

ADDRESS OF THE ABBOT PRIMATE

Conference to the International Benedictine Oblate Congress
5 November 2017—Rome—Fraterna Domus

In the name of all of us here in Rome who have worked to prepared this Congress with joy, hope, expectation, encouragement and faith, we say "Welcome to all: *Benvenuti a tutti, Bienvenue à tous, Willkommen an alle, Bienvenida a todos, Bem-vindo a todos, Witamy wszystkich, Karibu kwa wote, and Hamyoung Ham Ni Da*. I hope that each of you can understand at least one of these expressions of welcome. We are so pleased that you are here. We know also that coming to this Congress has meant sacrifices on the part of many of you: time, finances, energy, and the journey itself. The agenda for this Congress have been in planning for well over a year now, and I want to thank Father Edward Linton of Saint Meinrad Archabbey, who has led the International Team of planners who have organized these days. Here I mention: Thomas and Klara Brunnhuber (UK), Jean Ritzke Rutherford (Germany), Anne-Marie Visser (The Netherlands), Benedetta Reece (USA), Eileen Dutt (UK), Melanie Godefroid (Belgium), Elisabeth Roux (France), Fabio Vincenzo Baldacchino (Italy), Janís Dopp (USA), Father Jeremy King, O.S.B. (USA), Jordi Gubern Prat (Spain/Catalonia), Martin Grüger (Germany), Michel Gammon (Canada), Sergio Portelli (Malta), and especially Giorgio Marte (Italy, Sant' Anselmo). Our appreciation and gratitude for their work of planning and preparing this Congress is beyond the power of words to express. My prayer is that these days will be a time of renewed faith for each of you, a joyful time for reflection on your relationship with the monastic community of your oblation, and an opportunity to ponder the rich treasure of the Benedictine spiritual life which you will find among the other Oblates gathered here. So let us begin with a prayer: *Raise up in your Church, O Lord, that same spirit which animated our Holy Father Benedict, that filled with that same spirit we may strive to love what he loved, and to live as he taught. Through Christ our Lord.*

The theme of this Congress is *A Way Forward: The Benedictine Community in Motion*. Such a title can leave no doubt that the way forward of which we speak is a spiritual path, taking us into deeper communion with God. You will walk this path in relationship with the monastery of your oblation, and with one another. In this session *I would like to reflect together with you* on the relationship between you as an Oblate and the monastery to which you are connected. I want to consider how that relationship keeps guiding you ever more profoundly into a wondrous and mysterious communion with God. What does it mean to be an Oblate, to be thus connected to a monastic community? What is your experience of the relationship you find in relating to your monastic community? How is your relationship with God deepened, and how does that have an impact on your day-to-day life, your relationship with others? What expectations do you have of the monastic community of your oblation, and of its individual members? Do you think the monastic community has expectations of you? These are important questions to consider, because if you want your contact with the community of your oblation to be something that enriches you personally, something that gives a spiritual direction to your life, something that has a positive impact on you and the life you lead and establishes ties that continue to grow over time—then you want to think seriously about this relationship. What *can* it mean for you, what do you *want* it to mean for you and others, and *how* do you keep alive and fresh something that is part of your daily life? You must

want it to be life-giving for you and for those who are dear to you. We have to face the fact that you live as lay people in the world. You are people who have a relationship with God through a monastic community, but you also have families, neighbors, friends, co-workers and acquaintances to whom you relate every day. You have an impact on the lives of these people in any variety of ways—sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. People see what you do, observe how you act, how you speak, what you say and what you don't say. As the psychologist says, "All behavior has meaning," or more simply put, "what you do speaks volumes." What we say and do, how we choose to live our lives: this communicates to others what our values are, what is important to us—who we are becoming as men and women of faith and followers of Jesus in the spirit of Saint Benedict. Doing good things for others must be more than a humanitarian gesture: as a Christian, your activity must be rooted in God, and flowing from a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. I would like to think that being a Benedictine Oblate says something important about your faith to the many people who weave their ways in and out of your life.

The thoughts and ideas I wish to share with you come from my own experience, first as a human being and a Christian, then as a monk; next as an abbot for 21 years (20 of which were at Conception Abbey in northwest Missouri in the United States), and final as Abbot Primate for a little over a year now. I look forward to visiting with you—and especially the Oblates I know personally who are here from Conception Abbey. One of the tasks that I have before me as Abbot Primate is visiting regional meetings of Benedictine men and women. This is one of the ways in which I become more familiar with the worldwide Benedictine Order—with personal encounters, with discussions, and with shared question and answer sessions. Recently, as the topic of vocations to the monastic life has become more acute in many of these gatherings, the question arises, "How can we interest teenagers and young adults in monastic life? How do we get them to come and visit us, and see what our life is like?" My first response was to pose another question: "Why do you want them to come? To fill your choir stalls? If so, I believe you are taking the wrong approach. Rather, I think you want to invite young men and women to come to your monastery to take some time aside for themselves, some time for quiet and reflection, some time for them to answer questions about their experience of the world and the Church, to let them hear you speak from your hearts, and to open the Gospel to them. The young adults I meet today are filled with questions about the future of our world; they are seeking ways to express faith, but don't easily find them in their world. They desire a relationship with God but are uncertain about how and where to find it. If we can help them answer such questions and quandaries, we involve ourselves in the important work of evangelization for the growth of the Gospel and the life of the Church. And if we can do that in ways that are inviting and unthreatening, they will want to come and be part of what we are doing."

Remember that story in the opening chapter of the Gospel according to John, where Andrew finds himself curious about this man Jesus, and so asks him, "Where do you stay?" And Jesus answers simply, "Come and see." What we need to do is entice young people simply by showing them the Gospel come to life in our own lives. If they see that, they will want to come and be part of it with us. Who we are as monks, nuns, sisters and oblates—what we say, what we do, and how we do it—should be the invitation for them to "come and see."

The next question I want to consider is at the heart of our discussions this afternoon. At a gathering of abbots, I was asked, "How do we get young people to come in the first place?" My immediate response was again to pose a question in return: "Who are your best friends?" For a moment they considered the matter, and then responded as you might have expected: family members, friends, students, retreatants. My response to this was "No; who are your *best* friends, those most loyal to you?" They looked puzzled, and I said simply, "Your Oblates. Your Oblates are the men and women who most want to see you succeed. Your Oblates are the people most loyal to you, knowing that your relationship with them has an impact on their lives like few others. You give your Oblates 'gifts for life, for living well and peacefully.' Go to your Oblates who have family members, friends, students, neighbors, and young co-workers who look up to them, who believe in them, and in most cases, who really love them. Have your Oblates talk about their experience of the monastery, what it does for them, and ask your oblates to invite these young people to come along to some event or retreat at the monastery, some presentation or discussion. There they will experience something they know to be important in your life, and they will pass on their own 'good news' of these 'places set apart.' The purpose of such invitations is not to fill your choir stalls, but to do the work of Jesus in proclaiming and living the Gospel. If you do that, your choir stalls will begin to fill up spontaneously, with young people enflamed by the Gospel message."

This story may serve as a catalyst for what we want to consider this afternoon: your relationship to the monastery where you have made your oblation. As said earlier, knowing the meaning and impact of this relationship in your life is an important part of a "movement forward" for each of you, and for the organization of Oblates across the globe. Why? Precisely because if you do *not* have the kind of relationship, as an Oblate, which you both desire and need, you will look elsewhere to find the spiritual nourishment that makes a difference in your life. I believe that God has planted within the heart of each human being a need for spiritual intimacy with God. And it is almost inevitable that we come to this spiritual intimacy through the witness of another individual or community. Created in the divine image, we will naturally have a desire for a profound union with the One who brought us into being, who sustains us in our being, and who constantly seeks us even when we are not conscious of the fact. For so many Oblates, this contact with God is revealed and nurtured by the community to which they have joined themselves. It may be manifest in participation in prayer with the community, or in personal reflection in a place that is quiet and life-giving; it may arise in a relationship with a particular member of the monastic community who becomes a spiritual friend. Or it may be born in some act of service performed with members of the community, or simply from finding a space where you feel the inner freedom to give yourself the "gift of time" to listen to the divine voice that speaks to you through the Scriptures, or the liturgy, or the people and events in our lives. Finding this spiritual intimacy is important for each of us; and while we may discover it at the monastery of our oblation, our task as Oblates is to keep it alive when we are away from the monastic community. This means that your offering of self to God as a Benedictine Oblate reaches beyond your chosen monastery.

As Oblates, you create a living friendship with a monastic community; what makes it a living relationship is the fact that you receive from the community something of importance in your own life, and you then wish to give something back to this community or person from whom you have received this special, sacred, intimate, and truly living gift. I like to think that our Oblates who

have a relationship with a monastic community or one of its members create a sacred triangle with God at the top, and with the Oblate and their monastic community at the other two points. The relationship between the individual Oblate and the community is connected with this lower segment, and both have lines leading to God. Through the sacred friendship created between an Oblate and his or her monastic community, both the Oblate and the community are drawn to God. Truly, the relationship between the Oblate the monastic community is a two-way street, and I tell you this from experience. When a monk or nun is in communion with an Oblate, both the individual monk or nun and their community receive abundant blessings. You as Oblates are not just recipients of such grace; rather, by your faith, your goodness, your prayer, your kindness, your loyalty, your fidelity, and your witness, you inspire us who are members of the monastic community. You also lead us to God. And it is by this two-way street between the Oblate and the monastic community that all of us are connected more deeply, more profoundly, more joyfully to God. Thus this union becomes a three-fold communion among the Oblate, the monastic community, and God.

As many of you may know, Saint Aelred of Rievaulx, a Cistercian monk of the 12th century, was the author of a book entitled *Spiritual Friendship*, which he wrote at a time when friendship among members of a monastic community was looked upon with suspicion. In his treatise, St. Aelred builds a case for understanding that relationships that have God at their center will draw both parties closer to intimate union with God. St. Aelred goes so far as to say that friendship is a sacrament of God's love, a sign and experience of divine love. While he is specifically talking about two persons in his treatise, we can see an analogy to the relationship of an Oblate to a monastic community. If we are honest and authentic in our relationships, they will take us into a deeper understanding of who we are—before ourselves, before our God, and before anyone whom we allow into such a relationship. St. Aelred offers a helpful theme for looking at our relationship with a monastic community when he describes spiritual friendship as something based on similar values, goals, hopes, dreams, aspirations and aims. For a monastic community, prayer and union with God lie at the heart of its shared life. This is one of the things that monastic communities have to offer to the many people who come among us, and especially to our Oblates, with whom we feel a sincere kinship, knowing that they share our values, hopes, and aspirations. We welcome people to pray with us, to be silent before God with us, and to listen with the "ear of the heart" to what God speaks to us. Monastic communities provide an environment where this can happen; and we offer this to others as a *gift*, as something precious which we have cultivated and which we desire to impart to those who come among us. Don't you find this shared gift to be one of the main reasons you wish to associate yourself with a monastic community through some kind of personal commitment? This brings us back to our main theme of *movement forward* in the life of the Oblate to deeper union with God through a joyful and healthy relationship with a monastic community. *The Benedictine Community in Motion* is nothing less than a movement toward *eternity*, as Saint Benedict clearly expresses at the close of Chapter 72: "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ, and may he bring us all together to everlasting life." It is the wondrous mystery of the grace of the Risen Christ which acts in us individually and communally, drawing us towards resurrection, towards that vision of eternal life that lies before each of us.

St. Aelred's teaching on *spiritual friendship* points us in the direction of a healthy and God-centered relationship, whether that relationship is with a monastic community in general, or with a

particular member of the community. The focus on God as the deepest desire of the relationship steers us on a path of life that truly satisfies the soul. An essential part of any relationship is the task of *listening*, and of course we know that Saint Benedict commands at the outset of *The Rule* that the individual listen with the "ear of the heart"—that is, by a singular manner of listening *interiorly*. I can hear something and understand it quite clearly in my mind with all the rational intelligence required; but then, that thought must find a way of entering the heart and engaging us with a two-part consideration that may be illustrated by an analogy. When the mind and the heart "dance together," they keep one another in step; they demonstrate the same beauty and unity that two people who dance express—or that two parts of a single person may express within—in a single movement of the Spirit. In fact, the Biblical use of the word *heart* (or *leb* in Hebrew) comprehends the mind and the heart working in concert to discern the ways of God, and then to follow them; it brings together the two processes which God has given us for discernment. Think of that banner statement from the Book of Deuteronomy, which in turn Jesus repeats several times in the Gospels: "You shall love the LORD, your God, with your whole heart, with your whole being, and with all your strength" (6:5; 10:12; 11:13; 13:4; 26:16; 30:2, 10). When people ask me, "How do you discern something inside you? How do you know the path to follow?" I will often respond (yet again!) with a question, "What do you hear your heart telling you?" If we listen to our heart, we are listening to that still, quiet voice inside us that was given us at our Baptism: the Holy Spirit, guiding us, teaching us, inspiring us, encouraging us, and praying within us. And often it is worthwhile to entrust our discernment to a wise friend who can help us distinguish the Spirit's voice from our own voice.

So often in our pilgrim journey through this life, we are trying to find the *will of God* for us. The text of Psalm 40 reads: "You delight not in sacrifice and offerings, but in an open ear. You delight not in burnt offering or victim. Then I said, 'See, I have come.' In the scroll of the book it stands written of me: 'I delight to do your will, O my God; your instruction lies deep within me'" (vv. 7-9). These few verses offer two things for our reflection: 1) An "open ear" stands as an image which draws us into that divine-human dialogue, listening with "the ear of the heart." Our rich monastic tradition of *lectio divina* helps us to listen to God's voice. Our contact with a monastic community draws us into that rhythm of listening with an open heart. God speaks to us; we just have to keep listening with an open heart—a heart ready to be surprised, to be taken aback, to be disappointed, to be consoled. And if our heart is open and ready, whatever comes to us will draw us toward "new life," even when it challenges us to look again at our life, and to change direction if necessary. Our prayer is a response to God's initial word to us. 2) When we can say with the Psalmist, "Your instruction, O God, lies deep within me," we live with a remarkable freedom. In our daily living with the Scriptures, and especially with the Psalms, we hear the voice of God calling to us, inviting us, and re-creating us by the power of the Word. My brothers and sisters, this is "our way forward" towards God, towards reaping the rewards of a surrender to the Word of God as the way to follow Christ and live his Gospel. It's as simple, and as difficult, as that.

For just a moment, let us consider how the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews uses these brief few verses from Psalm 40. The author takes these very words and puts them on the lips of Jesus (Heb 10:5-7). When the Gospels tell us that Jesus went off to be alone, to pray, we can be certain that he was going off to be alone with the One whom he called *Abba*—the One to whom he

entrusted his heart and his life, whose will he followed. When we keep working on that mysterious path of God's will in our life, it places us in the graced stance of imitating Jesus. The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews shows us that in taking on our human flesh and becoming one of us, Jesus found his life's deepest meaning in searching out the will of God, surrendering to the will of God, seeking to do the will of God, walking that mysterious yet marvelous path which leads to God in every experience in life—the blessings and the hardships, the joys and the sorrows. For Jesus, this was his "way forward," his way of becoming the means of our salvation. And so for us, our "movement forward" as Oblates is connected with this search for the will of God: the very name we bear, "oblate," is from "oblation," an offering of self, which becomes one with the oblation and offering of Christ Jesus.

It is to be hoped that our path to union with Christ will be fostered through our communion with the monks, nuns or sisters among whom we have made our oblation. There, with the community, we pray, we reflect, we listen with our heart; we come before the God who made us to live with honest and open faith. As you know so well, Oblates share in the prayer-life of the monastic community; you are a part of that rhythm of prayer which characterizes a monastic community. In time and with faith, we come to see ourselves as beloved sons and daughters of God. When we come to that realization, that inner *conviction*, and feel it pulsing through our veins, our communion with God generates a new and vital way of living for us. The fears before us and the failures behind us, the dreams of what is to come and the nightmares of the past—all of these find their rightful place in our life, and we are freed to live in the glorious liberty of the children of God. Finding God's love in our lives can be a difficult path for some of us. Past hurts and disappointments, broken promises and dreams deferred, can all contribute to the challenge of experiencing God's love for us. Hopefully, this becomes simply another "way forward," a movement toward God, when we are able to find within the monastic community where we have made our oblation a welcoming intimacy, a healing presence, an experience of loyal friendship. In those experiences, we have at least a foretaste of the love of God that crowns our lives. As the Psalmist reminds us, "Taste and see that the LORD is good" (34:9). Knowing and experiencing God's love becomes the path to inner freedom for us, the way that frees us to give ourselves to God through our love for one another.

A good friend of mine, a woman who with her husband raised two wonderful children, once commented to me: "As parents, we have to give our children wings to fly." Parents have the primary task of creating for their children the space to live and grow into adulthood so that they can then move into life on their own; parents must provide interior gifts so their children can make their own way through life. There is a parallel here with what a monastic community seeks to provide for their Oblates. The monastic community, perhaps through an individual monk, nun, or sister, must give the Oblate the tools for making a way through life's spiritual and personal experiences. We certainly do not draw our Oblates into relationship with our communities to the exclusion of God; nor may we allow them to relegate their relationship with God to some subordinate status. I have seen this happen, and it is wrong. Some people try to make a monastic community into a surrogate family because of past hurts or disappointments; they try to replace their lost or broken family with the monastic community. It is important to remember that such intentions are a way to more hurt, disappointment, and discouragement in the end. Family bonds are bonds of blood; a religious

community is united by bonds of faith. It is important to maintain the distinction. Spiritual fathers and spiritual mothers who are members of monastic communities must always strive to direct their spiritual children to God, and not to themselves or their community. In our world today, so many people experience alienation—within the family, in the neighborhood or workplace, in other experiences of life. The welcome such people find at a monastery is a great gift; but that welcome should always help individuals to move forward in their essential relationship with God through Christ. That is the meaning of the "movement forward" in the life of the Oblate: a community that wants what is best for each of its Oblates, that strives to help them to keep God at the center of their lives. You, as Oblates, share in the mission of a monastic community to live a life in the spirit of Saint Benedict, and to make that life known to others. You have a real role to play as agents of that good in the world around you.

The Oblates of a monastery have a special place in the hearts of the members of the community to which they belong. You are a gift to the monastic community. And this is not simply because of what you can do for them. You are a gift to them because of who you are—men and women of faith who join in the great search for true knowledge and an authentic experience of God in your lives. Your prayer for the members of your community, your presence and participation in their common life, reminds them that the teaching and example of Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica continue to stand as a witness to the Gospel in our world today. You are an extension of the monastic community's witness, as you return to your homes, families, work places and neighborhoods, attesting to the values and hopes of the Gospel and *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. The movement forward as *Benedictine Communities in Motion* is through fidelity to what is God-centered and Christ-centered. Prayer is an obvious priority, accompanied by the kind of silence that allows the *ear of the heart* by listening to enter into communion with the divine word. And that communion then goes forth in lives that give expression to our deepest values, values that have emerged from our reflection on the Gospel and the call of the Church to service in the name of Christ. Our welcome to you here in Rome must not be an accumulation of empty words. Rather let it stand as an invitation to you, our Oblates, to enter more fully into the Benedictine charisms of welcome, peace, prayer, and that movement through life that points us toward God in eternity. If we keep that vision before us, we will not be wanting in the things that matter in our earthly pilgrimage, because that vision involves us in *A Way Forward: The Benedictine Community in Motion* toward nothing less than eternal life.