



*The Benedictine Oblate Letter*

*April, 2013*

Dear Oblates and Friends,

T.S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* begins with a well-known reference to April:

April is the cruelest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing  
Memory and desire, stirring  
Dull roots with spring rain.

April is cruel because it stirs up unfulfilled memories and desires. Eliot's poem conveys attitudes of disillusionment and cynicism. It expresses a philosophy of nihilism. Nihilism holds that that life has no intrinsic meaning. It rejects moral and religious values. It denies that there is any objective basis for truth. Yet in these lines Eliot alludes to the General Prologue of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, quoted below in modern English:

When April with his showers sweet with fruit  
The drought of March has pierced unto the root  
And bathed each vein with liquor that has power  
To generate therein and sire the flower;  
When Zephyr also has, with his sweet breath,

Quickened again, in every wood and heath,  
The tender shoots and buds, and the young sun  
Into the Ram one half his course has run,  
And many little birds make melody  
That sleep through all the night with open eye  
(So Nature pricks them on to rant and rage)-  
Then do folk long to go on pilgrimage,  
And palmers to go seeking out strange strands,  
To distant shrines well known in sundry lands.

The two poems are strikingly different. For the modern poet, April evokes feelings of emptiness and gloom; for the medieval bard, April inspires pilgrimage to far-off shrines and, at least for some, an intense search for God. In the centuries between Chaucer and Eliot, western culture apparently descended from belief and hope to skepticism and despair.

In his Rule, St. Benedict makes two explicit mentions of pilgrims. Benedict says in Chapt. 53: "Let due honor be shown, especially to the domestics of the faith and to pilgrims." Chapt. 61 provides for the reception of pilgrim monks, about whom Benedict says: "If a pilgrim monastic coming from a distant region wants to live as a guest of the monastery, let her be received for as long a time as she desires, provided she is content with the customs of the place as she finds them and does not disturb the monastery by superfluous demands, but is simply content with what she finds." Pilgrims could be troublesome!

Benedict probably would not have allowed his monks to make pilgrimages, lest they encounter evil on the way, as we see in Chapter 67:

When brethren return from a journey, at the end of each canonical Hour of the Work of God on the day they return, let them lie prostrate on the floor of the oratory and beg the prayers of all on account of any faults that may have surprised them on the road, through the seeing or hearing of something evil, or through idle talk. And let no one presume to tell another whatever he may have seen or heard outside of the monastery, because this causes very great harm.

Even worse, pilgrim monks may become gyrovagues, wanderers whom Benedict describes unfavorably in Chapter 1: “Always on the move, with no stability, they indulge their own wills and succumb to the allurements of gluttony.”

Authentic monastic pilgrimages occur within the monastic enclosure, in accord with the vow of stability. Monastic life is a search for God, or better yet, it is our response to God’s search through our listening and obedience. Benedict writes in the Prologue: “And the Lord, seeking his laborer in the multitude to whom He thus cries out, says again, ‘Who is the one who will have life, and desires to see good days’ (Ps. 34:13)?” Let us always say, “Lord, here I am.”

***Here are some reminders:*** I have been posting short video clips on the oblate website. The last four videos are on *lectio divina* and the next ones will be on the Liturgy of the Hours. Go to [www.benedictinesisters.org](http://www.benedictinesisters.org), click on oblates, and the videos are under “resources.”

***All oblates*** are welcome to the 2013 fall retreat to be held Oct. 18-20. Mark your calendars. More information will be forthcoming.

***Clyde oblates:*** the next oblate weekend is May 24-26. Please let me know if you expect to attend.

***St. Louis area oblates*** are meeting every third Saturday of the month at the St. Rose Philippine Duchesne parish office, 2650 Parker Road, Florissant MO 63033. The next meetings are April 20 and May 18. If you live in the St. Louis area, you are most welcome to attend!

In Christ,

*Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.*