



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

November, 2013

Dear Oblates and Friends,

I attended New York City public schools in the days before the 1962 Supreme Court decision that restricted school prayer. With a very diverse student body, prayer came in the relatively non-controversial form of a psalm, which was read at the beginning of our periodic school assemblies. The psalm most often used for this purpose was Ps. 15, and I have treasured it since childhood. Ps. 15 begins: “Lord, who shall dwell in your tent, or who shall rest upon your holy mountain?” I had never thought of a mountain as holy, but even then I understood that the psalm is not only about a mountain. I realized that it outlines a holy way of life. It teaches us how to live according to God’s law. The psalm continues: “The one who walks without stain and practices justice; who speaks truth from his heart; who has not used his tongue for deceit; who has done no evil to his neighbor; who has given no place to slander against his neighbor.” It is no surprise that this psalm finds a prominent place in the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict.

When we come to the monastic life, we come in order to become holy, not by our own effort—although it takes effort-- but by the grace of God. Benedict urges us in the Prologue: “Let us arise, then, at last, for the Scripture stirs us up, saying, “Now is the hour for us to rise from sleep” (Rom. 13:11). Let us open our eyes to the deifying light, let us hear with attentive ears the warning which the divine voice cries daily to us, ‘Today if you hear His voice, harden not your hearts’” (Ps. 95:8).

When we “open our eyes to the divinizing light,” we are transformed in Christ. St. Peter expresses this notion when he says, quoting Deut. 14:2, “you are ‘a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people of his own, so that you may announce the praises’ of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9). We recognize the presence of Christ first in ourselves and then in one another.

If we really recognized Christ in others, and saw Christ in them, would we not fall prostrate before them in adoration? Benedict prescribes prostrations for four reasons. The first reason is to express forgiveness and reconciliation. In RB 44, those who are excommunicated for serious faults make satisfaction in this manner: “At the hour when the celebration of the Work of God is concluded in the oratory, let her lie prostrate before the door of the oratory, saying nothing, but

only lying prone with her face to the ground at the feet of all as they come out of the oratory.” In RB 67, “When brethren return from a journey, at the end of each canonical Hour of the Work of God on the day they return, let them lie prostrate on the floor of the oratory and beg the prayers of all on account of any faults that may have surprised them on the road, through the seeing or hearing of something evil, or through idle talk.” The second reason for prostration is to receive the blessing of serving one another. In RB 35, the weekly servers in the kitchen prostrate themselves before all the brethren in the oratory and ask their prayers after the Morning Office on Sunday. The third reason is that of hospitality. In RB 53, the monks prostrate themselves when greeting guests. The fourth reason concerns community and interpersonal relationships. In RB 58, the novice prostrates when he or she makes profession; it is a sign that he or she is henceforth to be counted as a member of the community. Most important, in RB 71 on mutual obedience:

If any brother, for however small a cause, is corrected in any way by the Abbot or by any of his Superiors, or if he faintly perceives that the mind of any Superior is angered or moved against him, however little, let him at once, without delay, prostrate himself on the ground at his feet and lie there making satisfaction until that emotion is quieted with a blessing.

With the exception of final profession, we no longer prostrate ourselves before the community. Our cultural expressions of humility and deference differ from those of the fifth century. Besides, if we did prostrate, assuming we were able to do that, most of us would need help getting up! But the attitude of reverence toward others is not out of date, and we reflect this attitude in the way we speak and act toward others.

Here’s a reminder: I am still posting short video clips on the oblate website on various aspects of Benedictine spirituality and prayer, although not as many as I had been doing. Go to www.benedictinesisters.org, click on oblates, and the videos are under “resources.”

St. Louis area oblates are meeting monthly. They meet every third Saturday of the month at the St. Rose Philippine Duchesne parish office. Their meeting format now allows more time for reflection, prayer, and group lectio. Anyone in the St. Louis area is welcome to attend.

Clyde meeting dates are Feb. 28-Mar. 2 and May 2-4. Mark your calendars!

Peace,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.