



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

Thanksgiving, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I have been beginning my letters by going to Google images and finding a suitable picture, black and white for snail mail and in color for email letters and the oblate website. Thanksgiving pictures have proven to be a challenge as most of the pictures are not only secular but silly as well. There are many images of turkeys and cartoon figures of pilgrims. There are a few nice pictures of the Mayflower, but I already used a boat for Columbus Day. Then there's a song that pops into my head. Its refrain goes: "Happy Thanksgiving, hooray, hooray, hooray! Aren't you glad you're not a turkey on this Thanksgiving Day?" You can find this song on YouTube. It's hard to turn it into a spiritual reflection (one possibility: "The Rule of Benedict as a Guide on How Not to Be a Turkey").

The Rule of Benedict can come across as a rather somber document, full of admonitions on how to escape the pains of hell. But the Work of God, in Latin the *Opus Dei* and what we call the Liturgy of the Hours, takes up more chapters than any other topic. Its core is the praise of God. In Chapter 9, Benedict legislates that Morning Prayer begin with Ps. 51:17, to be said three times: "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth shall declare Your praise" (we only sing it once). Each psalm is concluded by a "Glory be" (we do it once at the end of the four psalms that comprise our office).

Then, take a look at Chapter 16: How the Work of God Is to Be Performed During the Day:

"Seven times in the day," says the Prophet, "I have rendered praise to You" (Ps. 119:164). Now that sacred number of seven will be fulfilled by us if we perform the Offices of our service at the time of the Morning Office, of Prime, of Terce, of Sext, of None, of Vespers and of Compline, since it was of these day Hours that he said, "Seven times in the day I have rendered praise to You" (Ps. 119:164). For as to the Night Office the same Prophet says, "In the middle of the night I arose to glorify You" (Ps. 119:62). Let us therefore bring our tribute of praise to our Creator "for the judgments of His justice" at these times: the Morning Office, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline; and in the night let us arise to glorify Him (Ps. 119:164, 62).

The sevenfold praise of God was so important to Benedict that he quoted Ps. 119:164 three times and Ps. 119:62 twice. The number “seven” in the psalm, as elsewhere in Scripture, should not be taken literally but rather as “many.” Benedict uses “seven” to say that we should pray always, as St. Paul writes in 1 Thess. 6:16-18: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks, for this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus.”

But why do we praise God? Surely God has no need of our praise. We praise God because Christ did so, and we unite ourselves with Christ: “Through Christ let us continually offer God a sacrifice of praise, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name” (Heb. 15:13). The author of the Letter to the Hebrews alludes here to Hos. 14:3: “Take with you words, and return to the Lord; Say to him, ‘Forgive all iniquity, and take what is good. Let us offer the fruit of our lips.’” We ask God for mercy, love, and forgiveness, as well as our daily needs. By offering praise, we deepen our relationship with God; we increase our faith and grow in intimacy.

Thus the Divine Office is a constant reminder of God’s presence in our lives. It is this mindfulness that is the center of Benedict’s teaching on humility. We read in Chapter 7: “Let a man consider that God is always looking at him from heaven, that his actions are everywhere visible to the divine eyes and are constantly being reported to God by the Angels.” Such an idea can be frightening, but it can also be a matter of thanksgiving and praise.

Not everyone can pray the Divine Office. The demands of family and work may make this impossible. But we can all try to develop an attitude of gratitude and thank God for all the blessings we receive each day. Let us try to be mindful of God’s presence. In this way we can pray without ceasing.

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, OSB

P. S. If you want to join us in praying Lauds and Vespers, go to our congregational website at www.benedictinesisters.org, click on Clyde Monastery at the top of the page, and go to “Monastery Podcast” just under the photo.



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

October, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I am writing this letter on Monday, October 8, 2012. It is the federal holiday honoring Christopher Columbus, the man who “discovered” the New World. Of course, we know that he didn’t actually discover it since it had already been found. Nor did he ever acknowledge that he discovered another continent rather than India. Whether he really knew that he had made a mistake is another matter.

Back when Columbus Day was October 12, you may have recited the first two lines of jingle written by Winifred Sackville Stoner, Jr. (1902–1983), who thought that her rhymes would replace Mother Goose (they didn’t).

In fourteen hundred ninety-two
Columbus sailed the ocean blue.
He had three ships and left from Spain;
He sailed through sunshine, wind and rain.
He sailed by night; he sailed by day;
He used the stars to find his way.
A compass also helped him know
How to find the way to go.

Columbus, although he clearly got lost, had means to find his way. Do we? Our true compass is Christ and we have the Gospels to guide us.

We do not seek a passage to India. What do we seek? First and foremost, we seek God. In Chapter 58, the novice is tested to see if he or she is “truly seeking God.” We are all novices on the way and must strive to deepen our faith. Pope Benedict XVI has proclaimed a Year of Faith, beginning on Oct. 11, 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. It will end on the Solemnity of Christ the King, on Nov. 24, 2013. The starting date also marks the twentieth anniversary of the publication of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. The Year of Faith summons us to “an authentic and renewed conversion to the Lord, the one Savior of the world.” During this year, Catholics are asked to study the Vatican II documents and the Catechism. We know, however, that faith is not just doctrine and theology; rather, it is primarily our relationship with God and with one another.

In order to maintain and strengthen that relationship, we also seek peace. In the Prologue, St. Benedict tells us to “seek after peace and pursue it.” St. Benedict refers to peace several times in his Rule. In Chapter Four, the Instruments of Good Works, we are told “not to give a false peace.” In the same chapter, if we have a dispute with someone, we are urged to make peace before the sun sets. In Chapter 34, the good of the monastery are to be distributed according to need so that all members will be at peace. In Chapter 53, guests are to be welcomed first with prayer and with the kiss of peace. It is no wonder that the Benedictine motto is *pax*, peace.

St. Benedict tells us how to achieve peace. In the Prologue he says, “God says to you, “If you will have true and everlasting life, keep your tongue from evil and your lips that they speak no guile” (Ps. 34:14-15). When St. Benedict invites us to “walk in His paths,” again he tells us how: “The one Who walks without stain and practices justice; who speaks truth from his heart; who has not used his tongue for deceit; who has done no evil to his neighbor; who has given no place to slander against his neighbor.” To achieve peace, then, we must guard our tongues, refraining from gossip and critical, negative speech. That is much easier said than done! Guarding one’s tongue really takes a daily effort.

Let us strive for peace in our own hearts, and then among our family and friends. Where there is estrangement and alienation, let us work toward reconciliation. Only then can we spread the Good News of Christ.

And now the news... The oblate retreat at Clyde was a wonderful experience for all. We had sixteen retreatants. The retreat began with lots of laughs as we read the Dr. Seuss story, *Thidwick the Big-Hearted Moose*. The story is about a hospitable moose and the creatures that come to reside on and in his horns. It’s a parable about the limitations of hospitality and the complementary roles of guests and hosts. The next day we explored hospitality in the Scriptures and the Rule of St. Benedict. The retreatants had a chance to visit with Sr. Jean Frances and other sisters they know from times past. Everyone enjoyed visiting and chatting after the long hiatus during our renovations. We joyfully welcomed Susan Yoshida as a new oblate candidate.

The *Clyde oblates* have decided to meet three times a year: Lent, late spring, and the all-oblate retreat in the fall. I’ll let you know the dates when these are finalized. They also came up with many creative ideas, and I’ll keep you informed as to how and when these materialize. What a group they are!

St. Louis area oblates will meet at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne Church in Florissant on Oct. 20, from 1:30-3:00 PM. The address is 2650 Parker Road, Florissant, MO 63033. A map is available through their website at <http://www.strpdparish.org/parish/map-directions.html>. You can call or email me for more information. I’ll keep you informed as to plans for that group too.

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

Exaltation of the Holy Cross, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Years ago, well before my time in community, the sisters used to change from their light cotton summer habits to their warmer winter serge habits on Sept. 14, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This was a welcome change from the time they used to wear serge habits all the time, even in the heat and humidity of a Missouri summer! For some of our sisters, too, even our younger ones, this feast was the date of entrance into community.

The Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross celebrates the discovery in 326 of the True Cross by Saint Helena, the mother of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great, during a pilgrimage she made to Jerusalem. The Church of the Holy Sepulcher was later built at the site of the discovery, by order of Helena and Constantine. The story is, as may be expected, legendary. The ancient basilica is a stop for tourists, but it remains a place of pilgrimage as well as a sad symbol of Christian division.

In a deeper sense, though, the feast celebrates the instrument of torture that became the instrument of our salvation. Thus on this feast we sing a hymn with the refrain:

Lift high the cross, the love of Christ proclaim,
Till all the world adore His sacred Name.
Led on their way by this triumphant sign,
The hosts of God in conquering ranks combine.

We lift the cross high, we exalt the cross, because by the cross Christ conquered sin and death.

The feast is alluded to in the Rule of St. Benedict. In Chapter 41, St. Benedict adjusts the communal fast according to the season: “From the Ides of September until the beginning of Lent let them always take their dinner at the ninth hour.” The Ides of September refer to Sept. 13 or 14, and the date marked the beginning the monastic fast. In ancient times it was customary to eat only one meal a day. Fasting usually meant to delay eating. It was a normal monastic practice; hence we find “to love fasting” among the tools of good works listed in Chapter 4.

Benedict allows two meals a day, the main meal at noon and a smaller meal in the evening, from Easter until Pentecost. Beginning at Pentecost and throughout the summer the monks fasted until the ninth hour on Wednesday and Friday. An exception was made if they worked in the fields or if the summer heat was oppressive. The “Ides of September” marked the beginning of winter— and so, thought our early sisters, who came from Switzerland, it would surely be cold enough to wear wool in Missouri. Such asceticism was a way to share in Christ’s suffering. In our own time we still need to practice asceticism, although we have different and healthier ways of doing so.

But fasting isn’t really the point of Chapter 41. Much more important is the abbot’s duty to “adapt and arrange everything in such a way that souls may be saved and that the brethren may do their work without just cause for murmuring.” That is, there should be no cause for complaining. And it so easy to complain! Schedules, duties, obligations, and work requirements are not always to our liking. Although we always have choices, the menu may not include our favorite foods. We may be sitting next to someone whose habits irritate us. There are at least a thousand and one things about which to complain. And there is nothing that tears down community, disrupts families, and ruins friendships more than complaining. This is why, in Chapter 34, Benedict says: “Above all, let not the evil of murmuring appear for any reason whatsoever in the least word or sign. If anyone is caught at it, let her be placed under very severe discipline.”

Scary, isn’t it? It is up to all of us to maintain a peaceful, loving environment for those we live with. We can do this by “offering up” our difficulties and trials rather than complaining about them. St. Paul did this. He says in 1 Cor. 1:24-26: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church, of which I am a minister in accordance with God’s stewardship given to me to bring to completion for you the word of God, the mystery hidden from ages and from generations past.” Let’s do the same.

Now for some news. There is room for one or two more for the oblate retreat, Sept. 28-30. If you want to hop aboard, call me at 660-944-2221 or email me at sarah@bspa.us as soon as possible.

St. Louis area oblates will meet at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne Church in Florissant on Oct. 20, from 1:30-3:00 PM. The address is 2650 Parker Road, Florissant, MO 63033. A map is available through their website at <http://www.strpdparish.org/parish/map-directions.html>. You can call or email me for more information.

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, OSB



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

Solemnity of the Assumption, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

On the Solemnity of the Assumption, our Sr. Nancy Rose will renew her temporary vows. We rejoice with her on this day, as she promises to us and to God that she will continue her monastic journey as a member of our Congregation. All monastic professions and oblations remind us of the day when we ourselves pledged our troth, that is, our loyalty and fidelity to the One we love.

St. Benedict does not grant newcomers easy access to the monastery. Chapter 58 of the Rule prescribes that one who seeks admission must knock at the door for four or five days and bear harsh treatment with patience. This is to “test the spirits to see whether they are from God.” If she perseveres in her request, she must stay in the guest house for a few days before entering.

The test of a vocation is whether the novice “is truly seeking God, and whether she is zealous

for the Work of God, for obedience and for trials.” A novice must be “told all the hard and rugged ways by which the journey to God is made.” After two months, the Rule is read to the novice, who is told, “Here is the law under which you wish to fight. If you can observe it, enter;

if you cannot, you are free to depart.” The Rule is read two more times, after six months and after another four months. Only then, if the novice remains firm, “having deliberated with herself, if she promises to keep it in its entirety and to observe everything that is commanded, let her be received into the community.” When the novice is to be received, “she promises before all in the oratory stability, fidelity to monastic life, and obedience.”

In our day, we no longer make newcomers stand outside in the cold of winter or the heat of summer. We provide them with food, shelter, and friendship. After they become acquainted with us and we with them, they have the opportunity to live with us for a time. Together we discern whether God is truly calling them to become members of our community. Even after entrance, the stages of postulancy and novitiate are times of discernment. Postulants and novices may find that their calling lies elsewhere.

But Sr. Nancy Rose has stuck it out. This touches on the meaning of monastic commitment, and, indeed, of all serious commitments. Perhaps the meaning of “stick-to-it-iveness” is most clear in relation to stability and fidelity to monastic life, but obedience also includes the quality of persistence and endurance. In Chapter 5, obedience is an essential part of our discipleship: “The first degree of humility is obedience without delay. This is the virtue of those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ.”

The same quality is found in Chapter 68, on what to do when commanded to do difficult or impossible things. After discussion, if the superior still orders the monk to perform the task, the Rule says, “let her obey out of love, trusting in the help of God.”

Sr. Nancy Rose renews her commitment on the Solemnity of the Assumption. This feast celebrates the belief that, like Christ, Mary was raised from the dead and taken up, body and soul, into heaven. But Mary is not separate from the rest of humanity. We all hope to share one day in the glory of the resurrection. That same hope lies at the foundation of our commitment as monastics and oblates of St. Benedict. Congratulations, Sr. Nancy Rose!

And now for some news...

St. Louis oblates met in July. The group was small but enthusiastic. We hope to resume monthly meetings this fall, perhaps with some help from technology (which is over my head). Details have yet to be worked out. All St. Louis oblates will be informed of the place and time of future meetings. We hope to see you there!

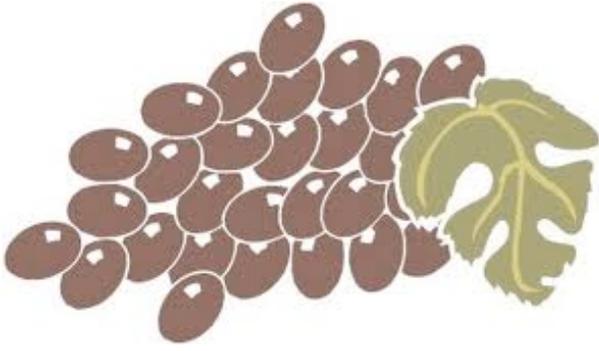
Clyde renovations have been completed. You are welcome to celebrate with us on Sept. 2, 2012. The blessing of our new front entrance will be at 2:00 PM. Refreshments and tours will follow. We are holding a raffle for a beautiful handmade quilt. Details can be found on our website at www.benedictinesisters.org.

The oblate retreat to be held at Clyde from Sept. 28-30 is filled to capacity. Details and travel directions will soon be sent to all participants. If you would like to attend but have not contacted me about it, I can put you on a waiting list. Just email me at sarah@bspa.us.

Like much of the country, Missouri is experiencing severe drought. Do pray for seasonable weather and rain in due measure!

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, OSB



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

July 4, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Here's a bit of news. On July 7, I will be meeting with our oblates in the St. Louis area for the first time since our monastery closed there ten years ago. Unfortunately, when the sisters moved to our other houses, our ties in St. Louis were weakened or even severed. We hope to renew old friendships and to make new ones. Hopefully the oblate program there can make a fresh start. We are looking forward to the meeting. Please keep us in prayer as we make this effort.

Please also remember our oblate retreat to be held at Clyde from Sept. 28-30: "Welcoming Angels: Hospitality in Scripture and the Rule of St. Benedict." There is still room, but we're filling up. Contact me by email at sarah@bspa.us, by snail mail, or by phone at 660-944-2221, ext. 121, if you still wish to register. There is no set fee for this retreat.

In the Gospel for July 7, the day of the St. Louis meeting, Jesus tells us, "People do not put new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise the skins burst, the wine spills out, and the skins are ruined. Rather, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved (Mt. 9:14-17)." We all know the usual explanation of this short parable. As new wine ferments, it increases in volume. If new wine is poured into old, stiff, brittle wineskins, the skins will burst. New wine is poured into fresh wineskins, so that the skins can expand along with the wine. In one interpretation, Jesus' parable teaches us that the good news of the kingdom of God must be expressed in new forms and shapes. We, who are called to his kingdom, are also a new creation, as St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 5:17: "Whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come."

The parable teaches us that we need to be flexible and to adjust to changing conditions and circumstances. At the same time, we need to hold on to our values and commitments. Summer is a good time to be flexible. Children are out of school. Summer is a time for vacations and for family visits. It is a time for summer sports. For those who live on the coast, it is a time to go to the beach. It is a time for picnics and barbecues. There are many things to do in the summer for fun and relaxation.

St. Benedict made allowance for the longer days and heat of summer. He changed the divine office for the summer months. In Chapt. 10, "because the summer nights are shorter, the readings from the book are omitted," and there is only one reading instead of three. Work or the summer heat indicates a need for a greater amount of drink (Chapt. 40). In the next chapter, Benedict regulated the time of meals: "beginning with Pentecost and continuing through the summer, the monks fast until after mid afternoon on Wednesday and Friday, unless they are working in the fields or the summer heat is oppressive." In Chapt. 55, the monks are to wear a thinner or worn cowl rather than the warm woolen one used during the winter.

St. Benedict is flexible in many other ways as well. The abbot's teaching must vary with the circumstances and with the character of the monks: "With the undisciplined and restless, he will use firm argument, with the obedient, docile, and patient, he will appeal for greater virtue; but as for the negligent and disdainful, we charge him to use reproof and rebuke" (Chapt. 2). In Chapt. 18, on the order of the psalmody, he says, "Above all else we urge that if anyone finds this distribution of the psalms unsatisfactory, he should arrange whatever he judges better." In Chapt. 55, on the clothing of the monks "should vary according to local conditions and climate." Monks should not complain about the color and coarseness of their garments; whatever is available in the vicinity at a reasonable cost should be used.

There are doubtless many other examples of Benedict's flexibility and moderation in all things. It is usually when we hold rigidly to our own ideas, opinions, and expectations that we are miserable and bring unhappiness to others. If we are rigid, then we are likely to demand too much of ourselves and of others; no one can measure up to the unrealistic standards we set. We are reminded of what St. Paul says in 2 Cor. 3:6: "the letter brings death, but the Spirit gives life." But when we are gentle, kind, and considerate we bring joy to others.

Summer is a time to enjoy life. May your summer be happy and safe.

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, OSB

ST. LOUIS OBLATE MEETING
A new beginning

Saturday, July 7, 2012 1:30 P.M.

Drury Inn and Suites
11980 Olive Blvd
St. Louis MO 63141



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

Pentecost, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

First a bit of news. This past weekend I attended the oblate meeting at Osage Forest of Peace, in Sand Springs, OK. This was the first time for me since the Congregation closed our monastery there. The oblates have continued their monthly meetings, with Sr. Pascaline traveling there every so often. It was wonderful to connect with our Osage oblates again, most of whom I know from the six blessed years that I lived at Osage Monastery. Their fidelity is a true inspiration to me and to all of us. The Forest continues to be a place of deep silence and prayer for people of all faith traditions. It is thriving under the skilled leadership of Sr. Jane Comerford, CSJ.

We celebrate Easter for fifty days. Easter is about Jesus' physical appearance. On Easter Sunday, Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, the mother of James and Joseph, went to the tomb where Jesus was buried. As the angel instructed them, they went to tell his disciples, 'He has been raised from the dead, and he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him.' Then they ran to announce this to his disciples. And Jesus met them on their way. They approached, embraced his feet, and did him homage.

It is not only the women who touch the resurrected Christ. When Jesus walks through the locked doors of the upper room, he shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and feet. Thomas will not believe that Jesus has been raised from the dead, until Jesus appears to the disciples again and says, "Put your finger here and see my hands, and bring your hand and put it into my side, and do not be unbelieving, but believe" (John 20:27). First the disciples touch Jesus and then Jesus commissions them as his witnesses.

Then, on Sunday after the fortieth day, we celebrate the Ascension. The Ascension is about Jesus' physical disappearance. It is Easter in reverse. First Jesus commissions the disciples to "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature." Then a cloud takes him from their sight.

Easter is about Jesus' humanity. Ascension is about Jesus' divinity. In today's Gospel from Mark we hear: "So then the Lord Jesus, after he spoke to them, was taken up into heaven and took his seat at the right hand of God." To be at the right hand of God is to be in a position of power and authority. It means that Christ is king of heaven and earth.

For Christ to be king of heaven and earth means, in the words of St. Paul, that in him were created all things in heaven and on earth. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. Thus, Jesus' kingship has a cosmic significance. Christ is the head of the body, the church. Jesus' kingship has a global significance, as it is as wide and broad as our universal church. His kingship also has a profound personal significance, for we must surrender to him our minds and hearts and submit to his will in humility and obedience.

Easter reaches its climax and its conclusion with Pentecost. It is the Spirit who bestows the seven gifts of wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety, and fear of the Lord. These are the gifts that enable us to be Jesus' disciples and to live a Christian life. We cannot do that without God's grace. We must listen to the Holy Spirit within our hearts.

Let us open our eyes to the deifying light,
let us hear with attentive ears
the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us,
“Today if you hear His voice,
harden not your hearts.”
And again,
“Whoever has ears to hear,
hear what the Spirit says to the churches.”
And what does He say?
“Come, My children, listen to Me;
I will teach you the fear of the Lord.”
“Run while you have the light of life,
lest the darkness of death overtake you.”

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, OSB

P.S. The annual oblate retreat will be held at Clyde the last weekend of September. It is open to all oblates. Registration and opening will be the evening of Sept. 28; departure is after the dinner with the community on Sept. 30. The topic is “Welcoming Angels: Hospitality in Scripture and the Rule of St. Benedict.” Details will be forthcoming. Please let me know if you are interested. You can reach me by email at sarah@bspa.us or by phone at 660-944-2221, ext. 121.



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

Lent, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

We have begun the holy season of Lent. In his chapter on Lent, St. Benedict takes the opportunity to encourage his monks to a more careful practice of monastic discipline. He strikes a somewhat reproachful tone in Chapter 49 of the Holy Rule, saying that we should do during Lent what we really should do all year long:

Although the life of a monk ought to have about it at all times the character of a Lenten observance, yet since few have the virtue for that, we therefore urge that during the actual days of Lent the brethren keep their lives most pure and at the same time wash away during these holy days all the negligences of other times. And this will be worthily done if we restrain ourselves from all vices and give ourselves up to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and to abstinence.

How do we purify our lives and cleanse ourselves from sin? St. Benedict goes on to direct us: “Let us increase somewhat the usual burden of our service, as by private prayers and by abstinence in food and drink.” This instruction sounds something like a New Year’s resolution. We have all made and promptly broken such resolutions. But there are significant differences between these and what Benedict is telling us in this chapter. St. Benedict is not promoting a self-improvement program. His Lenten program has an altogether different goal. He bids us to participate in Christ’s suffering and death so as to share in the joy of the resurrection. In fact, Benedict bases the entire Rule on the paschal mystery. In the Prologue, he urges: “Let us get up then, at long last, for the Scriptures rouse us when they say: ‘It is high time for us to arouse from sleep’ (Rom. 13:11).” We are called to run along the narrow road that leads to salvation (Prol. 48).

St. Benedict asks us to offer something above the ordinary measure of our service “with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” He says that the monk “may withhold some food, drink, sleep, talking and jesting; and with the joy of spiritual desire he may look forward to holy Easter.” St. Benedict focuses on joy. We recall Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 6:16-18: “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites. They neglect their appearance, so that they may appear to others to be fasting. Amen, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, anoint your head and wash your face, so that you may not appear to be fasting, except to your Father who is hidden. And your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.” We are also reminded of St. Paul’s teaching in 2 Cor. 9:7: “Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”

St. Benedict does not impose restrictions; rather, we choose our own Lenten practices. St. Benedict invites and encourages us to withhold some food and drink, in moderation and with permission. St. Benedict is positive and humane. We increase our offering to God but we do not necessarily have to decrease our caloric intake.

But while we choose our penitential practices, we do not choose our penance. Penance comes our way whether we choose it or not. We may experience serious or chronic illness, whether our own or that of a loved one. We may grieve the loss of family members or friends. We may be laid off from our jobs and suffer financial reverses. We all have to take up our cross and follow Christ.

Here lies the crux of the matter. How do we follow Christ? We must unite our own sufferings with those of Christ. St. Paul says of himself, "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the church" (Col. 1:24). Thus we "offer up" our sufferings to Christ by our peaceful acceptance of what comes our way. In this way our suffering does not cause us to become bitter. Rather, we allow our suffering to enable us to grow in faith, hope, and compassion. Let this be our Lenten practice.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg

P.S. We need to update our records. Please let me know if there has been any change in your contact information.

We keep you in our daily prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Is there anything particular for which you would like us to pray?



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

February, 2012

Dear Oblates and Friends,

This is my first of what I hope to be monthly letters to our congregational oblates. I cannot really take the place of Sr. Jean Frances, who has served you and our oblates so well as director for many years. Poor health has limited her physical activity and energy, but not her intellect. Her compassion and love are, as always, boundless. Her interest in the oblate program is strong, and her concern for all of you remains vibrant. She will still serve you indirectly as my chief consultant and advisor.

Our prioress general, Sr. Pat Nyquist, has already introduced me to you. I was the oblate director at San Benito Monastery until transferring to our Clyde in January, where I will be taking over the direction of our correspondence department. I am a doctoral candidate in Jewish studies, with a focus on Scripture, at Spertus Institute in Chicago. I've taught Scripture to our sisters in formation, our sisters in our health care center, and to a lively group of women in Dayton, Wyoming. I have also given an occasional retreat or workshop. I will undoubtedly draw on some of that material in my letters to you. I hope that at least some of you have read my weekly blog, "Sr. Sarah's BibleBytes." You can access the blog through our website, www.benedictinesisters.org or directly at www.sanbenitomonastery.org/DaytonBible/.

One of my hopes as oblate director is to revitalize the oblate website and to make more resources available. I would welcome any suggestions you have regarding this or any other matter regarding the oblate program. Has the program met your expectations? Is it continuing to be of spiritual benefit to you? How can it be improved? How can I personally be of help to you? You can always reach me by phone at 660-944-2221, ext. 120, or by email at sarah@bspa.us.

We will soon be celebrating the Solemnity of St. Scholastica, the sister of St. Benedict. What little we know about her is derived from the Dialogues of St. Gregory. The best known story of her life concerns a thunderstorm:

One day she came as usual and her saintly brother went with some of his disciples; they spent the whole day praising God and talking of sacred things. As night fell they had supper together.

Their spiritual conversation went on and the hour grew late. The holy nun said to her brother: “Please do not leave me tonight; let us go on until morning talking about the delights of the spiritual life”. “Sister”, he replied, “what are you saying? I simply cannot stay outside my cell”.

When she heard her brother refuse her request, the holy woman joined her hands on the table, laid her head on them and began to pray. As she raised her head from the table, there were such brilliant flashes of lightning, such great peals of thunder and such a heavy downpour of rain that neither Benedict nor his brethren could stir across the threshold of the place where they had been seated. Sadly he began to complain: “May God forgive you, sister. What have you done?” “Well”, she answered, “I asked you and you would not listen; so I asked my God and he did listen. So now go off, if you can, leave me and return to your monastery”. Reluctant as he was to stay of his own will, he remained against his will. So it came about that they stayed awake the whole night, engrossed in their conversation about the spiritual life.

Sometimes we interpret his story as a contrast between the masculine and the feminine approaches to the spiritual life: Benedict was zealous to keep the Rule of monastic life, while Scholastica tempered the Rule with love. This, in fact, seems to be Gregory’s conclusion: “It is not a thing to be marveled at, that a woman which of long time had not seen her brother, might do more at that time than he could, seeing, according to the saying of St. John, ‘God is charity’ [1 John 4:8] and therefore of right she did more which loved more.”

Beyond this somewhat facile comparison, we should ask what we can learn from this story, and in what ways it applies to us. It’s surely worth some reflection. The Liturgy of the Hours, which draws on this story, provides a few answers.

The first antiphon for Lauds is: “Scholastica prayed to the Lord, and great was her love! She won her favor from God.” God hears and answers our prayer in response to our love. This teaches us something about who God is. God is not a distant, unfeeling God but rather is a God who engages us in relationship. We deepen that relationship by our prayer and acts of kindness toward others.

The second Lauds antiphon is: “Go forth now, brother, go forth if you can and return to your monastery leaving me here.” Scholastica was teasing her brother or even rebuking him. Was Benedict perhaps the older brother, assuming authority over his younger sister? The third antiphon follows: “My brother, I made a request of you, and you would not listen; I asked my Lord, and he has heard me.” Benedict did not listen to his sister’s request. Since he did not respond, Scholastica turned to God. If we want God to listen to us, we need also to listen to others and, if possible, fulfill their legitimate requests. In Chapter 71 of the Holy Rule, St. Benedict calls monks to mutual obedience; they are to obey one another “with all charity and solicitude.”

The theme of love runs through the office for St. Scholastica. One of the Vespers antiphons quotes from the Song of Songs 3:4: “I found him whom my heart loves. I took hold of him and would not let him go.” My prayer for all of us is that we persevere in our search for God, growing always in faith and love. As we proceed during the dark and dreary days of winter, let’s keep our priorities straight: “Faith, hope, love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor. 13:13).

Peace,

Sr. Sarah Schwartzberg