



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

March, 2013

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Time is marching on. Most of this March is Lent, but we celebrate the Feast of St. Benedict on March 21. For us, this feast is a feast, not a solemnity, which is on July 11. That's when we celebrate in a big way. March 21 is quieter because it occurs during Lent. It commemorates the death of St. Benedict, which took place approximately in the year 547.

What kind of man was St. Benedict? We know something about him from the *Dialogues of St. Gregory*, but this book is hagiography rather than biography. St. Gregory tells us the story of a saint, and emphasizes the miracles and wonders he performed. These are based largely on the biblical accounts of the prophets Elijah and Elisha.

Take a close look at the picture. Can you see the snake in the chalice? The statue at Clyde's front door also has a snake. Some visitors, especially children, are very curious about it.

Why is Benedict peering at a snake? Here's the answer. Benedict was asked by a community of monks to become their abbot. He wanted them to change their crooked ways and they didn't want to do that. And so:

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. Rising up, with a mild countenance and quiet mind, he called the monks together, and spoke thus to them: “Almighty God have mercy on you, and forgive you: why have you used me in this manner? Did not I tell you beforehand, that our manner of living could never agree together? Go your ways, and seek ye out some other father suitable to your own conditions, for I intend not now to stay any longer among you.

When he had thus discharged himself, he returned to the wilderness which so much he loved, and dwelt alone with himself, in the sight of his Creator, who beholds the hearts of all men. (Ecc. 8:15).

The snake is a symbol of death and represents the poison. When Benedict makes the sign of the cross, the cup breaks, the wine spills out, and Benedict wisely leaves the wicked monks.

Benedict wanted monks to live according to his Rule, but his Rule was very temperate compared to other rules of his time. The murderous monks should not have tried to kill him; their next abbot might have been even stricter. In Chapter 64, “On Constituting an Abbot,” he cautions the abbot or abbess to be discrete and moderate. Discretion is “the mother of virtues” and the superior is to “temper all things that the strong may have something to strive after, and the weak may not fall back in dismay.” Nor did St. Benedict consider his Rule to be sufficient guidance for all. In Chapter 73 he calls it a “minimum Rule which we have written for beginners.” He suggested additional “tools of virtue for right-living and obedient monks”: above all, the Bible, the Conferences and the Institutes of John Cassian, the Lives of the Fathers, and the Rule of St. Father Basil.

There are at least three lessons here for us:

- We can try harder.
- We might already be trying too hard.
- It’s quite possible we’re doing the best we can.

This is what we need to discern. And then we need to pray for God’s grace.

Here are some reminders: I have been posting short video clips on the oblate website. The topic has been “Prayer in the Rule of St. Benedict.” The last four videos are on *lectio divina*. Go to www.benedictinesisters.org, click on oblates, and the videos are under “resources.”

All oblates are welcome to the 2013 fall retreat to be held Oct. 18-20. Mark your calendars. More information will be forthcoming.

Clyde oblates: The weather did not cooperate with us for the March meeting and we had to cancel it. This was a great disappointment, but it just wasn't worth the chance of an accident on icy roads. Be sure to come for the next oblate weekend, May 24-26. Please let me know if you expect to attend.

St. Louis area oblates are meeting every month at the St. Rose Philippine Duchesne parish office, 2650 Parker Road, Florissant MO 63033. The next meetings are March 16 and April 20. If you live in the St. Louis area, you are most welcome to attend!

In Christ,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.