



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

July, 2014

Dear Oblates and Friends,

By now you probably know the news that Sr. Dawn Annette Mills has been elected as Prioress General our Congregation. If you've been to Clyde in recent years, you have met her. You may know her from her work in the Correspondence Department or as Development Director. You may also be familiar with her frequent articles in *Spirit & Life*. In any case, we rejoice in her election, and in the election of the General Council: Sr. Ruth Elaine Starman, who will be her assistant, Sr. Valerie Starke, and Sr. Joan Ridley. I will be continuing as Oblate Director and as editor of *Spirit & Life*.

St. Benedict was very concerned with leadership. In Chapter 2 of his Rule, Benedict says that the abbot or prioress is takes the place of Christ in the monastery. Benedict relates this to the essential role of the abbot as "father" to his monks; the feminine translation is a bit awkward:

For she is believed to hold the place of Christ in the monastery, being called by a name of his, which is taken from the words of the Apostle: "You have received a Spirit of adoption ..., by virtue of which we cry, "Abba – Father"" (Rom. 8:15)!

The prioress' parental role is that of a teacher. Her teaching is to be "a leaven of divine justice kneaded into the minds of her disciples." A superior is chosen because of her "merit of life and wisdom of doctrine" (Chapter 64).

Benedict uses a number of metaphors to describe the role of the abbot or prioress. Perhaps the most significant of these is that shepherd. A shepherd leads the sheep and assures that they do not stray. In Chapter 27, Benedict explicitly cites Christ the Good Shepherd as an example for the abbot to follow:

Let him rather imitate the loving example of the Good Shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep in the mountains and went to look for the one sheep that had gone astray, on whose weakness he had such compassion that he deigned to place it on his own sacred shoulders and thus carry it back to the flock (Luke 15:4-5).

In Chapter 2, Benedict cautions: “let the Abbess be sure that any lack of profit the master of the house may find in the sheep will be laid to the blame of the shepherd.” On the other hand, she will be acquitted of blame if her community is “a restless, unruly flock” that refuses to amend despite her corrections and admonitions.

In Chapters 27 and 28, Benedict compares the superior to a wise physician who uses any means possible to heal a wavering monk: “applications, the ointments of exhortation, the medicines of the Holy Scriptures, finally the cautery of excommunication and of the strokes of the rod.” If these are unavailing, “her own prayers and those of all the others, that the Lord, who can do all things may restore health to the sister who is sick (Chapter 28).

Another metaphor is that of a steward, one who is the administrator of both the spiritual and material affairs of the community. In Chapter 64, Benedict warns the superior that she “will have to give an account of her stewardship.”

The person who would fulfill the role of prioress must possess many qualities. Benedict mentions many of these in Chapter 64. She must be learned in the divine law, chaste, sober, merciful, prudent, discrete, and moderate. She must not be excitable, worried, exacting, headstrong, jealous, or over-suspicious.

And what kind of abbot was St. Benedict? At first he was not successful. Asked by a group of monks to be their abbot, Benedict tried to reform their crooked way of life. Consequently the monks poisoned his wine, but when Benedict blessed it, the cup broke. After that, St. Gregory tells us: “By Christ’s assistance he built there twelve abbeys; over which he appointed governors, and in each of them placed twelve monks. A few he kept with himself; namely, those he thought would gain more profit and be better instructed by his own presence” (St. Gregory the Great, *The Dialogues*, chapter 3). Even a saintly abbot cannot govern everyone; only those who listen can be taught.

And now the news:

The fall retreat at Clyde is scheduled for Sept. 26-28. This will be open to all oblates. The theme will be “The Road Not Taken.” Mark your calendars! If you plan to attend, please email me at sarah@bspa.us or call me at 660-944-2221.

Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,

I took the one less traveled by,

And that has made all the difference.

St. Louis area oblates are meeting monthly. Meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month at the St. Rose Philippine Duchesne parish office.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.