



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

February, 2016

Dear Oblates and Friends,

On Ash Wednesday, when we receive ashes, the priest says one of two things. He might say, “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” These words are based on Genesis 3:16, when God punished Adam and Eve for disobeying his command. God told Adam: “By the sweat of your brow you shall eat bread, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.” We are reminded of our sinfulness and mortality; our time is limited, and we must repent before we die.

Alternatively, we may hear the words, “Repent, and believe in the Gospel.” Jesus spoke these words at the beginning of his Galilean ministry, “This is the time of fulfillment. The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel.” Immediately after saying this, Jesus called his first disciples. The message is that we have no time to spare; the kingdom has already come, it is here in our midst, and so we must answer Jesus’ call right now.

This year Ash Wednesday happened to fall on February 10, which is also the Feast of Saint Scholastica. It is a major feast for us, and so we celebrated it on the day after Ash Wednesday. Thus, we had the unusual experience of feasting immediately after fasting. As has become our custom here at Clyde, the monks of Conception Abbey joined us for Vespers and an abundant, delicious meal. The timing of the feast made it very clear that Lent is not just about fasting. Of course, we also celebrate other feasts during Lent, although not in such a big way. On Sunday, along with the rest of the nation, we even observed the commercial celebration of Valentine’s Day, although in a subdued, monastic way: each sister found a pink heart-shaped soap or sachet at her place at table. We look forward to the feasts of Saint Patrick, Saint Joseph, and the passing of Saint Benedict.

In fact, Saint Benedict does not emphasize fasting, although he does include it in the observance of Lent. He wrote in Chapter 49 of his Rule: “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.” Benedict lists abstinence last.

Perhaps Benedict realized that we don't really need to add to our penance. God sends enough penance our way. We may face illness, limitation, or loss. We may experience the typical aches and pains that accompany age. If we accept our diminishment with love and acceptance, in union with Christ, is this not a worthy Lenten practice? Are we willing to give up grudges, resentment, and anger instead of chocolate this year? Can we add a greater measure of patience and forgiveness to our lives? This is, after all, a Jubilee Year of Mercy.

Saint Scholastica, with whom we began Lent, can be a model for us. We know very little about her. We have only one story told us by Saint Gregory the Great in his *Dialogues*, that of the miracle she wrought by prayer. She delayed Benedict's return to his monastery, when he wanted to return, simply by praying for a rainstorm. The storm enabled them to continue their conversation on spiritual matters throughout the night. Saint Gregory concludes the story by commenting, “She realized, according to the saying of Saint John, ‘God is charity’. Therefore, as is right, she who loved more, did more” (<http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/>). Saint Scholastica knew what is most important in life and set her priorities straight.

And now the news:

Clyde oblates mark your calendars! The next weekend is scheduled for March 4-6, 2016. There is plenty of room, and all oblates are welcome. The theme will be *Listening with the Ear of Your Heart*. We'll be discussing the meaning and practice of obedience in our lives.

Saint Louis area oblates: 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). The group has been discussing *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. They are also doing *lectio divina* as a group, following *Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* by Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

Sand Springs oblates: The Sand Springs oblates meet on the first Sunday of the month. The group is reading *In the Heart of the Temple* by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. I will be giving a mini-retreat at the Forest of Peace from April 8-9 on the theme *Burning Hearts*. I hope to explore the importance of the Eucharist and Scripture in our lives. All are welcome. Further information will be forthcoming.

Sheridan, Wyoming, oblates meet the first Saturday of the month. The group is reading and discussing Sr. Maria-Thomas Beii's *Study Guide for The Rule of St. Benedict with Reflections for Oblates and All Who Seek God*. They haven't gotten very far, since their discussions have been "fantastic."

Tucson oblates: there are four oblate groups affiliated with our Tucson monastery: Prescott, East Valley, Phoenix Central, and Tucson. The East Valley group is engaged in a study of mercy, geared toward the Jubilee Year of Mercy. The other groups are discussing Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si'*, in the light of the Rule. The Prescott group is also discussing Michael Casey's book, *The Road to Eternal Life*, and are up to Chapter 20. For information about the Tucson oblate groups, you can read their newsletter at <http://www.benedictineoblates.com/resources.php>.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah