

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

January 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

Moving into 2009 may have you thinking of New Year's resolutions. It's an old tradition that stems from Roman times way before Christ and the Christianization of pagan customs. Some people take them lightly just to honor the tradition; others adamantly refuse to make them because they know from experience they won't keep them for long.

I like the making of resolutions for the coming year because it gives me a sense of goal or direction for my spiritual efforts at putting on Christ, lest without some structure I'd fail to do anything. They say the road to hell is paved with good intentions but I'd rather aim high and fail than not take aim at all. Life itself will certainly challenge us every day. Our part is to rally and make the best of what God allows life to put on our plate, so to speak. God's grace stands ready to help us meet each hour's need. We **must** put our faith in that.

One step forward and two steps back seems to be the norm of the human condition for all of us, in or out of a monastery, I assure you, so don't be surprised by that. Getting up and going on, learning from our experiences and growing in wisdom from dealing with life's realities takes all the inner strength our Emmanuel, God with, God within us, wants to give if we only avail ourselves of it.

When I think of resolutions my mind makes a leap to "doing good" as proof of the inner reality of God's goodness within. So, right way, our Father Benedict's chapter 4 on the Tools of Good Works comes to mind as a fine starting place for defining our resolutions. I invite you to take up your copy of the Rule and quietly give that chapter a reread.

From our Tucson Oblate Director, Sister Lenora, I have gleaned the following introduction or orientation for us. I'm quoting her directly in the following paragraphs. (quote)

The Tools or Instruments of Good Works appear in most editions of the rule as short statements, numbered from one to 72, 73, or 74. Their original form, however, seems to have been rather a series of paragraphs where the tools are grouped by topics, and are not numbered. Some tools pertain to the body and external surroundings, while others are more spiritual. Similarly, in chapter 7, the ladder of humility has two sides: body and spirit; both of them are necessary. Concentrating exclusively on either body OR spirit will lead to disaster, and these tools taken collectively help us to maintain a healthy balance.

Compiling lists of spiritual maxims is a characteristic writing style of the period in which the Rule was written, following the tradition of the Desert Fathers of the Church. The purpose of this compilation was to teach discernment – showing how to distinguish between good and evil in the circumstances of daily life. (End of quote)

Our Sister Gladys wrote a commentary of chapter 4 that subdivides those many instruments of good into what soon appear to be logical groups or themes. Most of them will get further development later in the Rule when Benedict creates one pattern for living them in the context of a monastic community. These patterns are recreated throughout the many unfolding generations for monks and lay people but the basic values stay the same, just needing some flesh put on them suitable to the times.

On a separate sheet I'm going to print Sister Gladys' comments. See if they don't help you find an orderly path through St. Benedict's toolbox. Somewhere there, may you discover where God, through the Spirit active and working within your mind and heart, is leading you to express your growing monastic heart's deepest love and goodness purposefully, as a blessing for your life and all who are around you.

Dear ones, may this New Year, despite the ups and downs it will inevitable bring to us all, OR rather, perhaps because of them, find you running the way with Jesus and Benedict, your hearts filled with the irrepressible joy of love and fidelity. HAPPY, GRACED, NEW YEAR! Sr. Jean Frances

Chapter 4 The Tools of Good Works

#1-9 Here we have the biblical description of a holy life, with passages from both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament. Some of Benedict's monks may have been pagan converts, and they needed the basics. Approximately half of the tools express some aspect of the love of one's neighbor.

#10-19 After stressing the need for self denial which is at the heart of monastic obedience, Benedict calls his monks – and us - to what have come to be known as the Corporal Works of Mercy. These are spelled out in more detail later in the Rule.

#20-28 The earliest monks were fugitives from the world and the ways of the world. Here the *world* refers, not to God's created world, but the ways of the world that run contrary to God's goodness. Anger can be channeled into constructive behavior, but Benedict is concerned lest anger become destructive, controlling us and leading to grudges, lies, aggression and depression, as well as distractions at prayer.

#29-33 These are lessons from the Sermon on the Mount and have to do with our response to those we perceive as enemies. They are the instruments of patience.

#34-40 Several failings listed here receive longer treatment later in the Rule. The antidote for pride is humility; work is the antidote for laziness; silence is a defense against slander and the evil of murmuring.

#41-43 It is often hard for us to recognize our own gifts of nature and grace while it's too easy to make comparisons with what we perceive to be the gifts of others. Being truly humble means first of all to accept and thank God for *the gift that we are*. If we don't accept ourselves with all our gifts and limitations, we are rejecting God's greatest gift to us, our own life.

#44-47 This sums up what are known as the Four Last Things. It is impossible to live realistically if we avoid confrontation with death. Death makes plain how precious life is. Knowing that makes us the more grateful. Whatever our heart is fixed on at the hour of death is what counts for eternity. There is a death in every moment as the future unfolds before us.

#48-54 Benedict is no killjoy; he is careful in describing the kind of laughter he condemns. He has no more use empty, raucous, uncontrolled laughter, which is often at someone else's expense, than he has for empty chatter. Artists often represent Benedict as very serious and solemn, but I can't believe he looked that way all the time. Anyone who could twice encourage an attitude of joy in a paragraph on Lenten observance must have radiated joy himself at times.

#55-58 Listening to holy reading was particularly important in Benedict's monastery because many of the monks couldn't read. Also, books were scarce and had to be shared. Having them read in public saved wear and tear on those precious manuscripts and assured that everyone heard the same thing. We don't have that problem today. Some monasteries still retain reading in the monastic refectory during the meals but many communities use meal times for general conversation, as a time for fellowship. That and doing dishes together after table build community. It creates a balance between silent, private times for Lectio and prayer, since we all now have access to books, and those things that bond the community of persons together. Just listening is not enough; there's a difference between listening and really hearing. Benedict also makes plain the necessity of regular personal prayer that will lead to an honest appraisal of our actions and repentance for our failures.

#59-61 Benedict tells us to act according to what we know is right and not use the behavior of others as an excuse for following our own will rather than what obedience asks of us. Our growth in holiness is dependent on making our own decisions based on what we sincerely believe to be right, and accepting responsibility for such decisions. The test of holiness is the witness of our words and deeds.

#62-74 The final tool is a vital one: "never despair of God's mercy." It's a challenge to hope. We're all travelers and hope best answers the needs of wayfarers who have not yet reached their destination. Using these tools and keeping them in good condition is a lifetime work. We may fall short of our goal, use a tool awkwardly or forget to use it, but NEVER DESPAIR OF GOD'S MERCY.

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

February, 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

Late in January, as I was composing this letter we had a reading in the daily missal, from the gospel of Mark, about the sin against the Holy Spirit; it said: "whoever blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will never be forgiven. He carries the guilt of his sin without end." That's awfully powerful and frightening words, except that I know neither you nor I would knowingly do that, and people without their wits are not responsible. It does trouble many people, though, and I've read many interpretations of what that really means. One reads: "... a deep distrust of the reality of God working in our life" is that sin against the Holy Spirit. If anyone can identify that quote, please let me know. I wrote it down but failed to name the source. To me that deep distrust equals a failure of faith and hope and confident love, those **three most basic attitudes of the Christian toward God** but hardly counts as blasphemy! That, I think, is a decision to deny God acts in human life.

That got me thinking of what we also believe about the boundless and unconditional love, compassion and mercy of God toward ALL, a very biblical and fundamental attitude as well. Often the word "mercy" is translated loving kindness, the benevolence of God toward all creatures as varied and multiple expressions or revelations, if you will, of the divine beauty and bountiful life. Every created thing is somehow, in wondrous fashion, a particular configuration of the divine energies for life and for love that we Christians call God.

There is, of course, only one God, known worldwide by many other names. "God beyond all names" is the apt title of one of our best loved hymns. The Divine Author that bids and welcomes all hearts that seek and strain toward the hidden Lord of the universe is the invisible One made manifest in our Jesus, Son of God, born into our human condition so we could learn what God is like and how much God wants to engage us in an intimate relationship that can transform us into the Life and Love and Mercy we so marvelously belong to by our Baptism.

When we pray so frequently, "Lord, have mercy", we are not begging as though doubtful, but coming as confident lovers who are, with those familiar words, opening ourselves to the Mercy that is ever available to us and inclining hopefully toward us. How God longs for us to be REAL and honest and open-armed toward the divinity in a conscious relationship, loving as we are loved!

So much of our sacred Scriptures try to reassure us that God is in us, that the human life "mysteries" of Jesus are our life story as well, we in him and him in us, always. We have nothing to fear, but rather, with the full confidence of lovers we try to live fully in Christ, daily transformed into him, as we go through, with and in him to our beloved Father of **all**.

Transparency **to** Christ, as a goal of living **in** Him, holds a big place in monastic spirituality. Lent is a good time of annual spiritual reflection to pray that "He may increase and I (my ego driven self) may decrease". It comes as no surprise that we are

all far from that ideal of being transparent of God to those around us. But God knows and expects that, so there's no reason to be depressed and give up trying every day to bless our world, our families, our work, our neighborhoods with the same Love and Mercy that hold us so tenderly through all life's ups and downs in staunch reassurance. St. Benedict's Rule makes coming to that kind of transformation the life goal of the monk and the monastic hearted. Let's begin again this year as our nation draws a deep breath and willingly seeks once more to become what we ought and want to be, encouraged by one another. Benedict in his chapter 49, On Lent, teaches us to bravely take those first necessary steps, though they might be very little beginnings, to be and do what is right and holy as one of our contributions to the betterment of society as a whole, not just ourselves. We want to stand up and be counted among those who DO loving and compassionate things, not just think or talk about them.

Let the Holy well up within, touching every aspect of our personalities and our place in this world. We want to incarnate in our flesh the indwelling Divinity, the Fire of life and love and mercy. We can begin anew by forgiving, that is, just letting go and counting as loss if necessary, the baggage and burdens we've lugged along the way. **Like love, forgiving is a choice, a decision we make, not a feeling.** Remember St. Paul's words about counting everything as so much loss for the sake of having Christ Jesus and being found in Him. In the end all we have will be God, but joy of joys, we will have all in Him. Then we will be free to move lightly and happily into the vision held before us of our becoming transparent of God in our own unique way. And remember to see and rejoice in the sight of God in others. Look again at Galatians 5: 22, those human things that are daily revelations of God's work in people, even if they don't realize it. So often in the people round us we are truly touched by an angel!

Happy celebration of the Feb. 10th feast of our monastic mother, St. Scholastica, twin sister of our father Benedict. And then I pray you'll feel much love coming your way on Valentine's Day. The sacred Lenten season begins late in the month with Ash Wednesday on Feb. 25th, "looking forward to holy Easter with the joy of the Holy Spirit".

The Clyde Oblate gatherings in 2009 will, due to circumstances here, only be possible on the following dates: the weekend of **June 12-14** and the weekend of **Sept. 11-13**. Don't wait till the last minute to register your intention of coming because guest rooms will be limited.

Blessings on your everyday, dear oblates, friends and all you hold in your heart at prayer, Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

March 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

We've come to the holy season of Lent which Benedict wrote about in his Rule, chapter 49. Do try to take time to prayerfully read it as you ponder what you have to give to our Lord "above and beyond the usual measure of your service." I hesitate to say anything about penitential exercises because it seems to me everyone, including ourselves in the monastery, know the meaning of the adage, "Sufficient for the day are the evils thereof."

I want to share with you this little quote from the writings of the modern day mystic, a Swiss woman doctor named Adrienne von Speyr: "Christian HOPE is a vessel; FAITH lives in it and LOVE carries it". How beautifully put, and true! Think of yourself as the vessel of hope and absolute trust/faith in God living within you. Your own loving heart or perhaps, Christ's heart of Love, yours in His, carries you through all the times of your life.

Besides enduring hard times, all people carry, some secretly, some visibly, the burden of their personal history: old wounds and scars, lifetime fears and depressing disappointments, some visible to others but not to ourselves. The best we can do is learn to bear with them with all available grace, carrying our wounds humbly and well. No human being goes through life unscathed; the scars show that we have struggled and are still here, still growing and learning and sincerely wanting to be all that God has destined for us.

True spirituality and everyday, down to earth holiness is trying to do all that God wills and permits for us. We see God's Providence behind what life puts on our plate, moment by moment, and for that reason, embrace it and do the best we can...no need to complicate sanctity. I remember my grandmother saying John, my brother in law, was "just plain ordinary GOOD!" High praise indeed!

Our Benedictine monastic thirst for holiness, as a way of being the best lovers we can be, is not complicated. In trying to give expression to Gospel values in a concrete manner for daily living, Benedict's chapter 7 On Humility is not about a laborious climbing from one hard learning experience to another to achieve the final supreme goal of holiness called LOVE. Rather, as Michael Casey so aptly puts it in his book A GUIDE TO LIVING IN THE TRUTH, Benedict is identifying "milestones" on a road of gradual, normal changes all of us go through as we age in grace. He says they are noticeable first as attitudinal changes which then move on into behaviors. "They (the 12 steps) do not cause progress; **they merely measure it.**" (pg.43) Have you read Chapter 7 in that light?

Benedict may have been pondering Matthew 5, the Eight Beatitudes, which also are attitudinal signs of growth into Christ. If you can take the time you might experience some Lenten light and joy in putting this Scripture and chapter 7 of the Rule side by side to compare the attitudes that lead to holiness. How you make them concrete in actions marks your own spiritual growth.

Think about Salvation. Have you ever wondered what that really means? The word means to save; it means deliverance, liberation, being set free to move forward, no longer shackled and weighed down. Jesus lived our human life and took all our sufferings on Himself, nailing them to the Cross in His sacred Body, dying there so that liberation could come for each of us personally and the healing of our human woundedness could follow.

After the Resurrection, when Jesus showed Himself to His disciples, He bore the marks of the nails and the sword thrust to His side, scarred like us. Never be afraid to be honest and vulnerable about woundedness. "The truth will set you free." (Jn 8:32) The healing will take a lifetime, and those wounds will still be there in eternity, as they were for Jesus, shining with the glory of the Resurrection at work in you. Learn to love the wounds as sacraments of the triumph of grace. You have not given up.

Have a graced Lenten season, Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

April 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

Lent gets to feeling like a very somber walk through our particular desert at times, doesn't it? Sober, but not sad or fearful or joyless. For us, the journey to holiness is the sanctification of our weakness and woundedness, not the denial or pretence that it doesn't exist! God loves us the way we were, the way we are and the way we will yet be. In the CLOUD OF UNKNOWING (14th c.) we read: "It is not what you are nor what you have been that **God sees with all-merciful eyes**, but what you **desire to be**." What a comforting thought!

God understand us better than we or anyone else ever will, and God cares so much that waiting on us isn't a problem. The word repentance doesn't mean digging around for good reasons to dislike ourselves, but means to rethink our attitudes and decisions, to have second thoughts about what we do and how we are with others. It means rethinking how we measure up as lovers to our Ideal, the God of Love. It's what that poor boy in Luke 15 was doing when he found himself at rock bottom or at least in a pig pen! The Scripture says: "He came to himself". Think of repentance in Lent, then, as a time of reflection and taking a good new look at ourselves.

That would be more in keeping with what our father Benedict, quoting Romans 2:4, says: "Do you not know that the patience of God is leading you to repent", longing for us to "turn back" into His arms of love and mercy and be more fully alive? (Prol. 37, 38 and 50) It is by this annual season of growth (Lent means "**springing up**"), and everyday's conversion or turning, that we "share patiently in the suffering of Christ". It is by allowing life's gifts, our loves, everything beautiful, and daily graces to deeply touch and heal us that we patiently grow up into Christ.

Now as the calendar turns to April, it seems at long last we turn our attention to the glorious mystery of the Resurrection of Jesus, God's affirmation of the worth of His sacrifice and infinite love for each of us. We are set free! With the power of the Spirit within us we can run on the way of our life in Christ, letting His divine touch encounter everything that, by His providence, is a part of our daily living.

If we would only remember to invite God into our moments, whatever they contain, good, bad or indifferent, we'd be amazed at our strength in His, our power for good and for love ...amazing grace! Feel the springing up of Life in yourself, the surge of that dynamic force of Love and Goodness that is GOD IN! It is the throbbing, life-giving energy that the Spirit of the Risen Lord has loosed within us for meeting life's responsibilities, demands and challenges.

We may think sometimes that the stuff of our particular life is killing our spirit, if not our health, but that won't and can't happen unless we let it, not if we keep our minds open to what God is doing in us, in our situation, in others around us. God often comes to our aid through others, holding us together with the added strength others can bring. But do not be afraid of your own inadequacy. It is the other side of God's abundance. Where our poverty is most acute, there grace abounds all the more. Remember to call on it!

So much depends on the reality of our personal relationship with God our Father, with Jesus and His Holy Spirit. Our Christian religion is based, not on the Book as such,

or on a system of ideals, rules and laws to live up to, but on that deeply personal and very genuine relationship. That holds true for everyone else, too, which is why we say we are now the Body of Christ, altogether in the communion of faith, that is, absolute trust in Him to take us with great surety back to the Father who awaits us with love and longing. How do/ did you get to know God? How do you relate to God in a very simple, trusting and loving way? Love doesn't need a lot of words, only sincerity of heart.

As we approach the joy of Easter, remembering that we have been purchased at a great price, you might consider taking up St. Paul's Letter to the Colossians, chapters 1 and 2, and reflect on, not just the price paid with suffering and death, but even more on our marvelous new life in the Risen Christ. These sacred mysteries which we celebrate do not end on the Cross but with the amazing power of resurrection, both found in every one of our lives, right? Paul says: "God made you alive together with him, forgiving all our trespasses, erasing the record that stood against us." We are set FREE! Alleluia!

There is a saying: "Life can only be lived forward but it can only be understood backward." Love your life, all of it, fired by the amazing grace and love that God has for each of us personally and collectively, as a people, a church, a family, a nation, as one world! Alleluia, Alleluia! ***One in our Risen Lord***, Sr. Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

May, 2009

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Happy Mary's month of May! It also holds Mother's Day, the feast of the Ascension of Our Lord, Pentecost Sunday and Memorial Day, so a lot of food for our thoughts. When you take time to think of the Easter mysteries as touching your life personally, remember that it is the Risen Lord of glory, in all the power of his Resurrection triumph who abides (what a wonderful word!) permanently in you. In John's Gospel (Jn.14:23) we read that Jesus promised us **his Father would love us and they would come to us and make their home in us.** That's our reality!

As the Jewish Temple was central to their belief in God with them, in Christianity Jesus claims to be the new Temple, the residence of God, Who, taking up his life in us, makes us temples. In St. Paul's Letters to the Corinthians we read: (1Cor.6:19-20) "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you? Then glorify God in your body". And in 2Cor.6:16, "For we are the temple of the living God, as God has said, 'I will live with them and walk among them.'"

Sit with that realization until your heart begins to respond to it with wonder, joy, comfort or whatever. This, too, is a form of Lectio Divina. Taking the Word of God down from our examining mind, into the heart, holding it gently till the heart ignites with joy and gratitude, is crucial to Lectio.

Usually we read about Lectio as a four step process: Lectio (holy reading), Meditatio (pondering), Oratio (praying), and Contemplatio (resting in the Presence).

To only read, even from Scripture or other holy writings, isn't sufficient of itself, for it fills the mind with ideas but doesn't carry them down into the deeper realms of the heart and out into daily living, which by the way, is the proof of the pudding, so to speak. There's danger in just reading because it may end up like "Done that, now what?" We need to slow down and learn to love and relish the Word.

Ancient monastics lived a lifestyle close to the earth and God's timing so they didn't think in terms of techniques and processes. Their thought was that those four elements of a prayerful life were not steps but states or conditions of the soul, gently moving in and around, back and forth, all day long; we are in one of those places at any given moment. It was only much later in monasticism, with adaptation to urban life, that those elements began to be compartmentalized into the four step process in any given prayer period.

In our Congregation, leaning toward a more contemplative balance to our day, we seem to grow with age and grace more into the first understanding and strive for a perpetual prayerfulness or God-conscious presence to the Presence of God in us and in all others. I know lay people (and some religious today) who think they're lucky if they can create a space and time for ANY Lectio in their busy or noisy day. How do you get such a space, a place of peace and quiet to link back up with the God within?

Somewhere in the Book of Job we read: “If you would only be silent, that would be your wisdom.” Do give yourself the gift of silence. Instead of being held captive in the throes of the daily and the usual, let silence withdraw you to the peripheries of life for awhile. On the edges, in quiet of mind and body, you will find a new perspective on just about everything. You will learn to enjoy that break of blessed solitude, for the freedom to be yourself, have your own thoughts and feelings, dreams and vision. Touch base with the divine within you. Love silence. As our father Benedict says (RB 5:1-2) there are times when we refrain even from good talk, leaving some things unsaid “out of esteem for silence.”

The brain of every human being has both an active and a contemplative side. The dominance of one over the other shows where the most growth has so far taken place. But what we are striving for at maturity is a delicate balance of both. For many working and family people the contemplative side only seems to come to the fore with age, retirement, with grandparenthood, with illness or just the natural slowing down process after the most productive years of family and work.

For others, the natural early childhood gift of contemplation, of wonder, of amazement at the richness of life and of presence to the moment carries them through life with a different perspective, a pressing necessity for periods of silence and bonds with nature and beauty. For all of us, hindsight enlightens many of life’s mysteries and resolves many troubles in peace. May your growing monastic hearts find joy in daily Lectio.

Till June, with joy, Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

June 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

June is a month loaded with family and church celebrations. For Catholics it has more solemnities than any other month of the Liturgical Year: Trinity, Corpus Christi, Sacred Heart, John the Baptist (my patronal feast), and Peter and Paul.

Our dear fathers, living and deceased are remembered with filial love and respect on Father's Day. As an aside, I was born on Father's Day and my Dad always said he never got over it, hmm. Likewise, we hold in grateful prayer all those who have been spiritual father's to us along life's journey. All of them were mirrors in some way of the self-giving love of our heavenly Father.

As I grew older and learned more about my parents as themselves, as individuals with their own personalities, life history, limitations, gifts, struggles and strengths, the more I realized the need to reframe the way I perceived them; they weren't just Mom and Dad. I know they ran the race and finished their course with the divine arms around them and God's tender mercies purifying and sanctifying them. Each of us has grown, yes, even through strife, pain and loss, and our own life has been enriched as well as marked by them. Because of them we have the life we've lovingly consecrated to God and offered to the service of the Church.

As we finish up this current Oblate Letter year, to return in September, we Sisters want you to know and be reassured of our daily prayers for you. We wish you a happy, healthy summer and God's deep Peace in whatever life holds for you and yours.

Remember us and all Oblates in your prayers. Life and our dear but suffering world are in God's safe-keeping. I think I quote St. Francis de Sales here: *"Strengthen your hearts in unshakable submission to the will of God, to absolute trust in the holy providence without which nothing happens to us, no, not a single thing."*

I wouldn't be surprised if De Sales learned that from monasticism. The whole point of Benedict's Rule is to listen so deeply for the Word of God, active within us, that we are changed/ converted from our old ways into Christ-likeness, into Love. The whole of Chapter 4 on the Tools of Good Works is full of advice and admonitions about how that can be practically put into daily life. We are talking about monastic Obedience when we develop a habit of deep listening to God in our moment by moment experiences. Love moves us forward to submission in trust.

Chapter 4 at its conclusion mentions the workshop in which we toil daily at all these things that "re-form" us. For you who cannot enjoy the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the monastic community as a

special environment for this life-work, still, you must make a monastery in your heart and retire there as often as you can to listen for God in your daily reality. Your Stability can be found in being faithful to the very processes of spiritual maturation; call it perseverance.

At the end of that wonderful Chapter 72 on the Good Zeal of Monastics we have a picture of what the holy person looks and acts like, one who has persevered in the “school of the Lord’s service” and found stability in their spiritual life immersed in and integrated with their daily existence. That’s the goal for each and all of us.

I’ve learned over these many years in the monastery not to feel absolutely certain about anything or anyone. The one exception is certainty about the enveloping Love and Mercy that holds my little life. Yours, too! Monastics aren’t really different from any other human being: living the best they can from day to day, striving, falling, rising (the Paschal mystery acted out in daily living), busy, fragile, longing, hurting, hopeful for better things to come. Here the exception would be, perhaps, in the degree of intent toward God, that constant bending toward, living more intentionally and intensely in a conscious, loving, personal relationship with God.

It wouldn’t surprise me to find that there are millions of monastic hearts out there in the world in people who don’t even know it. The same divine Love and Mercy are active in ALL PEOPLE, sanctifying human life daily from within. That’s what we understand by the Pentecostal Spirit of the Risen Lord Jesus forever at work in God’s world. It’s like the scriptural parable of the seed that is planted and grows day and night without the farmer knowing it or staying up all night prodding the earth to see if anything is happening yet, ha!

My advice to all of us: lighten up a little. Let’s laugh a lot at our own foibles; it will teach us to be more patient with those of others. And laughter is healing, a thing that follows on the humble acceptance of the truth of us (Humility). We learn to accept others on their own terms, not ours. Perfection (from the Greek) means mature, not flawless. It is the counterpart, the twin sister of holi-ness.

Leaving you with a few things to think about over the next two months and wishing you joy in your daily search for God,

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

September 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

Welcome back after our Summer break. I hope you filled the months with good, wholesome, healthy things with family or otherwise. For myself, I tried to write a small book for young people and illustrate it myself with pen and ink sketches. Having never done anything like this before it took a lot of drafting and redrafting on my part, or maybe sheer nerve, ha! However, even if it never goes anywhere I had a ball doing it and enjoyed it immensely in the process.

BEFORE I FORGET TO SAY IT: We have all the oblates we can house for the September 11,12,13 retreat weekend. If you now feel you cannot come after all, please tell me now.

As for what we'll do in this series of ten monthly Letters, I think our Lord is asking me to do something with the Parables of the Gospels and how our Father Benedict used their lessons in the Rule he wrote as a guideline for monastics. For this first one it would help if you got your Bible and read the Gospel of Matthew 12: 1–8. This is about picking grain on the Sabbath Day. You first thought might be to assume that Jesus is saying we need to return to the strictness of the Sunday observance, the Lord's Day, so far now from our culture's concepts.

Rather, what I'm reading into it is Jesus pointing out that the **Lord of all** has the last word, the bottom line, the power over all law to make needed exceptions based on real human needs. About need, let me just say, of course, what we think we want and what we really need may be two different things, as most of you will recognize from life experience. God can do anything God wants to do!

This is especially a lesson about judging. There is a place in Scripture that says: "Judge not, lest you be judged." (Matt.7:1,2) All laws, whether in Scripture, like the Ten Commandments, or in the Rule are meant to be a safeguard for love which is the most important law of all. By it alone, in the end, will we be judged. You'll find that idea, too, in Matt.25:31 – 40, and over and over again in the Gospel and Letters of John and of Paul. That's because GOD IS LOVE and we are meant to become as he is, Jesus showing us the way. Benedict's "little way" also is a safeguard of love in a communal setting and the reason behind all the monastic practices we read about in the Rule, whether it's reverence and respect for one another, patience with one another and ourselves, deferring to or serving others before ourselves. Love is the end and meaning and purpose of simply everything!

But back to Matt.12:6. "Something greater than the temple is here." The faith community of Jesus' birth believed that God was present in the Temple; that was where you would find him, discover what his will for you is, and offer the required sacrifices as a pledge of your commitment to God. In this instance Jesus was talking about himself as the new Temple of God's unique Presence with humanity, making himself greater than the old temple. While he calls to peoples' minds that lay people and clergy have had exceptions to the Sabbath law from ancient days, He himself is a new locus of God's Presence and far superior to the old laws. He has power and authority given him

by the Father over everything. In good conscience, in Him, we learn when to make exceptions instead of rigidly holding to the letter of the law. In our text here he also says (vs.7) "I desire mercy, not sacrifice", putting human compassion and mercy above all else. What do you think of that?

It is God, indwelling our hearts that makes us lovers, not haters. Scripture tells us that the one who says "I love God" but hates another fellow human being, is a liar. That reference comes from the Letters of John. The Father is all about loving the entire universe of God's own loving, handcrafted creation. It is God's love that sustains the universe and touches it through human beings in every generation throughout history, people just like you and me. It is the abiding love of God in us, God's love IN us, in our own love, that makes all the difference in how we think and how we behave.

I'm convinced Jesus' intent was to assure us that people come first because he loves every single one he made, people first, not laws or policies, not as an after thought, not despite habits of self-protection or when I think of it in my spare time.

"Something greater than the temple is here". Extend that, as St. Paul assures us was Jesus' own intention, beyond even the concept of Jesus as the new Temple of Presence. WE are now, because of our baptism into Christ, temples of God's abiding presence and glory. "Do you not know that that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? You have been purchased at a great price. Then, glorify God in your body" (1Cor. 6:19,20) If we all took that seriously, what would happen to us and in our world? The only way we can glorify God in our bodies is by loving as God loves; that's God's sole command, our one life project...to become love.

"Little children, love one another. AS I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how everyone will know that you are Mine, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34,35) This rule shapes our monastic hearts because monastic spirituality is all about making love concrete in daily living.

Because love is the core Gospel message, our Father Benedict had to base his Rule solidly on the Gospel. So he had to make love the criterion for everything in life as monastics because no matter where we are, no matter what our lifestyle is, no matter who we are, Gospel life demands this of us. It has to be practical, not just talk, as Scripture also tells us. This takes a lifetime of loving even in very small matters. It is love by choice, not raging hormones, not emotions or infatuations which fade fast as we've all learned through life experiences.

Like M. Scott Peck's definition of love, our love must have qualities of inner freedom, personal integrity and lifetime growth toward our divine Ideal.. God's love pours out through us touching everything and everyone with that divine Care. How watchful we must be not to let love degenerate into self-serving niceness! Let's pray for each other as we journey on with the Gospel and the Rule for our guides.

Devotedly, Sr. Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

November 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

When I was a very young Sister I remember November was called the month of the Poor Souls. We had the extra obligation of praying what was called the Poor Souls rosary every day, fitting that in with quite a number of other private and communal devotions. All that changed, of course, after the Vatican II documents on the renewal of Religious Life which called for a simplification of our life in general, even a renovation, you might say of our communal prayer practices. This proved a positive move as we had a very hard time fitting everything required into a humane day, believe me!

With new theological insights, we don't use the term "poor souls" but rather the "holy souls of all who have gone before us". As St. Paul often reminds us in his Letters, we who are IN CHRIST are rich in grace and mercy, never poor, no matter where we are in our personal journey into the fullness of the Kingdom; Jesus also promises us that no one who comes to him will he ever turn away. He came to take us all in himself back to God, the loving Father of all. I have added her a list of scripture texts in this regard that I wish you would give yourself the joy and comfort of looking up and cherishing during your Lectio. They pertain to the words: rich, mercy, mercies and merciful. Rom.10:12; Eph.2:4-7; 1Tim.6:17-19; Isa.54:7,8,10; Isa.63:15-16; Col.3:12-15; James2:13; Matt.5:7; Psalm40:12; Lamentations3:22,23.

November is also the month of our great national and religious day of Thanksgiving to the Father and giver of all good gifts, of whom St. Peter writes that his divine power has *already given us everything we need for life and for holiness* through intimacy with him who called us through his own glory and power. He has bestowed on us the precious and very great promises so that we might come to share in the divine nature. (2nd Letter of Peter 1:3,4)

And that thought brings me to the Parable for this month, Luke 10: 29-37, the Good Samaritan.

Jesus asked: "Who was a neighbor to the robber's victim? "

The answer came: "The one who treated him with mercy."

Jesus said to him: "Go and do likewise."

A neighbor is someone close by. It could be a physical closeness like next door, across the alley or down the block. Or it could be a spiritual reality as with those who are close to our hearts, our families and friends, co-workers, club members, senior center companions, anyone who becomes close by way of companionship of the heart. It could be caring service providers, anyone who stretches their personal boundaries a bit by going the extra mile for you when you need it most.

Even a smile can be a mercy!

Could it be that you are sometimes a neighbor to yourself? Admittedly, we are sometimes not “at home” with our own selves; we sort of live through the days and events of our life with all its demands as though on auto-pilot and don’t come home to ourselves for days at a time. As an aside, that is one reason why some make retreat days or weeks, to re-center and come home.

Benedict’s monastic practices of Lectio Divina and Liturgy of the Hours are but two of the monastic ways meant to keep us coming back home to our Center where we can live with God in tender confidence and companionship. That’s why I love the daisy flower petals; all come out from the center and return to it. So must everything in our day, the more conscious the better!

Who do we care about strongly enough to put ourselves out for them in ways little or great? The parable tells us that Jesus, the Good Samaritan, had no walls or barriers of class or cultural distinction, no negative attitudes about race or religious practices that differed from His. He wouldn’t approve of religious or ritual practices we’d use to hide behind as a way of denying or ignoring someone’s basic human need. Like the fellow in the Gospel, Jesus gave what He had to meet the immediate need and even promised more in the daily availability of the sustenance of the Eucharist and life energy in the holy Spirit.

Who treated the victim with *mercy*? There again, we have that power-laden word that means lovely things like human kindness and compassion, tender caring for or about anyone, anywhere in need. When we’ve done all we can (not 50/50) and given all we are and have to offer of ourselves, our strength, our time, our attention, our willingness to be put out a bit, and even our health, and done all we can to alleviate distress, Scripture says we have, like a good servant, done no more than our duty. (Lk.17:9-10) We are all servants of the one Master/Teacher and King, Christ, as long as we live, so as to share His glory when He comes again.

Thank God for opportunities to put ourselves aside and serve with a tenderized heart so that we reflect Christ to our world, so sadly in need to mercy and human compassion. What does mercy look like in your daily life? How do you understand what that is?

To me, it’s many things: mercy is first of all a benevolent attitude tilted toward others. Mercy is a form of real presence, God at work in and through us, reaching out to meet needs. Mercy is God’s generosity spread far and wide for all to share. Mercy can be compassion, pity or a bending/flexibility in situations. Mercy is lavish giftfulness from a loving heart.

Because Jesus is the human face of God’s eternal compassion toward ALL created things, mercy is a great caring, a sensitive heart, a readiness to help.

Jesus says or illustrates mercy in many places in our sacred scriptures to encourage us to be like God in merciful, beneficent behavior. For instance:

“Freely have you received, freely must you give.” (Matt.10:8)

“As I have done for you, so also you must do.” (John 13:15)

“Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for these least ones, you did for Me.” (Matt.25:40)

“To the thirsty I will give a gift from the life-giving water.” (Rev. 21:6)

What life-giving water do you give in his Name? How about letting our monastic prayerfulness be life-giving water for our sad, disoriented world? Our little prayer of intercession, plunged into the heart of the Divine Mercy, has power beyond anything we can imagine because it is no longer ours but his.

As we think about all the things we want to tell God we are grateful for in this month of Thanksgiving, let's not forget to thank Him also for the hard stuff that has come our way, the things that have really challenged us, stretched us beyond ourselves, knocked us down a peg to two (the self diminishment so essential to Christian and monastic life) which humbles us and keeps us walking in the truth. Humility, like mercy, is a great gift that uplifts others and benefits creation as a whole. Silence or gentleness can be a mercy when I tend to over-react. What faces of mercy have you worn today?

A joyous, heartwarming month of gratefulness for ALL!

Happy Thanksgiving holiday to you and yours,

Sr. Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

December 2009

Dear Oblates and friends,

This is my favorite season of the year, full of Advent waiting and the burst of joy as Christmas arrives. I'm sure we each have so many memories, both religious and secular, of Christmas preparations, gifts bought and wrapped and labeled so carefully, wish lists, at least when we were little and still thought Santa Claus did the shopping for us, ha! Most of all I remember choir practices, church decorations, crib sets, Christmas plays and, as I grew older, the Church's liturgical cycle, the Advent Mass readings and the hopes they inspire to this very day.

We wait in hope of the second coming of Christ the Messiah and Savior of all because of that first coming when the hidden God revealed divinity in the human flesh of One like us, starting out as we all did with baby wails and wet diapers and constant hunger for food and life.

This is a great Mystery we celebrate annually, the mystery of God taking on the entirety of our human condition (except sin) so that we could be one with the Son in the return journey to the Father. All the divine, infinite Love, Compassion, Hope for humanity and Joy make inroads into our waiting hearts each year as the faithful celebrate and remember the perfect Gift of God in Jesus. Come, Lord Jesus!

The mystery of being IN God because of Christ will never be fully plumed in our lifetime, hence the yearly celebration. Let's not lose sight of the larger picture, the meaning and reality of life in Christ from birth to death and resurrection to a new level of existence in God because of the Mystery we are celebrating, even with all the homey traditions of the season in which we invest so much of our energy. And rightly so, because Love is poured forth through such earthy, homey things, gifting as God gifts, with love, sensitivity, and grateful hearts.

Because it's so important for us as Christian adults to understand these mysteries I intend to digress from the "parables" theme for this month and look with you into the deeper symbolic treasury of the Infancy narratives of Matthew and Luke in the bible. The stories of Jesus' birth and early life, called Christian mythology, are somewhat similar to the Hebrew Bible's use of Midrash, a term used for fleshing out a few known facts in story form. The basic facts are there but surrounded, as it were, with human details that help make a point. Matthew's Gospel uses texts from the Old Testament to point out who Jesus is. Luke peoples his story with men and women close around Jesus in those early years, like Mary and Joseph (of course!), Elizabeth and Zachary, Simeon and Anna, the Magi and shepherds.

We're all aware that there were no camcorders in that period of history, no eye-witness news, but that doesn't make the stories around Jesus' birth a falsehood. These stories are a little revelation of the challenges Christians faced in those days and still in our own. How did people respond to Jesus then and now? We can even find elements of our own stories in these symbolic narratives if we look deeply enough. They teach us who Jesus is for us and how to respond to him ourselves.

Let's look at the figures in Luke's Gospel and what they mean to tell us. Mary speaks to us; she is the model for the life of the Church and individual Christians. The challenge she confronts us with in faith, hope and love, is to give birth to the Son of God, to be a Christ-bearer. Just as Elizabeth stands for the Old Testament waiting for the Messiah, Mary is the sign of Christians who must be living, visible signs and sacraments of Christ, birthed, living and active, into each generation for all time.

How do we do that? Let's look mainly at Lk.2:7; Lk.2:12; and Lk.2:16.

The swaddling clothes represent being well received and cared for with tenderness, wrapped around with love. Here, Mary and Joseph embrace and cuddle the Infant, representing all Christians who welcome Christ in to daily life and center their life around him. Lying in a manger is symbolic; the manger is a cattle feed trough, a lowly place, a cattle crib for those in lowly rural or poor circumstances. Luke is reminding us all that God delighted to prefer the poor, the powerless of this world who await a reversal of their condition. Note how this theme was prominent in Mary's Magnificat and its source in Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

The threefold reference to a manger in Lk.2:16 refers to the prophecy of Isaiah 1:2-3. The "ox knows its owner and the donkey its master's crib...." (Incidentally, that's why we put the ox and the donkey in our crib sets.) Luke is saying that the new Israel, the Christian community, the Church DOES know and recognize its Master IN THE MANGER, the lowly feed trough. To place him there is to say that he is food: Jesus is our nourishment in the Eucharist, our food for life and the great journey to the Father. That's why Jesus must be put in the manger...it speaks of his role in human life.

In many other modes of presence Jesus nurtures us, as well, but this is a special sign of what Jesus is for us. Christians who receive him, welcome him into their heart and lives, LIVE by his life, and in their own person, birth him into their world. St. Paul calls it "putting on Christ" and our Father Benedict's Rule is a way of living so that Christ shines forth more and more as the Center of everything, living faith, living hope and vibrantly living love.

Mary, the handmaid of the Lord, is the maid who waits on table. She is going to serve up the Food of God, the Son lying in the manger, the crib for eating, now the altar, the new table where God feeds us on himself. Later in life Jesus will ask: "Who is greater, the one who sits at the table or the one who serves? Yet I am in your midst as one who serves." (Lk.22:27) Jesus is the Servant Son who offers himself as the nourishment God provides for his people (which makes it hard for me to bear the fact of countless of our churches today without Eucharist for the holy People who ARE the Church. God, come again to our rescue!) In Mary we have the sacrament of the Church offering the world salvific nourishment, a major theme in Luke's Gospel; Jesus gives himself as manna for the life's journey back to the Father.

How does Jesus (Joshua in Hebrew, meaning Savior) save today? In Lk.19: 1-10, there is the story of Jesus eating a meal at the house of a sinner named Zacchaeus. He says: "Today salvation has come to this house." HE is that salvation. It comes through hospitality, providing a meal. Breaking bread around the table together, is how salvation (which means deliverance from bondage) comes and is shared among many. Think communion. Luke's Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles have many meal stories, all quiet, subtle references to Eucharistic action. This same giving, sharing, freeing action goes on everyday in Christian lives that go to the table of the altar to eat the Food that bonds us and makes us strong.

How we thank Mary for laying Jesus in the manger, the symbol of communion in our poverty, for giving us the Bread from Heaven to sustain us and bond us together as Church as we gather around the altar. Jesus, our nurture for earthly life and our promised eternal life, the more often You come into our hearts the more beautiful we become, the more we are loved and the more we give ourselves away in every act of gifting love, joy and faithfulness!

I hope that this reflection will touch your hearts with joy at the realities we are celebrating in this holy season. A blessed, happy and life-giving Christmas season to each and all! Sister Jean Frances