

The Benedictine Oblate Letter ***November / December 2007***

Dear Oblates and Friends,

As you will have noticed, this letter will cover both November and December since I am woefully behind in writing. I am in transition from my services as administrator of our healthcare facility at Clyde. For the present, I have a patient room here. My deepest thanks for your prayers for my return to better health. Also, thanks to those of you who responded to my shy request for the dear older and ailing Sisters at Our Lady of Rickenbach. I am so grateful to each of you.

I had a November letter written in draft form, but it got stuck there. The inspiration to combine two months in one saved me some stress during this time of change. Our Sister Gladys, who is a nurse and was an oblate director, came from our monastery in Wyoming to assume new duties as administrator here. Pray for her, too, in this time of transition.

As I look over my draft letter on the theme of patience I want to use some of those notes (in view of the Advent and Christmas season) to orient our reflections toward the patience of God in human history and the patience of Mary and Joseph as they awaited the birth of the world's Redeemer. I hope you can give yourself some time amidst the bustle and rush of the holiday season to sit awhile in contemplative reflection on how patient God has been with the human race, which God loves so much as to send the Only Son. Give yourself a bit of silence and space. That's what God does for us as St. Benedict says in his Prologue to the Rule 37, "Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent?" He is quoting Paul's Letter to the Romans 2:4 but with the reassurance the God's patience springs from love and desire for us. So, God gives us space and time to grow up into Christ, just as Jesus became one of us in a human birth and grew into his role signified by that name, Christ, "the Anointed One," the Messiah. God's patience with us is not strained, but encouraging.

We've been considering patience, following Michael Casey's chapter in "The Undivided Heart," as a substitute martyrdom. It's what makes the crown of giving oneself up, even to death for Christ, accessible to all of us. The daily "bearing up under" our particular Cross, uniting it with Christ's, saves our suffering from degenerating into self-pity and "playing the martyr." We have a choice to make. Either we can indulge in nursing our

hurts and disappointments in life or we can hold our heads up and put our energies into something positive, actually coming to enjoy the life we DO have rather than develop a sour attitude and resentfulness that is sure to drive other people away from us. I've quoted this before from David Copperfield but it fits here, "I can be either the hero of my life story or its victim."

Negative thinking produces negative feelings which in turn produce negative behaviors. So, in our battle against the denial of so much goodness in even the hardest life, we need to keep guard over our thoughts. When we see them running toward negativity, we need to stop the decline by choice and with a prayer. Cassian, that ancient monk so revered by Benedict, always used the Psalm verse, "O God, come to my assistance. O Lord, make haste to help me." I've quoted that before, too, but it is important in monastic spirituality. Maybe Benedict had that in mind when he wrote that we should dash our evil thoughts immediately against the rock that is Christ and replace them with what is positive and just and loving.

I need to close here for now but end with a heartfelt wish that you and yours will have a blessed Advent of holy expectation and heartfelt longing for closeness to the God who comes close to us in Jesus. Joy to you and all around your table and tree! Come, Lord Jesus!

Ever in his vast Love,
Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

October 2007

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Do you ever experience your feelings of frustration and the tension of curbing your impatience as a kind of martyrdom? Early monasticism was steeped in the spirituality of that ultimate sacrifice to join Jesus in his total gift of self for the salvation of the whole created world. We don't hear much about martyrdom as something desirable these days. Or perhaps we don't want to think of something that radical asked of us for the Faith, but we know there are martyrs in areas all over our poor, sad, broken and war sick world today and from every religious persuasion.

After the Christian faith was permitted public practice throughout the Roman Empire in the 4th century under Constantine, the monastic life of self-discipline, frugality, simplicity and “cheerful Christo-centric patience,” says Michael Casey, quoting the martyr St. Polycarp, became as it were a substitute form of martyrdom, a holy and sacrificial offering of one's life through, with and in Christ.

Why Casey is speaking of patience in his book, “The Undivided Heart,” which is mainly about prayer, will come clear if you think for a moment about the devastating effects of impatience on your own interior life, let alone your relationships.

St. Gregory the Great, himself a Benedictine pope of the 6th century and known as the patron of liturgical chant and author of the only early life of Benedict, says that patience is at the root of every virtue as its guardian. The word *virtue* means a strength, and strength only comes with time, practice, goodwill efforts and sometimes much labor, so we can readily see the role of patience in the processes of spiritual growth.

Monasticism has always given a place of honor and serious observance to patience, right up there with the mindfulness of God. These are essentials of our way of life, centered on the example of Christ. Patience with God's timing in our regard goes hand in hand with awareness of the Divine Presence in life situations and in world history.

Another great monastic teacher, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, saw impatience as destructive of our monastic *conversatio*, that willingness every day to conform our life and behaviors to the monastic way. He even goes so far as

to call impatience the “soul's perdition” if we let it get a grip on us or become a permanent habit of angry response to life.

The Christian's basic response to the initiatives of God in our lives takes the form of faith (absolute trust), hope (the expectation of God's good things still to come) and the return of love for the ceaseless shower of God's love on us. A calm soul helps us be aware of those loving things as they come to us all day, every day, whereas impatience leaves us exhausted in fighting and resenting reality...what is...in our desire to control things and make them go our way. That's why, in Benedict's chapter on Humility, he makes the desire to do God's Will rather than our own, a sign of the genuineness of our interior life.

It is in the Prologue of his Rule that Benedict appeals to our acceptance of patient perseverance over a lifetime as one way of sharing in the redemptive suffering of Christ. All of us, baptized into Christ, have a share in those sufferings for the world. Do we really value that vocation? Do we care enough about our world “to give the very best,” as the Hallmark ads say, of what we have to offer for it? Are we glad, in a spiritual sense, to have something to help us identify more closely with Jesus as one who loves him intensely and so, wants to be with him in everything?

All can be united with Christ and offered through him to the Father for the building of the peaceable Kingdom, the reign of the Spirit in our world. Right now, every day, through countless little and big stresses that test and try our patience, we are helping God recreate the world. What is your frustration tolerance level? Depending on how we look at our stressors, they can become positive help to arouse the Spirit-power of the Risen Lord within us. “O God, come to my assistance. Oh Lord, make haste to help me!” In early monasticism, Cassian chose this psalm verse as a constant prayer in meeting the day's circumstances.

The word “patience” comes from a Latin root word meaning to suffer, to bear up under, to put up with. From that same root we also get the words “passionate” and “compassionate,” meaning to suffer with. And we have the word “impassioned,” as in an impassioned speech. None of us like suffering, though we all experience it. There is no great love or vitality in life without its measure of passion or suffering.

It's our attitude that makes a huge difference in the quality of the patience we exercise daily toward God, ourselves, other people, life situations, joys, sorrows, failures, successes and everything life puts on our plate. I'd invite us all to examine our thinking, our attitudes toward life's troubles. What place

has fear of loss of control, of chaos, if we don't maintain an iron grip on things, have in the amount of impatience we feel each day? For now I'll leave the matter and take it up again next month.

Please pray for the success of our Congregation's General Assembly, scheduled October 9-16. We've been in a long discernment process about our future and working toward major decisions.

We had a beautiful and fruitful Oblate Fall retreat at Clyde September 28-30 with about 20 attending. Fr. Patrick from Conception Abbey gave two conferences on Saturday on the monastic topics of Mindfulness and Gratitude. You were all in our hearts at prayer.

Every blessing that you need and much patience!
Sr. Jean Francis

The Benedictine Oblate Letter *September 2007*

Dear Oblates and Friends,

To my sorrow, you did not get a June Oblate letter. I was too ill to send one. However, I had a handwritten draft already made when I went to the hospital, so I am using that one for the September letter and trust you'll bear with me as I get started again.

I intend to use Michael Casey's book, "The Undivided Heart," and its chapter on patience as the background for my reflections the rest of this season. Thanks to all of you who wrote to me and those who said they got a lot out of his book, "Strangers to the City." It was his chapter on perseverance that I was pondering when I wrote the following in draft.

Casey made the remark that only those who let down their guard over their deeply rooted insecurities and relax into their new life in the monastery will be able to be permeated by its spirit. Those driven by their compulsion to do everything right, to be perfect (flawless in observance), are so intent on moral striving, he says, that the sheer excess of effort defeats the ability to gently imbibe and take on the new identity.

I wonder if those going into marriage, a new job or other life-changing situations wouldn't experience the same phenomenon. I call it "trying too hard." Benedict speaks about rubbing the vessel so hard it breaks. This is about going at life too intensely, maybe too harshly, too "all or nothing." I want what I want to have or do or be right now. No waiting, no stages of achievement, no gray areas, no compromises, no sense of myself being loved as I am but as I imagine that I need to be in others' eyes. This is basically a refusal of the humbling, weak human condition of not-yet-ness.

Such perfectionism is the opposite of a deep, rich and growing spiritual life that for all of us, I suppose, looks more like two steps forward and three steps back. We keep one eye on our humbling poverty of spirit and the other on the goal that lies ahead, as St. Paul would say, in Philippians 3. Union with God, the deepest love longing of the human heart, is signed or manifested outwardly with another person, a community, with a church group, with fellow workers, etc.

People start out their married and family life intending to be one in the shared life, to be together on everything and not at odds with each other. In a mature sacramental marriage, and by that I mean one that actually signs the reality of oneness, the union of mind and heart and body seen in the externals of life together become little sacraments of the interior reality of solid, committed, faithful love and unity.

The same sacramental character exists in the outward life of the monastic in community, a commitment that SIGNS the inner reality of our intent toward mutual love, self-giving and service. Everyone has the deep desire to be loved and loving. The outer is the proof of the interior, holy reality. For you who have a growing monastic heart and for us it's the same, just the external expressions are different. For us, this past month of August saw three young women in ritual ways, signifying their hearts' desire by entering the postulancy, the novitiate and the vowed life. With us praise God for these young, loving additions to our Congregation's life!

What I'm saying applies just as much to every other form of Christian living and loving. Think about the sacramental quality of your own everyday life for a moment. The way we are in our daily-ness signs interior values and aspirations or goals. The holy longing for union, for oneness with God in daily living, not just in the hereafter, has a deep effect on who we are interiorly and how we act. Here's where believing in God's infinite and tender love for us personally, and knowing with inner certainty that God lives in us as in his Temple, brings life and divine action together.

Jesus' Risen life in us is Spirit power for good, a power we can consciously claim and utilize. Because of it we become instruments of God's on-going creative work in the work, you in your world and we in ours.

What does Spirit strength look like? It could be the reverse of former weaknesses, selfish tendencies or a particular proneness to a certain kind of sin. We might look inside and suddenly notice that we actually are preferring Christ, preferring love or peace or generosity, and their opposites have little place left in our life. We might discover a love for silence and solitude, just to be alone and present to the Presence of God within. How do you know that's the Spirit's work in you? Because everything good has a divine initiative, a living Source within.

The Spirit's work shows its fruit in both interior attitudes and exterior behaviors. You've heard me often quote Galatians 5:22, about what the Spirit's work or fruit looks like: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. When you see these things in yourself or others, you are actually seeing God at work. Let God in the Temple of your heart, reach out with these strong and good things toward a world that so badly needs redeeming and sanctifying.

Never tire of reading the Letters of Paul, John and Peter because these so well describe what authentic Christ-like, risen life looks and acts like. Being Christ's heart and hands in our own particular sphere of action is our mission, or rather, is Christ's on-going mission through all of us. What joy this should give us, the joy of union, even now, with the One who has called and chosen us. As Benedictine monastics, the love of Christ must come before all else (RB 4:21).

Now, may that love, a hearty return for God's initial and on-going love for us, well up in your heart. And may God be everything for you, the Center and mainstay of your life. Nurture your own holy longings for union with Love in ways suited to you and your lifestyle. Most of all let Love in you flow out into your everyday existence simply, humbly, without self-consciousness or pretence. "First, be holy so that you may truly be called so" (RB 4:62). Yes, "Be holy, for I your God am holy" (Lev. 11:44).

Bless your world, your home, your relationships, your work, your ministries, your parish, your neighborhood with your own special kind of holiness, unique because God in you is unique in the divine gifts that are yours. No one else can do what God intends to do through you! Find joy in that, and energy to be all that you can be for God. It's a lifelong task, which might lead us into the letters for the rest of the season on Patience.

My grateful love and prayers to each and all of you,
Sr. Jean Francis