



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

August, 2016

Dear Oblates and Friends,

For many months now, and for a seemingly endless time to come, we have been hearing from and about candidates for political office. With all the bombastic rhetoric, it can be hard to know what is true and what is false, what is speculation and what is fact, what is said to convince and what is said to explain.

Some of us might be thinking that we have to choose between the devil and the deep blue sea. I am reminded of a passage in Homer's *Odyssey*. Circe, the goddess of magic, had turned Odysseus' men into swine. After Odysseus rescues his crew with the help of the god Hermes, Circe tells him the way home. Odysseus and his ship have to pass between two monsters, Scylla and Charybdis. Circe instructs him, "hug the Scylla side, for you had better lose six men than your whole crew." After a delay of one year, during which he feasts and drinks, Odysseus finally leaves for home. He survives the passage:

Then we entered the Straits in great fear of mind, for on the one hand was Scylla, and on the other dread Charybdis kept sucking up the salt water. As she vomited it up, it was like the water in a cauldron when it is boiling over upon a great fire, and the spray reached the top of the rocks on either side. When she began to suck again, we could see the water all inside whirling round and round, and it made a deafening sound as it broke against the rocks. We could see the bottom of the whirlpool all black with sand and mud, and the men were at their wit's ends for fear. While we were taken up with this, and were expecting each moment to be our last, Scylla pounced down suddenly upon us and snatched up my six best men. I was looking at once after both ship and men, and in a moment I saw their hands and feet ever so high above me, struggling in the air as Scylla was carrying them off, and I heard them call out my name in one last despairing cry. This was the most horrid sight that I saw in all my voyages. (Book XII, http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/aoto/aoto17.htm#fn_27)

Odysseus arrived at the Island of the Sun, where he faced another trial, but he would not have made it home at all if he had not decided what route to take and had remained on Circe's island.

We need to make a choice. What guidance can the Rule of Benedict give us? Benedict states that the leader of the community must possess certain character traits. In Chapter 2, “On What Kind of Person the Abbess Ought to Be,” he tells us that the abbess must teach more by example than by words. He reminds the abbess that she must give an account to the Lord of herself and of those under her care. She must constantly examine herself, so as to be cleansed of her own faults while helping others to amend.

Benedict gives a long list of attributes in Chapter 64, “On Constituting an Abbess.” The abbess must be learned in the divine law, chaste, sober, and merciful. She must act prudently and not go to excess. She must be discrete, considerate, and moderate. She must not be excitable, worried, exacting, jealous, headstrong, or over-suspicious. She is not above the Rule; rather, she must keep it in all its detail. Above all, the abbess, or any leader, must be humble. Benedict writes, “Let her keep her own frailty ever before her eyes.” What does it mean for a leader to be humble? A humble leader knows that he or she does not have all the answers, as if from divine illumination. A humble leader is one who seeks counsel and advice from all, from the oldest to the youngest, and is able to listen to and learn from everyone. A humble leader recognizes his or her limitations and is willing to delegate authority. He or she invites feedback, not waiting until complaints or difficulties are brought up. This implies an open, non-defensive attitude, and a willingness to re-visit decisions and even to change them. A humble leader admits his or her mistakes, and apologizes if there is need; conversely, he or she is willing and able to forgive others for their failures.

Humble leadership builds trust, confidence, enthusiasm, and hope. Such leadership is enabling rather than stifling, inclusive rather than elitist. All those who seek public office should read the Rule of Benedict, as should those who vote for them.

And now the news:

The International Congress of Benedictine Oblates will meet Nov. 4-10, 2017, in Rome. The theme is *A Way Forward: the Benedictine Community in Movement*. I have no more information at present; hopefully more information will be forthcoming. If anyone is interested, please let me know.

Clyde oblates: The next meeting is scheduled for September 17-19, 2016, on the theme *Blessings: What, Why, Where, When, and How*. All are welcome!

Saint Louis area oblates: The Saint Louis group has been reading and discussing *The Rule of Benedict:*

A Spirituality for the 21st Century by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. They have also been doing group *lectio* following *Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, “Lectio Divina Shared in Community” by Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B. Meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month from 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne School, Room 1 (accessible from Door 1 at the east end of the school).

Sand Springs oblates: The next meeting will be on September 11. The group is up to Chapter 7, “Empowerment,” in Sr. Joan Chittister’s book *In the Heart of the Temple*.

Sheridan, Wyoming, oblates are off for the summer and next meet in September.

Tucson oblates: The next regular meeting will be on Sunday, September 18, 2016. The *lectio divina* program is continuing this summer every Saturday from 10 to 11 am.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.