



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

July, 2016

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I am old enough that, if I were not living in a monastery, I would have retired by now. Most, if not all, of my high school classmates and friends retired a few years ago. However, whenever I bring up the subject, I am told that the average age of retirement in the Congregation is eighty-three. Besides, we have many sisters older than that who are still putting in a full day's work. Thus I have many years of work ahead of me. I may never have the opportunity to retire unless I lose my mental faculties first.

Fr. Terence Kardong, OSB, a scholar of the Rule and all things Benedictine, remarks that the motto, *Ora et Labora* is found nowhere in the Rule. The phrase originates in a book, *The Principles of Monasticism*, by the German abbot, Maurus Wolter (1825-1890). Wolter writes: "[The monk] has in a unique way committed himself to God's service; and the greater the talent he has received, the greater the profit he must gain by its use. This is the origin of that venerable and celebrated motto of monks, *Pray and Work*." It seems to me that Wolter assumes an early source of this motto. This contradicts Kardong, who comments, "It is hardly accurate to even call it the motto of the Benedictines. It cannot be denied, of course, that the Benedictines themselves have cheerfully plastered this motto on everything from their napkins to the carving above the front gate" (<http://www.osb.org/gen/topics/work/kard1.html>).

Wolter understands work as a means of purification of the soul. In his view, the monk devotes himself by turns to prayer and work. Work, he says, "bestows new strength on prayer, and prayer a new blessing on work." Then, Wolter makes some choice comments about the lazy monk: "He is a disgrace, a burden, and a hindrance for the whole monastic family to which he belongs. He is in reality a thief and a sponger, a parasite on the brethren earning their living by their sweat; he is like a corpse with which nothing can be done but bury it."

St. Benedict's language is much milder than that of some of his best interpreters. While he frowns on idleness, he realizes that not all monks are workaholics: "Weak or sickly sisters should be assigned a task or craft of such a nature as to keep them from idleness and at the same time not to overburden them or drive them away with excessive toil. Their weakness must be taken into consideration by the Abbess."

St. Benedict devotes one chapter to the daily manual labor. In Chapter 48, he sets up a daily schedule that includes time for manual labor. Kardong states that the monastic day has a three-part structure: *Ora, Labora et Lectio*. An analysis of the chapter indicates that about three hours were spent in church at the Divine Office; five hours were devoted to manual labor; and two or three hours were given over to

biblical study. The schedule varies somewhat according to the season of the year, especially in circumstances when monks engaged in agriculture. Benedict states: "And if the circumstances of the place or their poverty should require that they themselves do the work of gathering the harvest, let them not be discontented; for then are they truly monastics when they live by the labor of their hands, as did our Fathers and the Apostles."

It is clear that Benedict divides the day, scheduling specific times for prayer, work, and *lectio*. He does not confuse these activities by saying that work is prayer. We strive to be mindful of God's presence in our daily activities, but this is not the same as prayer. As Kardong comments, prayer means facing God alone in privacy. It requires specific intent and purposeful preparation. Jesus taught, "When you pray, go to your inner room, close the door, and pray to your Father in secret" (Mt 6.6). Only in that way can we establish a deep and intimate relationship with God.

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.

Reading List: Please let me know if you have suggestions for additions to my *Recommended Reading List for Benedictine Oblates*.

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 covered the chapters on the Divine Office up to Chapter 14, "How the Night Office Is to Be Said on the Feasts of the Saints." 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. Their next gathering will be August 20. 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 thoroughly enjoyed a potluck on July 11, the Feast of St. Benedict. Two candidates made their final oblation. Then the group is off until 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.