

REFLECTIONS ON BENEDICTINE RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE MODERN WORLD



*By Brothers and Sisters of the
Companions of St. Luke*

Reflections on Benedictine Religious Life in the Modern World

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Companions of St. Luke–OSB and the Greater Church

By Br. Lee Doucette, OSB



Several sources have reported that many people are looking for a deeper spiritual dimension in their lives. A few years ago George H. Gallup Jr. told an audience, “Unpublished polls indicate eighty percent of Americans now say they are searching for spirituality – a sizeable increase from previous years” and a news magazine in publishing details of a poll it had taken reported that many Americans are hungering for a “deeper relationship with God.”

Those surveyed said they regularly attended worship services and many were taking part in a Bible study, prayer group or other programs offered by the church they attended. Yet some were seeking an even “deeper relationship with God.” Such a quest can lead a person in various directions including examining if a religious community might provide direction. Now for some Episcopalians it comes as a surprise to learn that the Church includes such a thing as religious communities.

The Companions of St. Luke/OSB (Order of Saint Benedict) falls under the definition of a Christian Community in the *Canons of The Episcopal Church*. While CSL members do not live together in a monastery they are governed by a monastic rule, first written by Benedict of Nursia in the 6th century, that explores what is known as Benedictine spirituality. But the rule goes well beyond defining an ancient form of spirituality in that it also offers a contemporary form of spirituality that speaks to twenty-first century people and their needs and concerns.

In her commentary on the *Rule of Benedict*, Joan Chittister, OSB points out, “Benedictine spirituality deals with the issues facing us now – stewardship, relationships, authority, community, balance, work, simplicity, prayer, and spiritual and psychological development. Its strength, therefore, is that it is both fresh and ancient, current and tried at the same time.” Thus, while members of CSL/OSB are centered in an ancient rule they also explore ways to serve in the contemporary church today.

The CSL/OSB first organized in 1992 under the authorization of the then Bishop of Chicago, Frank Griswold includes Vowed and Oblate members. Vowed membership is open to men or women, single or in a relationship, lay or clergy who are at least 21 years old, baptized and in good standing in The Episcopal Church or a church that is in communion with the See of Canterbury.

There is a two and half year formation program for postulants/novices in the vowed track that requires a commitment to daily prayer, sacred reading, reading other books on a number of subjects, submitting periodic reports and reflections while under the guidance of a formation master who is a senior CSL/OSB brother or sister.

The intent of formation is for a novice to seek a “deeper relationship with God” by blending traditional and contemporary aspects of religious life. For example, as novices proceed through formation they take the traditional vows of obedience, conversion of life and stability as set forth in the *RB* while they blend in the contemporary experiences of prayer, sacred reading, worship, work and other aspects of daily living and relationships wherever

their home may be. The formation period offers postulants/novices an orderly way to pray and study and learn the meaning of Benedictine life as they determine under the guidance of a formation master if God is calling them to religious life through the CSL/OSB.

At the time a person is accepted as a novice he/she becomes a brother or sister in the community and receives the Benedictine habit that is worn at CSL/OSB convocations (designated times when all members meet together). If desired, wearing the habit at his/her home church services and other functions or at diocesan events is a matter that requires approval by the brother's/sister's rector and bishop.

CSL/OSB members have no special privileges at their home parish or diocese. Even though brothers/sisters take Benedictine vows, they remain (unless ordained) lay members of their parish serving like anyone else in a variety of ministries depending on their gifts and talents and the needs of the parish. Parish duties might include being a Eucharistic Minister, Eucharistic Visitor, reader, usher/greeter, Sunday school teacher/youth program, adult education, spiritual formation or in other ministries. CSL/OSB brothers and sisters would be expected to comply with licensing and other requirements such as the Safe Church training if required by their diocese.

The presence of a CSL/OSB brother/sister in a parish might require some education of parishioners as to what Benedictine religious life is about and why parishioner Susan Smith is now known as Sister Susan Smith, OSB. But once this is done (and it may be ongoing) it has been the experience of members that the presence of a Benedictine brother/sister can be a contribution to parish/diocesan life, the greater church and to the community where they live and work.

After successful completion of the formation program a brother/sister in the vowed track, with the approval of the Superior, may request to take Annual Vows. During the following three years after taking annual vows a brother/sister works with a mentor to complete a self-directed study project that has been approved by the Superior. After all formation requirements have been met, that take at least five and a half years to complete, a petition to take Solemn Vows can be submitted to the Superior and if approved must also receive approval of a majority of solemn vowed members.

Oblate membership is also available. Oblate novices have a one-year formation program under the guidance of a formation master. Oblates are invited to convocations but not required to attend. After successful completion of the formation requirements a novice Oblate novice can request full oblation. Oblates have on-going requirements under the direction of a formation master.

Are you "searching for spirituality" and a "deeper relationship with God"? If so you can learn more about the CSL/OSB by reading a number of reflections on Benedictine religious life in the modern world that follow.

Our beloved Brother Lee returned home to Christ in 2106. His life was a wonderful expression of Benedictine life and he contributed much to our community. We offer this reflection to celebrate his life and work with us.

Companions of St. Luke as a Community

By Sr. Audrey Rose Ballinger, OSB

The Oxford Dictionary defines "community" thusly:

"A group of people living in the same place or having a particular characteristic in common."

It makes a further refinement:

"The condition of sharing or having certain attitudes and interests in common."

In short, the word "community" **conveys a** sense of belonging, a way of relating oneself to others. According to the first definition, it would seem each of us belongs to multiple communities, by accident, before we were born. For instance, my father's family links me to the French Huguenots and the Pioneers of the Midwest, while my mother's connects me to the Spanish Conquistadores. I grew up on Eisenhower Street in San Mateo, California, and my address determined I would go to Parkside Elementary, Bayside Middle, and Aragon High Schools. My address also defined the parish to which we belonged and where we would worship, as well as the polling place where my parents, and eventually I, would vote. These are communities of happenstance, existing simply because I was born into a particular family or lived on a certain street, no questions asked--you belong.

These "accidental communities" of my birth and young adulthood laid the basis for a common experience of time and place but were not the whole of them, as I suspect is true for many of you. For I may indeed have been **born with brown hair, but have no more an affiliation with the "Community of Brunettes" than idle curiosity regarding the distinction between chestnut and auburn.** I recently learned my French Huguenot ancestors made it to the Colony of Virginia in the 17th century, but I have little motivation to assert any "First Family" roots. Rather, it seems as we grow and mature, the second aspect of "community", that of "common interest" takes shape, determining how and with whom we spend our time, creating intersecting layers of belonging. What we study at university drives association with particular sets of people and not with others. It may lead in turn toward where and for whom we work, the book groups we join, the type of yoga we practice, even the foods we choose to eat. In short, how we journey through and experience life is shaped by the communities to which choose to belong, and they in turn may be shaped by the experiences we gather on the way.

The Companions of St. Luke manifests both these characteristics, that of birth and that of choice, yet is ever so much more, transcending time and space and self. For God has called us each by name before we were conceived. He is our Father from the beginning of time through the end of time. He has claimed us for his own and we were born into that rich heritage--it is ours for the taking. We who are Companions have chosen to respond to his call of love in a particular way, by allowing the Rule of St. Benedict to govern how we live and interact with the rest of His Creation. Far more than an "interest group" to which we may belong for a time and a season, or a neighborhood we may one day leave, the Rule is a pilgrimage of the soul, a way of relating to and being at peace with the world, at one with God. And while dispersed, we are not without guidance and support, for we journey



onward steadied by the prayers and supplications of our fellow pilgrims, the Companions who have trod the very same path before us and those who now travel alongside. We draw sustenance for our pilgrimage through our twice yearly Convocations, and other gatherings as may be practicable.

"Come and see" said Philip to his brother Nathaniel. "We have found the Lord."

Come and see...and walk with us.

Living under a “Rule of Life”

By Sr. Helena Barrett, OSB



I've never understood why people cringe at the thought of living under a Rule. After all, most of us already do in some way, consciously or unconsciously. Athletes train daily. Rules and customs not only make any organization run smoothly, but they can even literally make the difference between life and death, as for example obeying traffic regulations while driving. Our everyday lives are ruled by schedules, by laws, by the times of our commute. We all live lives that are in some way 'under a

rule'.

Looked at that way, perhaps living under the Rule of Saint Benedict, as we do in the Companions of Saint Luke doesn't seem quite so weird. Of course more familiar 'rules' govern the external life as we know it, and mostly aren't directed towards the life of the spirit. That's what Benedict's Rule is primarily concerned with, though a lot of the Rule is taken up with the basics of everyday living with others. Yes, it is a Rule that dates from the Sixth Century, but it has a lot of common sense for today's world. Obviously some of it has to be rethought to suit the times we live in, but there is much that is timeless, and maybe even especially relevant to our present day. Under the late Roman assumptions lie riches of common sense, flexibility and loving pastoral concern for the wellbeing of the individual monk as well as the community.

In fact, a lot of it can be read as an expansion of the Baptismal Covenant in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer (pp. 304-305). But maybe the real problem is we have grown up thinking that the church no longer has anything to say to us; that it's all a matter of 'thou shalt not's' designed to cut off our freedom. It seems more attractive to do my spiritual seeking (if any) by way of more exotic traditions that don't have that weight of negativity. But perhaps the most richly exotic place to search is the one we ignore right under our Episcopalian noses!

There's a wealth of our own tradition to help us on the way toward God-centred lives. And as Episcopalians we are already, historically, inheritors of the Benedictine tradition, so how about giving it a try, whether you end up as a monastic or not?

Seeking God is what Benedict's Rule is all about, but don't expect it to be all ethereal. Benedict was a college drop-out who was disgusted with the 'whoever dies with the most toys wins' attitude of his own time. He decided to look for the things that really last. After years of trial and error he wrote down what he'd learned, wisdom for us all, monks or lay people.

Even devout Christians need some help in working out what being a Christian means besides going to church on Sundays and trying to act in a just and kindly way toward everyone. So let's have a look at Benedict's formula for what he calls 'the school of the Lord's service.'

To be a Christian isn't something abstract. It can't work without our getting to know Christ, and Benedict tells us to prefer nothing at all to Christ. Sounds pretty harsh? But as we get to

know Jesus we come to love him and to live the way he did, caring for other people, trying to heal broken lives and broken relationships, spreading the joy of perfect freedom wherever we go. We're all in this together.

Perfect freedom? Living under a bunch of rules, praying several times a day, living simply? All this adds up to freedom? Well, yes. Am I really free if I'm always worrying about all the stuff I have, or all the stuff I want? Am I really free if I barge through life without paying attention to the needs of others? Selfishness just breeds resentment. Not bothering to see others as children of God breeds fear; fear breeds anger; anger breeds violence, and I end up lonely and unhappy no matter how rich I am.

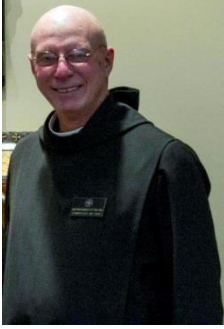
Benedict's way is caring for other people, and treating them (as he says of guests) like Christ. He wants us to listen to each other, really listen, not constantly planning our own next speech. He asks us to value everyone and everything around us. Use your tools, he says, and care for them as if they were the vessels of the altar that hold the Body and Blood of Christ. The same care goes for the world around us—Benedictines may well be the West's first, if only partially conscious environmentalists. Everyone and everything is precious. Can you imagine how much more peaceful and healthy and happy the world would be if we lived like that?

But that's how he wants us to end up, not where we start. We start with prayer, with the regular routine of saying the Daily Office which he calls 'the Work of God.' The Psalms make up most of it, with other Scripture a close second. Those ancient words are always coming around new, and leading us to singleness of heart that loves Christ first and foremost and everyone else in Christ. *Lectio Divina*, a fancy way to say living with (mostly) Scripture and chewing over its sustenance phrase by phrase, leads us into our own silent prayer and deeper into knowledge of and union with God. And work makes for a balanced way of life as well as keeping us active and fed! Body, mind, and spirit work together in harmony, and following the Rule trains us in the discipline and perseverance we need to be free to be simply and genuinely ourselves.

Is it fun every minute? No, nothing is. Is it hard in the beginning? Sure, But Benedict is writing for people like you and me. It's a 'little Rule for beginners,' and for someone who is seeking the things that will last it's a wonderful roadmap. And we are invited to follow it together, each at our own pace, until, preferring nothing to Christ, 'he bring[s] us all together to everlasting life.'

The Monastery of the Heart: Living as a Benedictine in Dispersion

Brother Robert Cotton, OSB



Some may wonder at the notion of how it is possible to live as a Benedictine monastic in a Community where there is no physical monastery and the members of the Community are spread across continents, oceans, time zones and nations. Isn't it true that St. Benedict warned against beginners attempting to live monastic life as a solitaire and believed that the ideal environment for a monastic vocation to flourish is in a monastery or community? How can you be a Benedictine and not live in a monastery? Is this authentic?

These were among the many questions that I asked and considered over ten years ago as I contemplated seeking a monastic vocation as a member of the Companions of St. Luke, OSB. It is also a question that has been asked of me by inquirers and those who are just curious since I started on this journey.

The whole purpose of seeking to become a monastic is to seek closer union with God. As St. Benedict said, "We are to prefer nothing to Christ". Monasticism is not a desire to live in a walled community or to seek to escape from the world. Rather, we are to live in the world but to always keep God as the center of our lives.

Benedict placed such an emphasis on the monastery and living in community with like seekers because, as he said, he wished to establish a "school for beginners". He knew that we could only succeed in our quest for closer union with God through the grace of the Holy Spirit and the help of our fellow monastics. He recognized that there are many stumbling blocks, false byways and frustrating, arid sections on the narrow path towards the Lord. We can only hope to overcome these through the prayer, help and guidance of those who share our goal and travel the path with us. Even after having taken Solemn Life Vows and having had the honor to serve as the Abbot of the Companions of St. Luke, OSB for five years, I know that I am still very much a beginner on the journey towards Christ and I very much need the support and prayers of my fellow travelers.

I have come to learn that it is not the walls of the cloister that make a monastery. It is the sinners, saints and people like you and me that make up the Community, guided by the Holy Spirit, that make the monastery. I have also learned that physical proximity alone does not form a monastic community. If there isn't honest communication; if there isn't sincere caring; if there is too much form over substance; or, if there is misplaced pride or harsh judgment, how closely you live to one another won't matter and the path to God will become steep indeed.

The fact is that the world is very much changed since Benedict created his monastic model. That is not to say that the goals he created or the insights he offered are any less valid than they were in the 600's. At the time he was writing, the only way people could learn from one another, provide support or seek guidance was if they were co-located. Books were few, travel was difficult and there was no phone or internet. Obviously, that has all changed and it is now possible for members of the Companions of St. Luke to be in near instant

communication with each other even if we are widely separated by space. It is this communication that allows Formation Masters to assist and guide postulants and novices, that allows us to pray together and that helps us to become a truly caring Christian family, helping each other find God.

All of this is not to say that it is easy. We miss seeing each other and we miss the camaraderie and interaction that only face-to-face meeting can bring. We miss the opportunity for communal worship with those we care about. Thus, it is important to us to come in from the Diaspora twice a year at Convocation to renew our relationships and strengthen our bonds. I always leave our Convocation gatherings exhausted but recharged in my Faith and my love for our Community—just as Benedict would want it!

We are fond in the Companions of St. Luke, OSB of saying that we carry the monastery in our heart. It is in our hearts that we learn to hold Christ above all else. It is in our hearts that our yearnings for closer union with God reside. And, it is in our hearts that our help and caring for each other comes to fruition. We might be dispersed but we are together in our love for God and one another.

Opus Dei: Prayer and Contemplation

By Sr. Anna Grace Madden, OSB

Opus Dei Opus Dei is a Latin term literally translated as “The Work of God”. Also known as The Daily Office, The Divine Office or The Liturgy of the Hours, this is the cycle of prayers that have been offered by Benedictines every day for the past 1,500 years. The word “office” comes from the same root as “offering”. At any given moment, somewhere in the world Benedictines are offering prayers to God according to the traditions of our spiritual heritage.



The Psalms of David provide the framework for our prayers. The words of the Psalter have been in liturgical use since they were composed. A marvelous aspect of the Psalms is that we are permitted to participate in them with the Poet who is the Holy Spirit and the countless souls who have prayed them from antiquity. Psalm 119:164 proclaims, “Seven times a day do I praise you, because of your righteous judgments.” Based on this Scripture, Saint Benedict prescribed seven fixed times or “hours” of the day for his monks to gather for prayer in the oratory of the monastery. Along with selections from the Psalter, Saint Benedict’s instructions included the use of antiphons, hymns, canticles and readings from Scripture for the various hours. All 150 Psalms were prayed in the course of a week according to the schedule he suggested for the Hours of Matins (Morning Prayer), Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers (Evening Prayer) and Compline. In current usage, many religious communities – including the Companions of St. Luke – have combined the “Little Hours” of Prime, Terce, Sext and None into the single office of Diurnum, or Noonday Prayer. Depending on the breviary (prayer book) used, the Psalms are generally prayed in entirety on a two- or four-week cycle.

When we are gathered together in community, the Companions of St. Luke pray the Offices using the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*. We have the latitude to use other breviaries in our own homes. Many of us use the online CSL version of St. Bede’s Breviary which may be accessed by link on our website. Some of the others we use are *Benedictine Daily Prayer*, *The Monastic Diurnal Revised*, *The Liturgy of the Hours* and *The Glenstal Book of Prayer*.

Praying the Office at the appointed times each day requires dedication and discipline. As Saint Benedict states in our Holy Rule, “Indeed, nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God. (RB 1980 43:3) In this age of multi-tasking, it can seem a foreign concept to set aside whatever we are doing to pray at the appointed times. Is it asking so much to give God our full attention by allotting times for nothing more? Father Michael Casey says it eloquently: “Time given to God is time withdrawn from other activities. Time given to God is time not available for self.”

Alongside the *Opus Dei*, contemplative prayer is an essential element of Benedictine life. Where the *Opus Dei* is formally structured, the shape of contemplative prayer is numinous.

The Rule of Saint Benedict sets time aside each day for the practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading), which is one avenue to contemplative prayer. For descriptive purposes, *Lectio* is divided into a four-step process:

- *Lectio* – We slowly and intentionally reading of a portion of Scripture or other Christian writing.
- *Meditatio* – We ponder a portion of the passage in our heart, following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary. (Luke 2:29)
- *Oratio* – We enter into conversation with God concerning the passage and the insights we have been given.
- *Contemplatio* – We simply and silently rest in God’s presence.

Recent models of lectio add a fifth step, *actio* – applying the insights we have received through *lectio* into our daily lives. In our actual practice of *lectio* we follow where the Holy Spirit leads. The steps may fall in a different order and some may be skipped entirely.

These are but two of the different means we employ to seek conscious contact with the Holy as we aspire to pray unceasingly. Just as surely as we experience communal prayer through the Offices and personal prayer through contemplation and intercession, we can also experience prayer intellectually through study; creatively through various art forms; and even in our daily tasks like preparing a meal or weeding the garden. Just as our bodies need a variety of nutrients to thrive, so do our souls.

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Opus Dei: Benedictine Study

By Sr. Martha Lamoy, OSB

In The Rule, Benedict tells his monks that there should be time set aside for a variety of tasks: community and individual prayer, the work of the monastery (i.e. those tasks required to earn a living and maintain the household), and personal spiritual reading and study. Two of the questions I'm frequently asked by friends who want to know more about my life as a religious and a member of the Companions of St. Luke is what types of materials do I study and, now that I've made my Life Vows, am I working on anything. Along with *what* am I doing comes the follow-up question, *why*? Hopefully this reflection will provide an answer.



One thing I've found is my study will take on different forms depending on what I feel called to do. It's important to note that when I say "study" I don't necessarily mean it in the academic sense. Benedictine study is deeper, more thoughtful and intentional. That doesn't mean I don't look at some things from an academic perspective, but it does mean that I go a step further.

With that in mind let me try to explain some of the ways I study as a Benedictine and a Monastic. First, my study encompasses my daily prayer. Particularly with my morning prayer I will try to find a word or phrase in one of the Psalms or scripture readings that strikes a chord. When I do this passage becomes the basis of the monastic practice of *Lectio Divina*, or "sacred reading", a time of sitting with a few words or lines and reflecting on and praying about what they mean in my life. I then take this with me during the day. Sometimes what I've chosen changes depending on the selections of Psalms for Noon Prayer. Other times the same phrase resounds with me all afternoon and evening.

In addition to what I find in scripture, I also study Benedict's Rule. Besides the document itself I also read what others have written about it. These various commentaries help me to understand the material and gain a new perspective on it. Other favorite topics include almost anything on monasticism in general, including works by those who influenced Benedict. I'm often asked where I find my reading material. One resource is the reading list the community put together for those in formation. 2 ½ years in initial formation wasn't nearly enough time to read everything that looked interesting, so I'll frequently return to the list for something new. Another resource are the books themselves. One author refers to another, who refers to another and so on. The reference lists and footnotes I find in one book lead me to continued study. My Brothers and Sisters suggest books they have found. I read books about topics relevant to the Episcopal or Anglican churches, or to Christianity in general. Because I live and work in the world, I read books relevant to my secular profession and the academic degree I am pursuing. And of course there's always the tried and true method of browsing shelves of the library or bookstore!

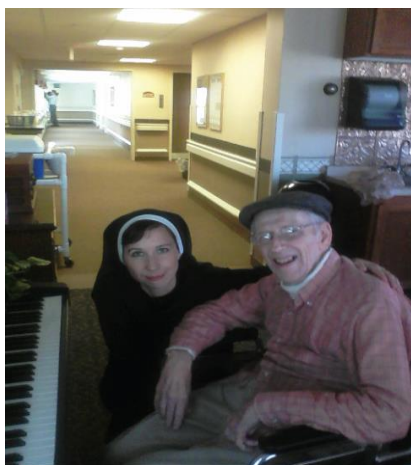
This leads to the second question I get asked frequently, about what I'm doing now that I've made Life Profession, and why I would continually want to revisit similar topics. From a secular perspective, I've been reading the books and scripture associated with the Episcopal

Church's Education for Ministry. This helps keep me grounded in the people I serve in my parish and the community. Spiritually, I continue to read and learn about Chapter 7 of The Rule, which speaks of Humility, and was one of the topics of study during formation. Much as with the suggested reading list during early formation, a number of books were recommended for my study and I couldn't read them all. I am also involved in the Episcopal Cursillo Ministry in my area; Cursillo's three-pronged approach of Piety, Study and Action correlate well for me with the Benedictine Vows of Stability, Obedience and Conversion. Since I work with our newest members—Postulants and Novices—I will periodically read the same material some of them have chosen so I have an idea of what interests them.

Along with *what* I frequently get asked *why* I continue to read and study. I then share that for me, being a monastic and in particular a member of the Companions of St. Luke is a lifelong journey. In order for me to continue to grow and progress along the journey I have to continue to put something into it. That "something" for me is enrichment and learning, finding material that gives new perspectives on what it means to be part of a religious community in the 21st Century and beyond, particularly part of a dispersed community like the CSLs. In addition, being Benedictine and monastic calls me to a conversion of life. For me, part of this conversion is a need to stretch and grow. The only way I can do this is to continue to learn. But ultimately, regardless of the reasons why study is important, or whether the material is scriptural, theological or secular in nature, the architect behind it all is God. I try to think about what God's will is for me and to make sure it's for the right reasons.

Opus Dei: A Benedictine Life of Service

By Sr. Veronica Taylor, OSB



Shortly after entering The Companions of St. Luke as a postulant in 2009, I faced the daunting task of explaining to friends and family just what my life as a religious Sister was supposed to be all about. I encountered a great deal of perplexity and misunderstanding. Without letting me get a word in edgewise, one friend at work said, “So you’re going to be a nun. Where are you going to live? Will they let you come out once in a while? Oh, I support you, it’s just that we need you here; so many people need you out in the real world”. She had automatically assumed that I was going to abandon the world for a cloister, and she did not like that idea at all.

Across the centuries, many have accused monastics of the kind of escapism my friend accused me of, of trying to flee the world and hide from its very real sorrows and trials. Locked away in their monasteries, the charge goes, monks and nuns are oblivious to the sufferings of the world’s people. They have turned their backs on the Gospel call to a life of service. What is the point, critics have asked, of a Christian life lived in isolation from the poor and needy?

I myself do see the value in a penitential and hidden life devoted wholly to prayer; I do not see cloistered monastic life as a pointless life of escape. Still, it is not the life to which I have been called. As a vowed member of the Companions of St. Luke, I have the great privilege and responsibility of living as a Benedictine monastic outside the monastery, amidst the chaos and busyness of family life, a full-time job, church commitments, and volunteerism. It is my calling, and that of my brothers and sisters, to live a life of prayer and contemplation, a life of deep devotion to Jesus Christ and adherence to the Rule of St. Benedict, *in the world*.

A big part of living as a Benedictine in the world is serving others. True, I spend a good deal of time each day in prayer and silence. I love liturgy and solitude and faithfully drop whatever I am doing at certain times each day to pray the Divine Office. But these practices, rather than serving as an escape from the real world, inspire me to action. It is in the silence of my heart, alone with God, that I most clearly hear the cries of the poor and the urgings of Christ to lay down my life in service.

Jesus wants us to give up our lives for others, just as he did. Our Father Benedict assures us of this in his Rule, saying, “The Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teachings” (RB, Prologue). What exactly are these teachings we are to carry out? Quoting the Gospel, Benedict compels us to “relieve the lot of the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, and bury the dead. Go to help the troubled and console the sorrowing” (RB, Ch. 12). In my life, this has meant not only giving my all to those who need me at work, serving the poor and homeless, and loving and contributing to my religious community to the best of my ability, but laying down my life in service to my husband and 4-year-old son as well.

Toward the end of St. Benedict's Rule, there is a chapter entitled, "The Reception of Guests" which we would do well not to forget. In this chapter, again referencing the Gospel, Benedict says that "all . . . are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say, 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me'" (RB, Ch. 53). This radical hospitality shows us that our Father Benedict possessed the wisdom and love to see Christ in everyone he encountered. He instructs us to do the same, no matter how poor, how ill, or how unlikable or unpleasant the "guest" we encounter. I am reminded of Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta's insistence that in each of the sick and dying she served on the streets of India she saw, "the face of Christ in one of His more distressing disguises".

I too have seen Christ in his distressing disguises: in the twisted, failing body of a woman dying of Parkinson's at the Episcopal Church Home where I work; in the brave, too-old faces of foster children wishing desperately for normalcy and peace in their families; in the tears and wounded pride of a woman begging for food for her children in the brutal cold of a Minnesota winter. I try to see Christ in my husband when we argue, in members of my community when we hurt one another or don't see eye to eye, and even in those who have wounded me in deep and lasting ways. But Benedict pushes me further. I am not only to see Christ in others, I am "by a bow of the head or a complete prostration of the body" to *adore* Him in them, for he is indeed present (RB, Ch. 53).

I have not found my commitment to Christ, as lived within the context of the Companions of St. Luke, to be easy. In a world lacking in stability, where commitments don't really seem to matter, it's hard to make vows and keep them. In a culture where anything goes and it's all about me and what I want, it's hard to be obedient. In a society that overvalues money, success, and material progress, it's hard to devote oneself to spiritual progress and conversion of life. When so many care so little about the forgotten of our society --the poor, the elderly, the imprisoned, the mentally ill-- it can be hard to do what's right.

Yet deep down, in a heart softened and expanded by prayer and silence, I know these are the things God wants me to be about. This is what the Rule of St. Benedict demands of me. I am to "prefer nothing whatever to Christ" (RB Ch. 72) and reminded "never (to) turn away when someone needs (my) love" (RB, Ch. 12). I try to live my life by these words. I am a 21st century Episcopal Benedictine, and mine is a life of prayer *and* service.

Opus Dei: Benedictine Work in our Churches

By Sr. Brigid Gerns, Obl./OSB



I am a Benedictine Oblate, rather than living in Vowed Life. It is the belief of the Companions of St. Luke that Benedictine Oblation is an authentic vocation, equivalent to vowed life that is defined by its own tradition and history. So as a Benedictine, I've promised to make the Rule of St. Benedict and the Benedictine vows of Conversion of Life, Stability, and Obedience as my rules of life. The role of Oblates is to live in the world, to become holy in the world, to do what they can to bring the world to God by being witnesses of Christ by word and example to those around them.

For me, this to be a “servant” centered ministry. I listen for God’s call, showing me or drawing me to places where I can support the needs of God’s kingdom. I have lived this out in a number of ways within my parish community.

I have always loved every aspect of the liturgy, so it natural to live that love out by working as a Sacristan (Altar Guild member). I enjoy being sure that every piece of the vessels and linen are polished, laundered, and perfectly placed for a service. But my work is more inclusive than that. I take a turn baking bread to use in the Eucharist and take my turn to wash all of the Altar Linens, small and large. I work in the group of Sacristans to help as all of us prepare our worship space for the special seasons and liturgies of the church year. Working on this is a calming and (mostly) contemplative activity for me. I am offering my time and my talents in a concrete way that lets me show my love and reverence for God. I would also say that my service as a Lector, Lay Eucharistic Minister, and Choir member are also part of this offering and expression of love.

Of course God may call us to many different types of activities for God’s kingdom. Feeding and housing the hungry has always been important, since the time of St. Paul and even before to the Jews. Goodness knows there are so many people in need in our own time. Even more important is to feed and house someone in need while giving them skills and training so they can return to an independent life.

My parish church is a founding member of a regional program called Family Promise, which has such a mission. About 4 times a year our parish hosts three to four families (adults and children) in our Parish House for a week. The program is helping these homeless families gain job and financial training so that they can save money for rent , have a steady job, and become independent once again. This program runs through the work of a dozen different local parishes of different denominations. The hope is that a given family will spend no more than 3-4 months in the program.

Their training takes place at another site, but they come to our church in the evening for supper, evening activities, a place to sleep, and breakfast. They leave again the next day, the children for school, the parents to continue their training. It takes the contributions of many people to host these clients for a week. Bedding must be set up, dinner provided every

night, and there are people who spend time in the evening with the children. There are two “night hospitality” church members who call “lights out”, lock the church doors, and sleep over at the church every night for safety and legal reasons.

I was immediately excited when I heard about this program. Although I didn’t feel called to be on the founding committee which raised money and marketed the program to other churches, I looked forward to meeting the guests and helping in the activities at the church.

The first thing I was called to was an overnight host. The idea of sleeping at the church didn’t bother me or make me uncomfortable, as it did many. I always signed up for at least two nights. Later that became awkward because of a health issue, so I started making one dinner a week (for up to twenty people!). That was a new experience, but I got out my cookbooks and my calculator, and they came out just fine. In fact, every scrap eaten! Once again I had been challenged to do something I had never done before, and it came out great – with God’s help. I know I have blessed others, and been blessed myself through helping this ignored population of families in need.

My other favorite activity that God has drawn me to is Education for Ministry. For those who haven’t heard of this, it’s a 4 year program of Bible study, church history, and theology for adults that’s been created, and is run, by the Seminary of The University of the South, at Sewanee (popularly known as “Sewanee”). The program is run locally by specially trained parishioners called Mentors. Each one must go every year to a 2 day training/refreshment course in order to maintain accreditation to lead the course.

I have been an EFM Mentor for 15 years. I took all four years of study myself, first, so I’ve actually been involved for almost 20 years. I can’t say enough about what a gift it has been to be called to lead small groups of God’s people through this course of study. I have always loved the idea of sharing ideas and information with others, but had no idea that God had given me a talent for working with adults.

I have learned so much, over time, as most teachers will tell you. Almost every session had a sacred moment that graced the whole group. Of course the “aha!” moments were beyond counting. We laughed and cried, and sometimes got upset, but in the end a given group was a very tight knit Christian community. Every time I think about it, I praise God again for leading me to work with the Logos and the Holy Spirit in this part of God’s Kingdom. I know that many times knowledge and love changed people’s lives. I also know that over time it has changed our parish as well, because every discussion we have, on whatever subject, is added to by someone with the knowledge and outlook of an EFM graduate.

Over the last 12 years as a Benedictine Oblate the Rule has informed and enriched my life. I have a newfound alertness to listen for God’s call in my life, and an openness to follow where God leads me, even if it is odd or unfamiliar, because I know that God is with me, as are all my Benedictine brothers and sisters who hold all up in prayer.

Living as a Vowed Benedictine in the Workaday World

By Br. Basil Edwards, OSB; Abbot

There are lots of good books out there that purport to tell us how to live the Rule of St. Benedict in daily life. One of my favorites is Joan Chittister's "Wisdom Distilled from the Daily." In the first chapter she tells the reader "The spirituality that emerges from the Rule of Benedict is a spirituality charged with living the ordinary life extraordinarily well. Here, transforming life rather than transcending it is what counts. That's why the Rule of Benedict is meant for hard-working, busy people whose family lives and bills and civic duties and hard work consume them in this world today as well as for those who have dedicated themselves to living a publicly professed religious life." So, how does one do both, work and have a life in the world and live a publicly professed religious life, and why?

Firstly, it isn't exactly easy. In his book, "Centered on Christ," Abbot Augustine Roberts spends considerable space on the importance of life lived in enclosure – separate from the world. In our community we have taken the stance that the enclosure is in the heart. The withdrawal from the things of the world is an internal withdrawal. We live without the continual physical presence and support of our brothers and sisters, but are held in community by our common commitment to remain outside the world of too much to find the inner world of more than enough. In this inner world of freedom we strive to maintain the practice of continual prayer and know that our brothers and sisters are praying with us. I learned from one of my sisters in the community that a moment of prayer stolen in a stairway in a rush to the next important thing to be done can help to keep us connected. Continual prayer is a practice that can free us from the weight of things to get done, and even if just for a moment can lead us into freedom for knowing the love and care of one another. Just for a moment we turn aside as Moses did to see the burning bush that wasn't burnt up, and in that turning aside we find also the freedom to love the Christ that we seek.

So, what's easy and what's hard about being a vowed Benedictine and working in the world. There are the practical matters like how to fit all the Offices of Daily Prayer into a crowded day; how to stay true to the practice of constant prayer, where and when to wear the habit. More difficult are the less tangible things such as how does one live into the vow of obedience (to whom, when and in what way); what does the vow of stability mean outside a physical enclosure; what does fidelity to monastic life mean in the context of the workaday world. One consoling factor is that it really isn't that rare for Benedictines to work outside the monastery. Some hold offices within the larger Church, some live and teach in residential schools, some even serve as chaplains in the military. Then there are those like me that work in medical settings to care for the sick and injured.

Everyone in our community has a different approach to the vows of Obedience, Stability and *Conversatio Morum* (fidelity to monastic life), but the essential features are similar and are all encompassed in adherence to Benedict's concept of balance of prayer, work and rest.



Enclosure of the heart is found by striving to balance – moving to the spiritual center. In the center, we find the absolute silence of the soul wherein we, like Elijah, can hear the voice of God.

Balance requires planning and attention. Balance is dynamic and changes a little each day. I tend to think of the vows as being at the apices of an equilateral triangle, yoked to the vows by spiritual elastic bands. If I move too far out of the center, my rootedness in the vows pulls me back.

Some days I feel very out of balance: I miss an Office or my need to provide care to a patient overtakes everything else, or I just get a little sloppy. Fortunately, St. Benedict gives us each day a chance to start over. I take ample advantage of that chance, praying that someday, when I am truly in balance, that I will come totally to preferring nothing whatsoever to the Love of Christ. When I do find the center long enough to experience the presence of God in the silence of my soul, I will hear “Good Work.”

Living as a Benedictine Oblate

By Sr. Toni Sylvester, OSB



When people see me in the black habit, they are curious and they ask, without hesitancy or rudeness, “Who are you?” The question I actually answer is: “Why are you wearing the black habit?” I tell them I am part of a Benedictine community and, if their curiosity continues, I tell them I am a Benedictine Oblate. This answer usually leads to a second and harder question: “What is an Oblate?”

Most people are familiar with monks and nuns but not many have heard of oblates. It hasn’t been that many years since I first heard the term. I sometimes compare it to being a

deacon in a parish church, which some Episcopalians understand, and I say that while I have taken religious vows, they are not to the level of a nun or monk. I have taken the same vows of obedience, stability and conversion of life but the rule of life I follow is not as rigorous and, while fully vowed religious take life-time vows, an Oblate renews his or her vows annually.

The person inquiring might be bold enough to ask me why I did not take the vows of a nun. I tell them for where I am in my spiritual life today, the vows of an Oblate have helped me grow spiritually without feeling I have taken on too much and have become out of balance. I have been studying the rule of St. Benedict for about ten years and the process of becoming more deeply rooted in religious life has been slow and gradual. I think the slow pace has been healthy for me, allowing me to learn and experience the Benedictine rule of life and leading me to a Benedictine community where I feel I belong, the Companions of St. Luke. *I realize the growth process continues so one day the Holy Spirit could well lead me to take life-time vows!* At each step along the way, I have had doubts yet I trusted God and moved steadily ahead, finding myself closer to Him and on ever firmer footing. For me, moving slowly and carefully allows time to listen to God rather than my own ego and emotions.

I always speak positively about being an Oblate so that people don’t see the vows as lesser or in any way inferior to those of a nun or monk and I stress how important it is that each person move at his or her own pace in the religious life. I see Oblates as a bridge between vowed religious life and the world, especially the parish church, and I try to express that thought. I describe my daily prayer life and my work in business, community and parish church. I try to give the sense that I am both a committed religious and an active member of the world, stressing again the idea of the Oblate as a bridge between the two. The vows of an Oblate are a good fit for people who lead active business, family, church and community lives and give them the structure in which to find a balance between contemplation and activity.

That last point is often the most important to people and they want, sometimes desperately, for someone to show them a way to have balance in their lives. It was this desire for balance and a way to integrate the different parts of my life into a healthy whole that attracted me to the Rule of St. Benedict in the first place so I understand why others seek balance. If I am asked for details, I can describe a day that revolves around regular prayer, work, rest and

play. I want people to see that being a religious can and does fit very well with active lives as long as we maintain that balance taught by St. Benedict.

Following the disciplined life of a Benedictine Oblate is not a solitary exercise. I am first of all part of the community of the Companions of St. Luke and I stay in frequent communication with the other members. In turn, our community is one of many Benedictine orders around the world. There have been followers of the Rule of St. Benedict for fifteen hundred years so I can see myself as part of a long series of religious. Even though I say my daily prayers at home alone, I am part of that vast community and there are many others around the world saying the same prayers at the same time. We are all followers of Christ and students of the Rule of St. Benedict, living into our vows of obedience, conversion of life and stability.

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