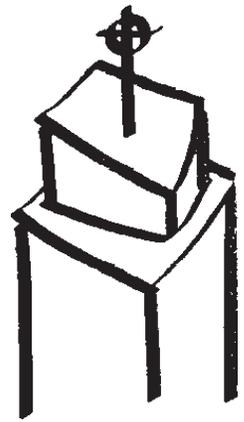


OUR FAMILY



NEWS

For Oblates of St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois



January &
February, 2018



The Oblate Journey: A Personal Reflection

About five and a half years ago, February 12, 2012, I made my oblation for St. Bede Abbey and since then have tried to live according to the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, “insofar as my state in life permits.” Almost all of St. Bede’s oblates are Catholic; many are life-long Catholics. However, I come to the oblates via a different path. I am the pastor of First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Bloomington, Illinois.

My journey to becoming a Benedictine oblate has been a long one. Perhaps it started with the discovery in college of the Spanish poetry of St. John of the Cross. Although too young to appreciate the full depth of his poetry, I was drawn to its beautiful description of the spiritual life. Thus began a life-long attraction to Carmelite spirituality and saints.

The twelfth century origins of the Carmelites on the Holy Land’s Mt. Carmel fascinated me. The impetus for this collection of crusaders, nobles, and pilgrims, both clerics and laypeople, to come to this mountain was a growing renewal movement in the church. They came to Mt. Carmel to find a gospel way of living guided by scripture and simplicity.

Saint Albert, Patriarch of Jerusalem in the early thirteenth century, gave them a rule of life that integrated the coenobitic and eremitic practices of the original Carmelites. The *Rule of Saint Albert* piqued my curiosity about how other religious communities had ordered themselves and brought me to study the desert fathers and mothers, John Cassian, and eventually Saint Benedict. The *Rule of Saint Benedict* and its historical monastic expressions have been both intellectually and spiritually stimulating.

My first in depth exposure to the *Rule of Saint Benedict* was through Norvene Vest’s *Preferring Christ: A Devotional Commentary on the Rule of St. Benedict*. I worked slowly through this book as part of a continuing education study focused on contemplative ministry. I came to appreciate the *Rule*, both as a significant historical document and as an outline for Christian living. Vest’s work became the springboard for further reading about the *Rule*, the Benedictines, and monastic spirituality in general.

My wife has often told me that I should have been a hermit, so an affinity for monastic spirituality is not too surprising. But we have ten children, which means an eremitical life is not really an option. Other than annual extended silent retreats and occasional days of reflection, my life rarely includes solitude! The quandary I faced was how to bring together my great love of and commitment to my family, and my growing personal attraction to monastic spirituality. Inasmuch as very few monasteries, if any, offer childcare, I knew I’d have to live this spirituality in the context of my everyday life as husband, father, friend, and pastor.

I soon sought out an oblate community where I could explore how to incorporate the *Rule* more completely into my daily life, and that’s what brought me to St. Bede and to its oblates. Now, more than five years since my oblation, I am reflecting on how I have incorporated the theology and the practices of the *Rule* into my life.

Although oblates do not profess vows as monks and nuns do, I nevertheless find the three Benedictine vows of stability, conversion of life (*conversatio morum*), and obedience consistent themes in my experience of Benedictine spirituality. It is in these three areas that Benedict has shaped my life.

For Benedict, stability meant, of course, a stability of place. The professed religious was to remain in one monastery for life and not be a monastic gadfly flitting from one monastery to another. Benedict labelled such monastics “gyrovagues” and said of them, “Always on the move, they never settle down, and are slaves to their own wills and gross appetites.” (*RB* 1:10-11) Exterior stability is difficult, if not impossible, for laypeople to achieve. I’ve enjoyed relative geographic stability in my life. I’ve served only two churches (Marion, Iowa and Bloomington, Illinois) in my 33 years of ordained ministry. But this still falls short of the Benedictine ideal of permanent stability, and there is no guarantee that I’ll stay where I am for the rest of my life.

More important than exterior stability is interior stability. I see much superficiality in the world around me. We quickly dart from one preoccupation to another, invoking boredom or hardship as our excuse for seeking out the novel. An interior stability, however, invites us to remain grounded, with our feet solidly in one place, and attend fully

to what is before us. We don't abandon something, or someone, because we've lost interest or because it's become too difficult. We're in it for the long haul. Stability involves fidelity, patience, and endurance.

Interior stability reminds us that God is present here, wherever we are, and in the midst of whatever is happening. We don't have to go somewhere else to find God. God is even present in the quotidian responsibilities that wear on us. I don't need to chase the latest fad or buy the latest gadget to find fulfillment, because I can realize fulfillment here, in this moment, where God and I meet.

The *Rule* itself is a testament to stability. Benedict wrote it in the sixth century, and it has flourished in the fifteen hundred years since. It has made an indelible mark on the history of Christianity. Knowing that I am connected to something so ancient and yet so contemporary adds a measure of stability to my life.

The next vow taken by Benedictine religious is the vow of conversion of life. Benedict understood that the spiritual life is something we will never master. We are always working at growing spiritually, and it is stability that makes this possible. If we never land in one place, if we never resist the shifting breezes of popular fancy, we won't stay put long enough to be confronted by our own shortcomings and failures. We can avoid ourselves and our need to be transformed by keeping ourselves in constant motion. Stability offers us the space to encounter God and be changed.

For the Benedictine religious, this ongoing conversion takes place within the enclosure of the monastery, which Benedict calls "a school for the Lord's service." (*RB* Prologue: 45) My "school" is wherever I am: at home or in church, in the grocery store or on a neighbor's porch, at my daughter's softball game or stopped in traffic. Regardless of whether we live in a monastery or in the world, Benedict urges us to engage in continual conversion and to prefer Christ over all else. (*RB* 4:21)

But if we are to prefer Christ over all else, we must make decisions, sometimes difficult ones. Which voices will we heed in making those decisions? Benedict's final vow of obedience calls us to follow not our own will and desires, but to listen to those who are wiser than we and in a position of authority. The abbot or prioress is one with authority in the monastery. I don't have one of those (but I do have a wife!), so to whom do I owe my obedience?

Benedict tells us to "listen carefully... to the master's instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart." (*RB* Prologue:1) The "master" is God, and we are to obey God, whom we encounter in prayer and scripture. Prayer and scripture are not two distinct practices in the *Rule*. Rather, prayer relies heavily on scripture, and scripture is interpreted through prayer. The Liturgy of the Hours involves praying the psalms and other scripture, and the scriptural practice of *lectio divina* is infused with prayer. To pray is to be immersed in scripture, and to study scripture is to be immersed in prayer. God nudges us through prayer and scripture. God is the master to whom we listen with the ear of the heart. I've taken Benedict's program to heart and employ the *Benedictine Daily Prayer: A Short Breviary* and *lectio divina* in my personal devotional time.

In addition to God heard in prayer and scripture, there are other voices to which we need to attend. Benedict counsels his monks to show obedience "not only to the abbot but also to one another as brothers, since we know that it is by this way of obedience that we go to God." (*RB* 71:1-2) While religious have the members of their community to advise them, I have my family, church, and friends. Benedict stresses that we listen to and follow those who have a claim on us. The choices we make are not just about us. What we say and do affects others, and we have an obligation to consult them in making decisions. Hence, Benedict understands the need for obedience, the need to consider other voices besides our own.

Underpinning Benedictine spirituality and weaving its way through each of the vows are Benedict's fundamental values of humility and hospitality. Only those who are humble can practice stability and not run from their faults and sins. Only those who are humble can be open to a continuous and never-ending conversion. Only those who are humble can listen to and obey voices other than their own. Only those who are humble can fully integrate Benedictine spirituality into their lives.

Benedictine humility involves finding our rightful place before God. We are not God and not the center of the universe. We are not to control other people for our purposes. True humility frees us to be the individuals God created us to be and brings us to the perfect love of God (*RB* 7:67), and to the perfect love of ourselves, I would add.

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Our Family News is published in the special interest of the oblates of St. Bede Abbey. Please send changes of address and comments to The Editor, Our Family News, St. Bede Abbey, 24 W US Highway 6, Peru, IL 61354.

We welcome your submissions to this publication, either instructive or reflective, whether prose or poetry. They should in some way relate to the **Rule of Benedict**, Benedictine spirituality, and/or the oblate program. The editor reserves the rights to choose material for publication and to edit as necessary.

I don't pretend for a moment to have achieved record-shattering success at being humble. I feel like I've fallen off Benedict's twelve step ladder of humility many times. But I do know, as the Japanese proverb urges, if I fall off the ladder seven times, I get back on eight. I place my feet on the first rung and tentatively resume my faltering ascension.

As humility becomes more rooted in our souls, we are better able to practice hospitality. Those who have learned to be humble are more apt to serve others sincerely. Benedict urges his readers, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ." (RB 53:1) He continues in chapter 53 to describe the generous hospitality afforded to all who come to the monastery, especially "poor people and pilgrims," who are to be shown "great care and concern." (RB 53:15) They come to the monastery with nothing and are in most need of the community's hospitality.

It is not just visitors who are to receive generous hospitality. Monks and nuns are to extend the same graciousness to one another. Benedict writes, "No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers." (RB 72:7-8) Hospitality doesn't begin with guests, but with other members of the community. Guests enter a monastery that is already a generously hospitable place.

We try to make hospitality a central quality in our house. From time to time our children's friends have found a temporary home with us. It's never anything formal; it just happens. The last young man to live with us was Jameel, a friend of our son John's. Jameel spent a lot of time at our house, but then we began to notice that he was present more than usual. We saw him more often, and he was eating more meals with us. This made my wife and me curious, so we asked John, "Is Jameel living with us?" John answered, "Yes he is. His mother kicked him out." And so Jameel came to stay with us for the next several months.

Hospitality, like so many of the other values imbedded in the *Rule*, is countercultural. We live in a selfish society that is afraid to share and be vulnerable, but that is precisely what the *Rule* asks of us. The *Rule* invites us to be hospitable and humble and to practice stability, conversion of life, and obedience. As we pay attention to the *Rule*, we'll discover, as Joan Chittister, O.S.B., has written, "the purpose of Benedictine spirituality is to make life significant and sacred and full of meaning."

That's the promise of the *Rule*, but I'm a long way from attaining the true richness of that promise. I am truly a beginner, even less than a beginner, more often than not slothful, unobservant, and negligent, at Benedict's "little rule." (RB 73:7-8) I've been an oblate for over five years, but I know I have far to go and much to learn.

--- Jim Warren

SCHEDULE OF UPCOMING MEETINGS

Meetings are held in the abbey church from
1:30 P.M. to 4:30 P.M.

Sunday, February 11, 2018
Sunday, March 11, 2018
Sunday, April 8, 2018
Sunday, May 6, 2018

