and our latest missions. He had returned happy from a visit to England, where he had experienced the miracle of the Spirit's action in hearts and minds. He told us about his community in Acey, and his daughter-houses: each with an awareness of its fragility and a positive outlook of hope, often clinging to tiny signs. I shared with him something I heard recently from a very frail elderly Sister from Talavera de la Reina in Spain. When I asked her what she thought was the most pressing need today for our Orders, monastic life and the whole Church. After a long silence, she replied: "To be poor!" I saw these words resonate in the poor person in front of me, Dom Godefroy. His gaze reflected it back to me, making it even sharper and more piercing at the heart of our responsibility, our ministry, our vocation.

August 2nd was the anniversary of my first vocation, at the Porziuncola in Assisi. He echoed this confidence by telling us that it would soon be the anniversary of his first monastic vocation, when, I believe in the year 2000, on a military mission in the United States, he went to spend August 5th and 6th at Spencer Abbey. The guesthouse was full for I don't know what celebration, but he went anyway, staying in the Abbey forest. During the night before the feast of the Transfiguration of the Lord, he received his vocation. He told us that on the evening of August 5th he intended to go to the Chartreuse de la Valsainte, very close to our chalet, for the Vigils of the Transfiguration.

He spent the night near our oratory under the roof of the chalet, in a space where he could sleep on the floor, as his doctor had advised him, he said, to relieve the pain in his back. In the morning, when we went upstairs for Lauds and Mass, we found him already in his alb. He had prepared the sacred vessels and the missal. He had put a lot of wine in the chalice. I pointed out to him that it was a little excessive for three people. He smiled and said:

"Tomorrow, we'll put in less!" I later thought that this full chalice was the "overflowing cup" (Ps 22:5) that he needed for his last Eucharist, his last communion with the Blood of the Lord.

He was surprised that I didn't take the Mass in memory of the Curé d'Ars. I pointed out to him that it was August 3rd and the memorial of Jean Marie Vianney would be the following day. I realized that he had undoubtedly just prayed Vigils in memory of the saint he was soon to meet in Heaven...

When we came downstairs after Mass, we saw that he had already laid the table. Again, with an abundance of dishes that was more fitting for a festive meal than a breakfast. It lasted a long time, once again sharing about life and the people and communities we knew.

After breakfast, he prepared his excursion. He discovered that there was a bicycle in the garage and was delighted as it would allow him to go further and reach higher mountains. He consulted the maps, but we didn't find out what he was planning, except that he wanted to pass by the beautiful Romanesque church of Rougemont, a former Cluniac priory. He had several goals in mind, and would have decided on the spot.

He left around 9 o'clock, greeting me with a face that radiated the joy of a child. I was painting a watercolor of a shepherd surrounded by sheep. He leaned over to look at it. I told him it was a failure, especially the proportions between the shepherd and the sheep. Then he said something to me that I still think about today: "No, it's fine. But the sheep need ears!"

"Give ears to the sheep...". Now that our shepherd friend has left his physical presence in the midst of his flock, and the other sheep and flocks entrusted to him, I can't stop thinking about that remark.

"Give ears to the sheep...". Now that our shepherd friend has left his physical presence in the midst of his flock, and the other sheep and flocks entrusted to him, I can't stop thinking about that remark. It takes me back to the Rule of Saint Benedict, which is fully reflected in its first word: "*Obsculta, o fili* – Listen, my son!" (Prol. 1). I'm thinking especially of the passage in which St Benedict makes the father abbot responsible before God's final judgement "for his teaching and for the obedience [i.e. listening] of his disciples" (RB 2,6).

We often think that this implies a disciplinary responsibility: that we are responsible for what the brothers or sisters do or don't do. Saint Benedict was more concerned that the sheep of the flock should have ears to listen to the voice of the Lord, and this is the responsibility that every shepherd of a community must have, a responsibility that is exercised first and foremost by his own obedience, his own listening to the word of God, to the voice of the Bridegroom.

"Give ears to the sheep": this remark, most likely the last message that Dom Godefroy addressed to anyone on this earth, is advice that the Spirit made him address more to the shepherd than to the watercolor painter faced with his unfinished work. Which father or mother, which abbot or abbess, does not feel an insurmountable sense of inability to draw their community with the beauty and harmony that they desire, that they feel it their duty to achieve? What I know of his history leads me to believe that this was also Dom Godefroy's great concern, and that he will remain faithful to this mission even from Heaven.

What is certain is that he had begun to take responsibility for his own obedience, for his own listening to God. I confess that I feel uneasy at the thought that his too rapid descent from the summit of the Dent de Brenleire was due to his desire to obey me. Someone saw

him at the summit at 4 p.m and I had asked him if he could come back for the main meal that we were going to have at 6 p.m. He was strong enough and perhaps reckless enough to try to get back in time, in just two hours, from the top of that mountain to the bike parked at the Gros Mont and then pedal back to our chalet with all his might. I fear his obedience. That it made him run on the ridge from which he would soon slide into the ravine to sudden death. He obeyed to the point of falling, like a grain of wheat, into the ground. He obeyed to the point of death, a death that engraved on his body, on his face, the wounds and bruises of Christ from his Passion.... "The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. It is appropriate for those who have nothing dearer than Christ" (RB 5,1-2), writes Saint Benedict.

I wonder, but it may be heresy, if God the Father did not feel the same discomfort when he saw his Son obey him to the point of death on a Cross...

But Dom Godefroy left us another, more luminous sign, to prove to us that he was working with love to listen to the voice of the Spouse. As we prepared for Mass, in the sacristy and library area where he had spent the night, I saw that he had done his *lectio* on a small table where he had placed a lamp and where his large Bible lay open. During the long hours of the night and day when we were looking for him, waiting for him, I went to look at this Bible and I discovered that his last *lectio divina* had plunged him into chapters 19 and 20 of the Gospel of Saint John. The two open pages began with verse 34 of chapter 19: "But one of the soldiers pierced him in the side with a spear, and immediately blood and water came out." The second page ends with this passage from chapter 20: "As he spoke, he showed them his hands and his side. When the disciples saw the Lord, they were overjoyed. Then Jesus said to them again, 'Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, so I send you. When he had said this, he breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'" (Jn 20:20-22).

Between the pierced Heart of the Crucified One and the revealed Heart of the Risen One, these pages announce Jesus' descent into the tomb, his Resurrection, and his appearance to Mary Magdalene and the apostles. In his Paschal passage, which continues to be fulfilled in the time of the Church, Jesus comes to incorporate his disciples into his eternal Life, through the gift of the Spirit.

Our brother Godefroy had listened to this word, this Easter call and he followed to the end, ablaze with love, the Lamb slain and alive forever!

Yesterday morning, as I do every day when I'm on the mountain pasture, I went to pray Vigils on the road that leads to another chalet, where I sit for a while on a bench in silence facing the mountains and the valley. For the first time in 38 years, I suddenly noticed that a rocky peak loomed behind the forest on the mountain opposite me. It was precisely the last summit reached by Dom Godefroy, the Dent de Brenleire! In the first rays of the rising sun, the metal Cross on that summit shone like a morning star, the Marian sign of invincible hope!

Br. Mauro-Giuseppe Lepori, abbot general OCist