

*Looking for Europe
in a Benedictine Garden*

PAOLO RUMIZ

Introduced and translated by GREGORY CONTI

Translator's Introduction

THE SMALL REGION of Umbria, the self-designated “Green Heart of Italy,” has been home to more than its fair share of saints. Leaving aside their role in the Catholic Church, even the most adamant non-believers, such as Paolo Rumiz, have to acknowledge that the two most famous children of Umbria, Francis of Assisi and Benedict of Norcia, have had an enormous impact on Western civilization.

Rumiz was moved to write about Benedict, and his followers who live and work in the order's monasteries today, after a visit to Norcia in the spring of 2017, six months after central Italy's most recent earthquake. The quake had destroyed the church dedicated to Benedict but left standing its façade and a statue of the saint, whose inscription reminded Rumiz that Benedict is the patron saint of Europe.

Shortly after this encounter with Benedict, coincident with a moment when Rumiz, along with many others, was afflicted with germinating anxiety about the future of united Europe, Rumiz was invited by a Benedictine abbot to participate in a seminar on “wounded landscapes.” The timing was perfect and the invitation led to a journey to a dozen or so Benedictine abbeys in Europe and the writing of the following accounts, which later became two chapters of the book *Il filo infinito: Viaggio alle radici dell'Europa* (The Infinite Thread: A Journey to the Roots of Europe, Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore).

Since its publication in March 2019, *Infinite Thread* has been in the top ten list of Italian nonfiction books and has made a significant contribution to the ongoing debate about the future of the European Union.

G. C.

Praglia, Province of Padua

The old monastery sleeps in the winter mist, anchored like a battleship on the last promontory of the Euganean hills overlooking the plain. The first rooster cries dawn beyond the perimeter bastions, as though he were poking holes in the darkness. His chant penetrates into the labyrinth of cloisters, crypts, storerooms, the library. I make my way out of the guest quarters down a long, cold corridor, until the silence breaks, and I hear the distant shuffling feet of the monks on their way to matins. There are fifteen of them at most. Not very many for an edifice as big as this one. But at this same instant in France, Germany, Spain, Austria, Poland, Greece, Hungary, and elsewhere, in a hundred and a hundred abbeys, men dressed in black are coming out of their cells to salute the day. An army.

“The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork.” Praglia abbey, a quarter past five on a day in January. It’s still nighttime, but it’s easy to wake up before dawn in a place that is out of this world. Unused to silence, I have trouble sleeping, in the throes of tempestuous thoughts, suspended in time and space. Where am I? Padua is just down the road, but this is not Venetia here, and not even Italy. Praglia is Europe. That’s what the vineyards on the mountainside say, the church bell, the smell of baking bread, the fruit trees, the farm animals, the well-kept clearing fronting the forest, the perfect curve of the terraced banks. That’s what the Rule says, measuring the hours and dividing them meticulously between prayer and work. *Ora et labora*, the mark of Saint Benedict, patron of Europe.

Praglia, the name itself sounds good. A barracks of the faith with a peasant soul. I ask myself why I, a nomad, have decided to cross the threshold of an enclosed place. Looking at my notes, I reread a phrase I would never have written a year ago: “Happiness lies in the perimeter.” The *templum* of the Romans, the *témenos* of the Greeks. The interior boundary where the outside world may enter only on tiptoe. Maybe the pact of permanence (*stabilitas in congregatione*) that the Benedictines have been subscribing to for fifteen centuries, to live and

die in the same place, points to an alternative to the clamor of a globalized world that marginalizes, uproots, and sets in motion torrents of displaced persons. Rubber rafts and low-cost wanderlust. Tourists and refugees, who meet on the same tragic shoreline.

“Their voice goes out to all the earth / their words to the ends of the world.” Father Anselmo’s Lombard accent resonates in the votive chapel putting the seal to Psalm 19 on the beauty of creation. Abbot Norberto answers him, the monks bow their heads, intoning a two-note chant while outside the forest is coming to life. Sparrows and nightingales, a continuous crescendo. Places are understood in daytime but they are heard at night. What brings them to life is acoustics. Whether thunder or whisper, the act of creation is acoustic. Spirit is breath, voice, word. Hearing (as in, discerning the essence) is not just any ordinary word, because it is harnessed to sounds distilled from silence. But I am not here just to stock up on silence. There is something else behind all this. My pain for Europe.

It all began in the spring of 2017, during a journey on foot along the fault line of the last Apennine earthquake. It was a magnificent day, we were coming down from the snow-striped Sibylline mountains, and Norcia was there below us, violet in the sunset. Beyond its walls, ruptured by the quake, the medieval town was semidestroyed. We walked around amid police barriers, intimidated and speechless. Then the lovely piazza opened up before us, its buildings now sitting on their haunches. The moonlight transfixed the rose window of the church of Saint Benedict, its façade all that was left standing. But in the center of the piazza was the statue of the saint, intact, with the writing “Patron of Europe.” My heart sank. Until that moment, I had never in the least thought of Benedict and his relationship with Norcia, the earthquake, Europe.

What was that saint saying, his hand raised in benediction, illuminated by the floodlights, amid the ruins of a world? That Europe was going to rubble? Was I looking on at the demise of a grand political idea? The message of the ruins seemed plain as day. The return of national narcissisms bespoke a balkanization in progress on a continental scale. But the saint’s preservation spoke of something else.

The opposite. It recalled that upon the fall of the Roman Empire it was Benedictine monasticism that saved Europe, planting the seeds of reconstruction at the worst possible time, in a world marked by violence, mass migrations, war, anarchy, economic failure. Something very much like today.

Above all, the statue was saying that the germ of the rebirth of a world had sprouted in the Apennine heart of my country. In that seismic backbone that is the center not only of Italy but of the entire Mediterranean. In that unquiet world of sibyls, pastoralism, and long winters, which for millennia, after every destructive eruption, had been able to rise again and which now, for the first time in history, was experiencing an exodus with no return. Abandoned by politics—the mountains don't bring votes—Benedict's great grandchildren were becoming refugees, pouring down out of the mountains to die on the same beaches as the migrants. Hence more questions. Why had this fulcrum of European rebirth been forgotten by Italy? How was it possible to ignore such a message of rebirth?

Today, after mulling over these questions for months, I am walking the corridors of Praglia as it wakes, in the labyrinth of its four cloisters, wine cellars, stairways, and colonnades. I read on some tombs embedded in the floor the writing, *Monachorum cineres* (monks' ashes), and I ask myself what this place must have been like before the crisis of vocations, when it was swarming with men in black bending over their fields, tending their beehives, on their knees in prayer. When Europe still had no national borders and the landscape was crisscrossed by the continuous pilgrimage of populations on a network of trails, bell tower to bell tower, abbey to abbey, in a measurable world, where humanity and nature, even today, go hand in hand. Because that is what Europe is. A cultivated and measurable world, surrounded by endless steppes and deserts.

But it's time to say why I'm here. A typical short circuit of travel. Something that Christians call providence. It was the Benedictines who sought me out, just at the time my anxieties and doubts over Europe were germinating. Abbot Norberto called me to his abbey for a panel on "Wounded Landscapes." Exactly what I was looking for

after the ruins of Norcia. Nobody had affected the continental landscape more than the Benedictines: the consolidation of treacherous terrain, irrigation, the planting of vineyards and olive orchards, forest preservation, and grazing regulation. So he offered me the perfect occasion for trying to get an understanding of what was bothering me. Was the Rule of Saint Benedict with its seventy-three chapters still useful in the struggle to save Europe and stave off the barbarians? Could the monastery be an inspiration for alternative models to pervert globalization?

It didn't seem possible that this little paperback manual in Latin and Italian that the monks had silently left on my bedside table could have changed Europe. Yet it was there, in that Rule, the secret of a prodigious adventure that had recolonized lost territories, putting a stop to the anarchy and violence unleashed by the dissolution of the empire. The more I read it the more I discovered admirable teachings. The exercise of leadership through listening. The democratic election of the abbot. The prestige that has nothing to do with age. The openness toward the younger generations. The respect for nature. The commandment to welcome strangers. The assembly method of managing internal conflicts, which would later generate, with the Cluniac reforms, the first continental parliament. The discipline accompanied by tenderness in human relationships. Stunningly modern.

"Nox et Tenebrae et nubila / confusa mundi et turbida / lux intrat, albescit polus." 7:30 a.m., the chant of the lauds in the church. Its apse is nothing less than an orchestra shell, the place where resonance is married to the early morning light through the stained-glass windows. I wonder why Gregorian chant has been thrown out of churches and replaced by the guitar. The monastic chant in Latin is magnificent, but here the monks are too few to make a choir, and without singing Catholicism is finished. The Orthodox Catholics are way ahead; they know how to seduce you with their masculine baritones and the celestial countermelody of the women. The Christians of the East have no tone-deaf priests. The most powerful Christian chants I have heard were not in Rome but in Aleppo over ten years ago. Another world that has come to an end. Aleppo and Syria no longer exist.

The abbey seems to be sailing in the rain. An ark in the deluge, a space of salvation certified by the centuries, the heart of a communitarian identity regulated in its tiniest details. At eight o'clock the *Ora et Labora* machine is already in full operation, hoeing the garden, restoring manuscripts, overseeing the wine in the casks, picking medicinal herbs, studying the liturgy, welcoming guests. The abbot—a man who is massive and meek—is wearing a black ski mask and takes me out to the wine cellars, the old stables, colonnades, monumental cisterns, loggias, pharmacies, herbariums, and tunnels that during the last war were used to hide Jews, partisans, and fascists. He describes not an architecture but a functional structure, dictated by a specific spirituality. The well is also a symbol: the gift of water from the heavens that turns into life by passing through the subsoil.

Staying here can be dangerous. Once you get used to such harmony, going back to the world makes you feel like you're going to suffocate. I ask myself how this world of the spirit keeps from being contaminated by the nothingness, the liquidation of the invisible, the vulgarity, and the screaming that surrounds it. How to resist the desire to wall yourself off? But if this were really a closed space, how could it seduce a secular priest eater like myself? Isn't it actually hospitality that gives rise to vocations? I must understand if this ancient perimeter, like its brothers on five continents, can be newly necessary in a world that excludes the weak, burns resources, and consumes the biosphere. To be sure, to those deafened by the superfluous it offers a life raft of frugality and silence, which in times like these is a gift of inestimable value.

"You go off to the East, among the Sufis and the Buddhists, only to return to Europe and realize that the answer is already here." In the library, Father Norberto takes off his ski mask and talks. "I rediscover the Rule continually. Year after year, it shows me its usefulness. If accepted by the heart even before the mind, it teaches you to edify and integrate in hospitality, helps to see life as a story of salvation. The conviviality of the refectory is the mirror of the Church. . . . Benedict must have understood so much about people. He humanizes work and social relationships as the celebration of the greatness of God." And

here his voice breaks with emotion: “The search for God is a progressive entering into the love and communion that He offers us through his signs.”

I talk about the migrants and the growing intolerance of them. Something foreign to our Mediterranean spirit. A transformation that is not historical but biblical. I find in my notes, “and the time came when men’s hearts turned hard and they lost their pity even for babies. They depredated nature, leaving nothing for their children, then they let the weakest among them die. Charity and hospitality became crimes and peace a word without meaning.” Norberto’s eyes are teary again. “Here,” he says, “if we don’t keep our arms outstretched for the world, we risk drowning. What’s happening around us is apocalyptic in scale.” Yes, I have to get back on the road, break my promise to give up my life as a wandering storyteller. Too many things have come together to bring me here. Too many to be coincidence. I have to become a pilgrim in search of Europe.

I try to come up with an itinerary, but it’s an arduous enterprise. Because of their vow of *stabilitas* these monks know well only their own enclosed garden. Gianmario Guidarelli, an expert on monasteries who teaches at the University of Padua, offers me a key to understanding: “Each abbey is the sublimation of the genius loci to which it belongs, so it is different from all the others. Monasticism is the art of living together in relation to the local territory. What Benedict does is regulate all of that. His rule is a manual for cohabitation within a specific environment. That’s why Charlemagne supported the Benedictines and why their rule became a model for feudalism.” But he adds, “Careful, the monks are bound to permanence but they were born travelers. The monastic community is always the end point of an individual and collective journey.”

Sure, but where to start from in this enormous archipelago? I write to the congregation’s central office in Rome, but getting precise information is tough. Someone has called the Benedictines not an order but a “democratic disorder,” where each monastery is its own world. Nothing to do with the Vatican and its pyramidal organization. For the Benedictines, centralization is satanic. I start marking

down on the map of Europe names of abbeys I've never heard before. Reichenau in Germany. Glenstal in Ireland. Pierre-qui-Vire in France. Pannonhalma in Hungary. But also some famous names: Montecassino. Mont-Saint-Michel, Westminster. Time to go. Benedict, help me to recount your places.

Sankt Ottilien, Bavaria

If the thread of the sacred is acoustic, the journey among the abbeys immediately throws you off guard with the hard rock of "Smoke on the Water," played by the former abbot primate of the Benedictine Confederation, Notker Wolf, on electric guitar, accompanied by no less than Deep Purple. Looking at the images of that memorable concert, it seems unbelievable that he is the one I am seeking out, in the monastery of Sankt Ottilien in Bavaria, to provide me with the overture and the viaticum of this European adventure among the silences of crypts, cloisters, and blessed naves. For those who believe the Benedictine world is an antiquated relic, I advise you to look up the story of this abbot: born in 1940, speaker of eleven languages, music lover, polymath of theology, philosophy, zoology, chemistry, and astronomy, missionary to Africa, teacher at the pontifical university of Saint Anselm in Rome, author of some thirty books translated around the world, whom corporate executives devotedly consult to learn how to manage their companies in the Benedictine manner.

At the end of May, the abbey bell tower emerges with the clanging of bronze from a rolling landscape of forests and fields of rye. Under an umbrella of immense linden trees, Sankt Ottilien greets you with the good smell of manure, that noble element whose Italian name, *lettame*, comes from the Latin *laetus*, because the fertilizer is the farmer's delight. If Benedict's monasteries interpret the spirit of their places, here you fill your lungs with the agrarian spirit of Bavaria, the motherland of big teats full of milk and beer. Here, between a lauds and a vespers, this abbey has brought to life a hypertechnological barn and a photovoltaic and biogas power plant that produces more than double the energy needed for the whole place to operate. Plus there's

a brewery, a carpentry shop, the guest quarters, the hen house, the publishing house, the high school, the butchery, the blacksmith's shop. And forests and prairies and fruit orchards. An "in your globalist face" lesson in zero-kilometer, farm-to-table production and consumption.

"We're farmers," the man who used to be the primate in Rome confirms modestly as he takes me around to see the gardens, the milking room, the ducks. He whistles out calls to the blackbirds, caresses the flowers, activates the water jet of the fountain that someone had left turned off, gets his picture taken with visitors. He talks as he walks, as though he were sowing seed, with the calm awareness that sooner or later the words will bear fruit. "When I practice my flute the animals listen. For the Corpus Christi procession the cows come out of the barn to watch." He explains that part of the Catholic Church finds the monastic life hard to understand. "We are not contemplative. If anything, our attitude is meditative. We chew the word until it releases every bit of its flavor and enters into our flesh and bones. But above all, we are immersed in life. We are nourished by the fruit of our labor."

Benedict sanctified labor by inventing a system of community living, a new way of being together, disciplined by a rule and by a spiritual father called an abbot. The principles are clear. Respect for the individual, regard for the entire community, sharing of responsibility. All things forgotten today. *The Art of Leadership* is a book that the rocker abbot wrote with Sister Enrica Rosanna, a Salesian nun who counts in the Vatican. "I say this again and again to corporate managers: create an atmosphere of dialogue, not fear. That's what they need to understand in Brussels. We wouldn't have situations like Catalonia if the Union truly listened to the various European identities."

"O Gott, du lenkst mit starken Hand. . . ." At the liturgy of the sixth hour the German language resounds in the nave expressing all of its force. "O God, you lead with a firm hand. . . ." Founded at the end of the eighteenth century by an artist who became a monk, Sankt Ottilien quickly projected itself into Africa with missionary activities. In 1941 it became a hospital of the Wehrmacht, in 1945 a refuge for Jewish survivors of the death camps. In just three years,

more than four hundred children were born here, who still today, as adults, come back to visit and recount the miracle of that beneficence. The cemetery tells the story poignantly. On one side the graves of the monks, lined up in a common flowery burial ground, each with its own wrought-iron cross with symbols of the work done in life. The smith, the herbalist, the gardener. On the other, the gravestones with the Star of David, and opposite them the tombs of the German soldiers. A postmortem armistice.

Without emphasis, Notker points to a small house that hosts twenty-three Syrian and African refugees. He doesn't care that the Christian Democratic government in Munich does not approve. "We took in eight Islamic Kurds that the government wanted to expel. Their kids attended our school without any problems." He simplifies the commandment of hospitality: "Anything can be done. You just need to talk to people." *Schluss mit der Angst* is the title of one of his recent books. Enough with fear and the politics of fear because there lie "the roots of aggression." Only those who are not afraid know the fullness of life. I ask him if he sees similarities between Europe in the sixth century and Europe today. "Yes, but with one difference: today, the monks do not have the strength they had then. In the ninth century Bavaria was full of monasteries. . . . In 1100 the Cistercians founded a hundred or more in just a few years. . . . An explosive force that is unthinkable today."

"After sixteen years in Rome, here I am again at Ottilien feeling like I've come back home. Maybe I'll miss Italian pasta, and only those who have tasted it can appreciate that. . . . But my roots are here, this is where I learned to be an abbot, this is where I was first enlightened. I was two years old, it was 1942, but I can't forget the light that shone through the incense and the singing in the church." Smiling, he shows me the gravesite with a view of the countryside where he'll be buried, and I ask him about his relationship with eternity. He surprises me again: "I don't think about eternity, but about my encounter with God. We think too much about eternity in the horizontal sense of duration. I think only of the instant when I'll take my seat at the wedding table."

Devil of a man. After dinner and the compline service, he still does not rest. A good Bavarian, he plays in a band, the monastery band, that practices in lederhosen in a far-off room so as not to disturb the rule of silence. The German surprises never end. My traveling companion Claudio and I quaff a mug of red in the garden of the guest quarters, breathing in sips of delight. If someone is in search of God, it will be easier to find him here, among the manure and the chickens, than in some god-fearing parish church.