



## *The Benedictine Oblate Letter*

*June, 2017*

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I have watched enough episodes of *NCIS* and *Law and Order* to learn something about homicide and larceny, although I wouldn't be clever enough to pull off any crime without being caught. Moreover, I am too much of a coward to attempt to try to commit any crime. But these things were not beyond the monks of Benedict's time.

Benedict lived in the early Middle Ages. Many of his monks were illiterate barbarians. His flock included the restless, unruly, and disobedient. Some were prone to violence. Saint Gregory the Great tells us that, after one community of monks invited Benedict to be their abbot, they could not endure his discipline. Consequently they tried get rid of him by poisoning him, but Benedict escaped by performing a miracle.

Taking counsel together, they agreed to poison his wine: which being done, and the glass wherein that wine was, according to the custom, offered to the Abbot to bless, he, putting forth his hand, made the sign of the cross, and straightway the glass, that was held far off, broke in pieces, as though the sign of the cross had been a stone thrown against it: on which accident the man of God by and by perceived that the glass had in it the drink of death, which could not endure the sign of life. (<http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/>)

Poison is an easy way of getting rid of an unpopular superior, although we haven't tried it. However, the point of this story is not so much the attempted murder as it is the miracle that Benedict performed, which teaches the power of the cross. The story also illustrates the need for punishment in past ages.

Saint Benedict allowed for corporal punishment as a last resort. Lesser punishments were administered first. We read in the Prologue to his Rule:

Bold, hard, proud and disobedient characters she should curb at the very beginning of their ill-doing by stripes and other bodily punishments, knowing that it is written, "the fool is not corrected with words," and again, "Beat your son with the rod, and you will deliver his soul from death."

In Chapter 23, monks deserving of punishment are similarly described “obstinate, or disobedient, or proud, or murmuring, or habitually transgressing the Holy Rule in any point and contemptuous of the orders of the seniors.” Such monks are first admonished. After two rebukes, if they fail to amend their ways, they are rebuked in front of the whole community. If they still do not reform, they are placed under excommunication, provided they understand the seriousness of that penalty. If they are “perverse” and incapable of understanding excommunication, they undergo corporal punishment.

Saint Benedict’s purpose in excommunication was to motivate the monk to repentance and reform. He used medical imagery several times in this section of the Rule. Delinquent monks were considered sick. Benedict quotes Matthew 9:12: “it is not the healthy but the sick who need a physician.” The abbot or abbess must be a “wise physician” who has undertaken “the care of weak souls” (Chapter 27).

Benedict’s penal code has limited application today. I have never known a sister who was excommunicated. Certainly no sister has ever been whipped. As far as I know, we have never admitted juvenile delinquents to our community. We hesitate to read these are passages in public. We have to explain the historical circumstances behind Chapter 30, “How Boys Are to Be Corrected,” according to which delinquent children and adolescents are to be “subjected to severe fasts or brought to terms by harsh beatings, that they may be cured.”

Jesus associated freely with sinners and outcasts. He ate meals with them. He told Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house” (Lk 19:5). We cannot judge others as sinners because we do not know what lies within their hearts. We see only the external actions and do not know another’s intentions and motives. We are all sinners who need forgiveness.

*And now the news:*

*Tucson oblates:*

Since the future closure of our Tucson monastery has been announced, the Tucson oblate group has been prayerfully discerning their own future. The deans have decided to accept the offer of St. Philip's in the Hills Episcopal Church as a future meeting place for our Oblates beginning in October. The last oblate meeting at the monastery will be held on Sunday, September 17. There will be a ritual and blessing as the group transitions to a new meeting site.

On Pentecost Sunday, Sharon Hammond, one of our oblate deans, received her Certificate of Completion of Preparation for Lay Ecclesial Ministry at St. Augustine Cathedral. She is one of thirteen Lay Ecclesial Ministers who have completed the four-year program preparing them for service to the Church in the diocese. Sharon is also halfway through her studies for her Masters in Divinity. Congratulations, Sharon!

*Phoenix* oblates will enjoy an ice cream social in July to celebrate the Feast of Saint Benedict.

*Prescott Oblate Chapter:* The Prescott Chapter, now disbanded, will have a final get-together in honor of Saint Benedict's feast in July.

*Clyde oblates:* The fall weekend has not yet been scheduled. Further information will be forthcoming.

*Saint Louis area oblates:* The Saint Louis group has been 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, OSB. 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:* The Sand Springs oblates are off for the summer. The meetings will resume on

*Sheridan, Wyoming,* oblates are off for the summer. To celebrate the Feast of Saint Benedict, they are having a potluck on July 8. At that time, the oblates will renew their oblations and Mary Slipp will make her oblation.

Peace,

*Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.*