

Notre-Dame du Haut, Ronchamp:

A Symbol of Vatican II

To the west of the Vosges mountains in eastern France, a remarkable project of restoration took place after the second world war: the re-building of a church of pilgrimage since the middle ages by the noted French architect, Le Corbusier. In an area, so often the scene of warfare and destruction in the twentieth century, the vision of local people eventually led to the re-building of Notre-Dame du Haut at Ronchamp in 1955. Such was the vision of the project that it has been described as “a symbol of Vatican II”; and we are therefore honoured to be able to publish the following two articles: the first from the President of the Board of Directors, Jean-Francois Mathey, whose father worked closely with Le Corbusier on the initial restoration, and the second by Soeur Brigitte de Singly, the abbess of the small community of Poor Clares, who are now engaging in a ministry of welcome to the large number of twenty-first century pilgrims and visitors who come to Notre-Dame du Haut each year. We are most grateful for these; and indeed to those who have helped with the English translations of the texts. Ed.

The Chapel at Ronchamp



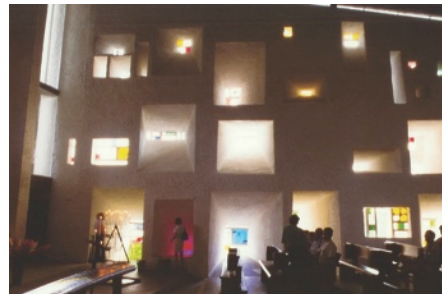
When in 1955, Le Corbusier built his chapel at Ronchamp, a masterpiece of modern architecture, the hill at the foot of the Vosges mountains in Eastern France had already been a place of pilgrimage for one thousand years. People would come up from the valley and the coal-mining village nearby to pray to Our Lady, particularly on 8th. September, her birthday. Our Lady watches over and takes under her protection the children (there was a cemetery on the hill for unbaptised children who died in epidemics), sons sent to war and all prisoners and other captive souls. There are also other dreadful fears: the coal mines have their share of men lost in the depths of the earth, many of them Polish

immigrants settled in Ronchamp with their families until the pits were closed, leaving most of the inhabitants without work at the time that Le Corbusier built his chapel.

By virtue of its geography, this region of France has always been strategically important and much blood has been spilt in battles here. This was one of the reasons why Le Corbusier chose to rebuild the small church, damaged by artillery in 1944. Henceforth, the battlefield on the hill would become a place of reconciliation between the enemies of yesterday. It would also become a place of silence for all those who have been wounded by life and for those seeking peace with their brothers and themselves.

Notre-Dame du Haut, this beautiful chapel full of grace, welcomes pilgrims and sends them on their way purified, refreshed and full of hope. Our Lady of the Height (Notre-Dame du Haut) conveys to heaven their prayers, stutterings, songs of praise and calls for help and forgiveness.

The chapel sits in harmony with the landscape – the smooth blue curves of the surrounding mountains, the long line of the Jura to the south and, to the west, the plains of the Saone. As the official leaflet puts it: “From an inspired first rough sketch, uniting inner lyricism with mathematical exactitude, Le Corbusier set up the chapel allowing the four horizons to remain open and visible, thereby inscribing it in its sacred space”. But the building is chiefly a sculpture shaped by the light, which plays on its surfaces like a white skin offered to the rain, to the snow and to the beams of the sun. The gloom within is pierced by the light entering through the many small coloured glass windows cut into the wall, the effect being of a huge diamond sparkling. Le Corbusier has created a vessel, a sacred vase, moulded in concrete; he has then placed on top a big shell inspired by that of a crab, set on pillars and covered by a vast veil in concrete, like a sail cloth or tent – a creation in absolute freedom, incubated for a long time and born by the architect to life and light. What is more beautiful: the jar or what it



contains – the bright and luminous shadows inside and the silence?

L'Association de l'Oeuvre de Notre-Dame du Haut owns the chapel and surrounding land – an unusual arrangement for such a place within a parish or diocese. This is an historical inheritance going back to the French Revolution when some forty village families decided to buy back the sanctuary sold as national property and thereby restore the ancestral pilgrimage. Today, this allows visitors to take possession of the chapel for themselves. Whatever their motive – spiritual, artistic or merely 'touristic' – they can be at home on the hill.

Now, after fifty years, the Association has felt a need to give back to the chapel and the site a social and religious vocation relevant to today. On the one hand is the challenge of mass tourism and on the other the needs of people seeking spirituality in a globalised world with disappearing time zones and borders. The pilgrimages continue (including the good old folks offering up prayers and tapers at the holy statue of Mary), but some of the pilgrims have changed. The preoccupations of the world have altered. Religious observances have (sometimes mistakenly) been judged outdated and discarded.

What then is the future of this chapel to be if it stands henceforth merely as architecture: however beautiful that is? In order that the chapel at Ronchamp may live in truth – watching over the world today and in the future – a permanent presence of prayer and worship in all seasons was greatly needed: a presence of welcome and reception. Accordingly, the idea was re-visited of a house near the chapel to shelter travellers and pilgrims with a small community to welcome them and receive the 100,000 visitors each year, who flock to Ronchamp.

Initially, the Association had hoped the Franciscans would come to form a community – their poverty, concern for nature, sense of beauty and praise of the Lord most suiting the chapel, but this was not possible. Almost accidentally, however, it was learnt that the Poor Clares of Besançon were looking for a new location to renew their community. The Chaplain and Association therefore invited them to Ronchamp and at the same time commissioned the Italian architect, Renzo Piano, to design the convent and the 'Porterie' or entrance – the door or passage from where the pilgrims start the ascent to the sanctuary.

Jean-Francois Mathey

A New Beginning for Notre-Dame du Haut

Why call this text a "new beginning" when Notre-Dame du Haut has existed continually since the Middle Ages? Even the tribulations of the French Revolution, fires and war have never prevented it from living and welcoming a great number of pilgrims. Yet the desire for the presence of a religious community was expressed for a long time, already by Le Corbusier, then throughout the years by the successive chaplains and the Association Notre-Dame du Haut to preserve and vivify the chapel's two lungs, cultural and spiritual. The risk of the chapel atrophying and the chapel's life asphyxiating would be real if one became more important than the other. Today, our presence answers this desire and allows very different kinds of visitors to experience interiority revisited by spirituality.

Why write in the Newman Association's journal which, at first glance, would seem to have no relation to Notre-Dame du Haut and the Poor Clares? I do not know John Henry Newman well, but what I have read recently in the light of his beatification reassures me that we are not off course by writing in this revue. John Henry Newman was an open-minded man of reconciliation. This is the link to our project of moving to Ronchamp.

Who are the Poor Clares?

The Poor Clares convent in Besançon, in France's Franche-Comte region, was founded in the mid-thirteenth century, when Saint Clare was still alive, after the arrival of the Friars Minor (the Franciscans founded by Saint Francis of Assisi) in 1224. It was the beginning of an evangelical adventure that has continued to this day. Our community became very important in the town, then in the fourteenth century became so rich that it lost its fervency. There were only two aged sisters left when Colette de Corbie (Corbie is a town located in the north of France) came to Besançon in 1410 with a few young sisters, having received the mission from Pope Benedict XIII (who was in Nice) to reform the families of Saints Clare and Francis. With her audacious faith, she gave new life to the community in Besançon. It was from the Saint Clare convent there that she conducted her work throughout France, Flanders and the Palatinate, founding and reforming seventeen convents and

monasteries until her death in 1447. “To return to the purity of its origins while adapting our way of life to the conditions of the times,” such was her first and lasting intuition on which we continue to rely.

The Poor Clares of Besançon experienced the French Revolution, the dispersion of the order in 1792 and its re-founding (by the Poor Clares of Poligny) at a new location in Besançon in 1879. In 1932, there being many sisters, a group left to found a Poor Clares convent in Burma, then in India and Tanzania. Since then, nine convents have been founded in these countries, keeping a fraternal link with our convent in Besançon.

In 1973, a new intuition, a new audacity: the community began welcoming young foreign female language students for short and long stays. The majority of them were Asian and were sent by former students. We offered them a very different kind of place to live compared to a student residency and they learned to live together, whatever their origins. For us, it was a very intense outreach experience that opened our eyes to the world with its very rapid evolution, allowing our prayers always to be in step with societal realities. Indeed, it is of vital importance for us to pray, not in a theoretical or ideological manner, but in real communion with human lives.

What Kind of Life Do We Lead?

- a life of celebrating God’s wonders in creation and in the history of humankind,
- a simple and joyful life with Christ, in contemplation, in work, in poverty and sharing,
- a fraternal life, with the sisters who God gives us, in their cultural diversity,
- a life filled with the Spirit, in retreat and in welcoming the dimensions of the world, open to gratuitous encounters.

Can Such a Long History End in an Impasse?

This is what we do not want and it is why since the year 2000 we are working on how not to lose the treasure of eight centuries of life. Already in 2001 and 2003, during several assemblies of the Franco-Belgian Poor Clares, we became aware that we are living a new historical phase, one crucial for the future of religious, contemplative life: a new spiritual thirst exists in our societies, and it calls for founding anew both our personal and communal lives.

The source has to be allowed to flow, and as Saint Clare wished, to get us back on track so that we can create and move ahead, poor but confident, and allow God to be born to the world today, in accordance with our weakness, but inspired by the Spirit.

The Project’s Origin

In 2005, our intuition was confirmed by the words of the General Minister of the Franciscan order, Brother Jose Carballo, addressing the globe’s Poor Clares, “Your communities are today called to make evangelical life visible, to testify to the presences that found their existence in God. How to found your life anew? Your way of life demands that Christ always be the starting point, that you always stay focused on Him, in order to embody the Gospel in a way that can be understood by the men and women of our time. Today, this embodiment is of utmost urgency for the Gospel to be credible. Today again, the Poor Sisters are called to reveal Jesus Christ in their personal and communal existences, so that the men and women of our time can be touched by the testimony of those who communicate hope through their way of being.”

Thus in 2006, at the end of a long reflection on our mission today, and in response to a call from the Archbishop of Besançon, André Lacrampe, we decided to create on the site of Notre-Dame du Haut, at Ronchamp in the Haute-Saône region of France, a Saint Clare community, open to sisters of other cultures. The sisters will live from their work there, and will participate in leading liturgical prayers in this great place of peace and beauty. They will do so in close collaboration with the chaplain, with the Franciscan brothers, the local Christians, the Association Œuvre Notre-Dame du Haut, in the spirit of dialogue and simplicity, of sharing and joy, in the service of all who are searching for meaning in their lives.

The only way we can accomplish this task is by living our lives authentically, and remaining faithful to what Saints Francis and Saint Clare revealed to us. “Live the Gospel, all the Gospel, nothing but the Gospel.” Audaciously, we did not hesitate to sell our convent to finance partially the new building, even before having all the administrative and financial authorizations, supported by the Archbishop, the Association, the Franciscan and Poor Clare orders – an audacity not always understood, but one that roots us in the dis-possession necessary for a new beginning.

Project Description

Ronchamp: A Marian pilgrimage site, rooted for 800 years on the hill where one discovers a splendid panorama, 17 kilometres from Belfort. The chapel was for the most part destroyed at the end of the second World War when the site was the theatre of bloody confrontations and destruction. A new chapel was built by the architect Le Corbusier at the request of the diocese. It is a jewel of contemporary sacred art. The chapel Notre-Dame du Haut was wanted as a “place of silence, peace, prayer and inner joy”... of reconciliation, too. Since 1955, more than 100,000 visitors and pilgrims from all over the globe have gone there annually, and have been greatly impressed by this place of interiority and cosmic beauty.

The chapel has a chaplain, and a reception and upkeep team, but for a long time it has seemed important to the succeeding Archbishops and of the Association Œuvre Notre-Dame du Haut (the owner) that a religious community, preferably contemplative, would maintain there a permanent presence of prayer, of communal life, of welcome. Which is how our ecclesiastical project came about.



In close partnership with the Association Œuvre Notre Dame du Haut, and our own Association, Les Amis de Sainte Colette, we have been working for more than four years with the internationally known (a quality required for this place) Italian architect, Renzo Piano. It is a project that respects the environment, discreetly marries the hill, and creates a new place for living adapted to our vocation and mission as Poor Clares. We desired to build an “eco-convent” faithful to our vocation – saving creation for the praise of God and the life of humans. An eco-convent means many construction and financial constraints, but also the joy of building a future which will allow us, in our little way, to pass on the planet a

little less damaged.

This very beautiful project could seem crazy in today’s world. Its wisdom lies in its inscription in the faith, as a sign of faith and hope in the future. Instead of turning in on ourselves and waiting for age and the decrease in our numbers to reduce us to extinction, we have sought out a new place that offers us the right kind of environment for Franciscan spirituality – a beautiful spiritual utopia that, today, is revealing itself to be a reality.

The preparations have been slow and meticulous, subjected to numerous authorizations and many controversies, but the construction site is open in a beautiful wooded area, near to the chapel and thus accessible, and yet in retreat, open to the horizon and the setting sun. Today, the building site, despite the delays caused in the past years, is taking shape and we can see, from our “refuge,” (Le Corbusier’s pilgrims’ hut) the walls rising up, hear the cranes and the hammers banging – the work of highly qualified construction workers, also exceptional in their kindness. The work of God and of humans in perfect communion.

The New Community

We imagined creating an international community and we are currently setting it up, so that we are capable of maintaining a liturgy that speaks and sings in several languages, capable of testifying that fraternal life is possible, in communion with different cultures, capable of welcoming guests from the five continents for discussions or for short stays. A modest project, because we plan on a community of a dozen sisters and guest house with only ten rooms, with rooms for meetings for visitors who need to take pause and recharge for a few hours or a few days. The Franciscan brothers who began animating the site in the summers will continue to come, reinforcing their presence.

In Conclusion

This at once audacious and modest project is in perfect tune with our engagement as Poor Clares in retreat from the world but still ever listening to it. It manifests our confidence in the future. It answers the concern of the diocese and of the owners, the Association of Notre-Dame du Haut, to accompany more closely the pursuits of the 100,000 visitors annually to the site. Tourists are welcome and most of them express clearly that their motivation is not just aesthetic or cultural. A permanent monastic community’s establishment near the chapel will create a real place of life, “a place of silence, prayer, of peace, of inner joy” to use Le Corbusier’s words again. It can but increase

the chapel's influence in a world where materialism goes hand in hand with a growing search for meaning and for spirit.

This concludes the presentation of a project that allows us to live and, we hope, to open the future to something new that we do not yet know. We want to follow in Abraham's footsteps, when he left for a place he did not know, by a path he did not know, to meet a God he did not know, as Paul Beauchamp, the French exegete who died recently, said. It is up to us now, with the aid of your prayers, to be faithful to this call. Thank you for sharing your journal's pages with us. Thank you for reading us.

**Sister Brigitte de Singly, abbess
in the name of the Poor Clares Community at Ronchamp**

Further information about Ronchamp and the work of L'Association Oeuvre Notre-Dame du Haut can be found at the website: www.chapellederonchamp.fr. There is a good English section with a chronology of the church and the project. From the initial 'home page' go to 'infos pratiques'; then 'Dossiers de presse'; then 'En langue anglais'. Information about the Poor Clares Community at Ronchamp can be found at www.clarisses-a-ronchamp.fr. There is also a YouTube video showing Sr. Brigitte making a presentation on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=145ZSRbx-Es> Ed.