



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

March, 2015

Dear Oblates and Friends,

In his entire Rule, St. Benedict gives special attention to only one season of the liturgical year. He devotes Chapter 49 to Lent. The first verse of the chapter tells us much about St. Benedict's view of monastic life: "The life of a monk ought to be a continuous Lent." But Benedict knew that we rarely live up to the ideal. He continues, "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." He urges us to "restrain ourselves from all vices and give ourselves up to prayer with tears, to reading, to compunction of heart and to abstinence." These practices do not seem too difficult; Benedict does not require heroic fasting and sacrifice. All is to be done with moderation and with permission. Otherwise our Lenten offering will be "imputed to presumption and vainglory and will merit no reward."

I am reminded of Franz Kafka's strange story (all of his stories are strange), "The Hunger Artist" (<http://www.kafka-online.info/a-hunger-artist.html>). The hunger artist made fasting into an art form. For many years, he was put on display in a small barred cage. When he no longer attracted huge crowds of spectators, he allowed himself to be hired by a large circus. People lost eventually interest, and he was forgotten. When a supervisor found him lying in the straw at the bottom his cage, the hunger artist asks for his forgiveness, saying, "I always wanted you to admire my fasting." His last words were, "I had to fast. I can't do anything else... I couldn't find a food which I enjoyed. If had found that, believe me, I would not have made a spectacle of myself and would have eaten to my heart's content, like you and everyone else." He was replaced by a vigorous young panther.

If Kafka is teaching us anything, it is that fasting, or any other means of mortification, can be abused. It is easy to deceive ourselves, and so we must examine our motives carefully. Self-sacrifice may be a way to attract attention to ourselves, to feed our vanity, or to build up our own egos. This is the message of the gospel for Ash Wednesday. Jesus warns us three times against

hypocrisy, saying each time, “your Father who sees what is hidden will repay you.”

We should not look for suffering. We experience enough suffering in the course of our daily life. This Lent we may have to cope with health problems, family problems, financial worries, or other difficulties. Surely God’s reasons are beyond our understanding. God does not send us suffering as punishment, but God does allow it to happen. Our faith teaches us that all things, good and bad, come under God’s providence. The Catechism states: “The witness of Scripture is unanimous that the solicitude of divine providence is concrete and immediate; God cares for all, from the least things to the great events of the world and its history... Jesus asks for childlike abandonment to the providence of our heavenly Father who takes care of his children’s smallest needs” (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p1s2c1p4.htm, paragraphs 303, 305).

The challenge for us is to accept all things as coming from a loving God, knowing “that all things work for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28). St. Paul assures us that we will be able to handle whatever comes our way: “No trial has come to you but what is human. God is faithful and will not let you be tried beyond your strength; but with the trial he will also provide a way out, so that you may be able to bear it” (1 Cor 10:13).

Lent is much more than a time to feel sorry of our sins and to make more sacrifices. It is, indeed, a time to share in the suffering of Jesus. But we must not forget its goal: we share in his suffering so as to also share in his glory (Rom 8:17). Thus Benedict says that we should look forward to holy Easter with “the joy of spiritual desire.” We need to find joy in the midst of Lent.

And now the news:

Clyde oblates mark your calendars! The next weekend will be March 20-22, 2015. Thus you will be here for the Feast of St. Benedict, March 21, which commemorates his death. The theme is Giving Up and Handing Over.

Sand Springs oblates continue to meet monthly. Srs. Pascaline and Clissene will be present for the next oblate meeting on Sunday, March 1, at 11:30 am. Sr. Pascaline will welcome Gale Clark as a new candidate and Cynthia Patterson, who is transferring to the Forest of Peace Deanery from St. Gregory's Abbey oblate community. The group has been discussing the book, *Monastery of the Heart* by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB.

Sheridan, Wyoming, oblates also meet monthly under the able leadership of one of their members, Cel Hope. They have had a lively discussion of the Year of Consecrated Life, and mentioned the Benedictine values of listening, hospitality, balance, moderation, and stewardship.

St. Louis area oblates are meeting monthly. Meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month from 1:30 p.m. - 3:00 at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne School. Meetings are held in Room 1, which is accessible from Door 1 at the east end of the school.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.