

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

January, 2010

Dear Oblates and friends,

Despite all the weather related changes to holiday plans and the obvious lack of Christ's "Peace on earth", even for those with good will, we Sisters are wishing you and yours the boundless riches of God's blessings in this year that marks the beginning of the second decade of the new century. Our faith tells us God still rules the universe despite appearances to the contrary and all things will work together for good for those who love God. Why would we be surprised at the testing of that faith? Scripture tells us it is our faith that will save us...absolute trust in God who holds us and will not let us be lost, regardless of what happens to us. The choice to trust and cling to that trust is ours! God holds us and will not let us go, no matter what.

Since we are accustomed to praying for Church Unity during January, from the 18th to the feast of the Conversion of St. Paul on the 25th, I want to turn some attention to the parable of the Prodigal Father in Lk. 15:11-32, usually called the parable of the Prodigal Son. Actually the two sons were BOTH prodigals, though that is a misuse of the term, which means generous to excess. Oh, they both went to excess, but in the wrong direction! And, sad to say, neither one was completely changed by the Father's generosity in by-passing his own rights for their sake.

Progressive degradation leads to disaster for the younger boy. When he finally hits rock bottom, when the only way out is up, this boy's poverty is described as a desperate need for nourishment, in truth, for nurture. Besides gross ingratitude this boy has added injustice by squandering his portion of the inheritance meant to be set aside for the father's care in old age. The father is watching, never losing hope, and finally sees his ragamuffin son. He disregards cultural convictions about his dignity and honor and deluges the son with affection and a lavish welcome. Let the party begin!

The father overlooks the grave wrong in his joy at a child returned! Not so the elder brother who's going to have now to care for his father solely out of his own inheritance/resources. In concentrating solely on his own righteous indignation he also sins against his Father with contempt and dishonor by refusing to go to the party and be reconciled. Both are in the wrong!

This parable is another subversion of our cultural and religious mind set about who is chosen and who is rejected in God's sight. In spite of misconduct and insolence and disrespect, BOTH SOULS are cherished and affirmed. The father's conduct upstages both the mindless squandering of inheritance by the one son and the self-righteous preoccupation of the other. He is equally disinterested (if you can imagine it!) in the immorality of the younger one and the

legalistic critical, judgmental mind of the other. Love, and maintaining the bonds of unity are what matter.

What Jesus is saying, contrary to human and Judaic convictions, is that the Kingdom of God is NOT about conventional morality or legalism but about infinite concern and love for all God's children, the whole human family. God's chief concern is not in our getting what we deserve, but in mercy—holding in LOVE.

God, as Jesus portrays the father here, is interested more in UNITY by the removal of barriers and the triumph of compassion. Our claims on God do not derive from our baptism, our church affiliations, our upright lives, our efforts to do all the right things expected of us, but from our experience of God's infinite MERCY and compassion for us in our sinful waywardness. Love and Mercy do not cling to wrongs but boundlessly hope for reconciliation.

Everyone is accepted and chosen by God, including public sinners of every shade and variety. The Father forgives everything, removing all barriers to unity, only wanting all His children to live together in peace and common concern because ALL are loved and valued and hoped for and gifted. No one and nothing is beyond forgiveness IF WE ALLOW IT!!

There's where problems set in – not that we doubt God will have mercy, forgiveness, compassion and affection waiting for us regardless of what we've done before. When, like the younger son, we “come to our senses” and reach out to our Father/ Mother God who loves us unconditionally, we head home.. The problem that arises is whatever barriers keep us in our pig-sty or our contemptuous alienation. WE have to want forgiveness and reinstatement in the human family wounded by our sins and allow the same sentiment for others over and over, 70 X 7.

What barriers do we poor ailing people erect against 'going home' and living in God's grace? All the best ancient religious traditions have variously listed the blocks in ourselves to mercy, forgiveness and reconciliation. Again, the blocks are in ourselves, not God.

Where is the arena or forum where holiness gets worked out in each of us? Everyday life – our own backyard – our families, our life experiences, our minds and hearts.

As this New year begins with a clean slate or, to use another metaphor, a diary with blank pages, let's take charge of our lives for our sake and God's! He can only use us for his work in our particular space in his world if we are available and free interiorly. Let's give ourselves a little time to think about what blocks there may be to unity within our self, with our other relationships, with God, with peoples of other cultures, colors, religious traditions and political persuasions,

etc. What fears hold us back from being generous with those graced words: I forgive you because I love you.

Our holy father Benedict created a rule of life to optimize love and trust. If you read the Rule, if possible at one setting, you'll get the picture of community built by love and forgiveness. That's what makes for unity; all of us are sinners but LOVED sinners!

There has been much illness and many hazards over the holidays. We pray you are as well as you can be and safe. Placing you and your New Year in God's boundless mercy and care and wishing you every blessing as you need it,

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

March, 2010

Dear Oblates and friends,

We're in the middle of our seasonal opportunity to concentrate on growing up into Christ, our "greening up", our maturing spiritually for our own sake and everyone else's. It's not a sad time or a self-punishing invitation we receive each year during Lent, but a call to love our way into the changes we need to make to be more like Christ. We're trying to see him at the center of our life and encourage others to see him in theirs - our Jesus, the image of the unseen Father who is loving us into wholeness and holiness. That's what we're about; this is our life work, our "continual Lent", as Benedict says.(RB 49)

I think our father Benedict would appreciate the struggle, the challenge to be simple and true to who and how we are. That's what his chapter on Humility is all about. St. John Baptist would say: "He must increase; I must decrease." With that in mind I want to reflect with you a bit on the Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican from Luke 18: 10 – 14.

Two people went up to the temple to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself: 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity - greedy, dishonest, adulterous - or even as this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." I tell you that the latter went home justified, not the former, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.

Go back and take a good look at the two persons in this story. Supposedly they both went to the temple, the Jewish locus of divine presence among the people, TO PRAY, to talk with God, to share the person they were with the God who loves and holds them in life and time, who cares about them and loves to share life with them.

From one and the same Latin root comes our words for **prayer** "orare", to pray, and for **oratory**, to make a speech. What we see here immediately is that the one fellow was in the temple as an orator. He was posturing; he was setting a scene in which his "saving graces" are meant to impression any witnesses with his superiority in his soaring good opinion of himself. He has a dangerous disease called "I – it is". The text says he took up his position, just like any good orator, and spoke his prayer TO HIMSELF, not to the God he seemed to address. I suspect he loved the sound of his own voice, and because he was delighted with himself, he could look down his nose at the self-effacing tax collector, part of the rest of humanity so beneath himself. Just because he put

the words: 'O God' in front of his remarks did not make them a real prayer. Actually, they were misdirected back on himself as his god.

As a slight digression here, let me put in a good word for taking care how we use the Name of God in our rapidly growing secular culture. Think how many times a day you hear the holy Name taken totally out of context and made meaningless, no longer a tender, loving reminder to us of our relationship with the divine Author and Center of our life.

Respect is always a beautiful, heart-warming part of loving. That's why in a monastic world-view everyone and everything is both/and, not either/or in its sacred and secular dimensions. Benedict makes sure that we see both sides of our reality by urging us to treat all things as though they were the sacred vessels of the altar. (RB 31:10) Our tools and equipment, our material possessions, our particular places and those who people them are all part of the sacredness of our personal and communal life with God. That day is sanctified, moment by moment, that has God intentionally in the center of shared life.

Read, if you can, RB chapter 52 on the oratory, the place of prayer, whether that's your bedroom, your church, a quiet corner in a den or family room at home, at the kitchen table or simply inside your own heart, and notice the reverence required for that sacred space. The degree of our personal culture and humanity are both deeply affected by how we value appropriate respect and reverence because they take us out of and beyond our self. We know Benedict had no liking for crude and rude behavior. It de-Christianizes us just when the mirror image of Christ is so badly needed in our world.

Back to the Pharisee, I'm picking on him though we all have a part of him in our self. I'm thinking the oratorical self-dramatization of the Pharisee must have hit the temple walls with a thud and fallen into a silent heap of its own unreality.

"Speak the truth with heart and tongue" says Benedict in RB 4:28, which is what the unassuming publican was doing: 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' That heartfelt, REAL prayer of the tax collector must have flown straight to the heart of God where it was aimed. It lodged there, forever an expression of what makes us blundering, striving humans most like God, the truth..... the truth that sets us free (Jn 8:32) to be simply ourselves, just as we are, where we are in our journey, honest through and through. I've read that Mardi Gras masks are collected and burned at day's end. We unmask ourselves and walk forward into Lent in the truth.

Do we really and confidently embrace the truth of ourselves, without disguise or distortion? Are we afraid God can't take us as we are...or won't? No matter what condition we are in at this very moment, so fragilely human but true, we are being held and loved and cared about. St. Paul says God's power is made perfect (obvious?) in our weakness, so why would we try to hide it? 'O God, be merciful

to me a sinner.' That must be one of the simplest and truest of prayers!

God's strength and grace is not hindered by our weakness of body, mind or spirit, for which we must be eternally grateful! God's grace is not less because I am too weak or tired or sick or forgetful or distracted to praise him as I ought or as I used to do. He is praised by my weakness as well as by my strengths simply because they are my truth! Embrace them, then, and offer them, not because they have any worth in our eyes but in God's, who looks at us with eyes of love and compassion and total understanding (something we all long for). There is such a mighty affinity between truth and Truth, a magnetic force that draws all things to God. Again, our weakness is no hindrance to God's activity though we may be obscuring it. God knows of what we are made and can use it ALL for his divine purposes. I may not know how.

I am not here talking about doctrinal truths or beliefs, but about the essential being, the simple core truth of ourselves – our truth laid bare before the divine Truth and safe there. It's by simply living the truth in love that we grow up in every way into Christ, as St. Paul says to the Ephesians (4:15). There is no other or better way to fulfill our life's mission and meaning than to become the vehicle of the universal, selfless Love of God outpoured on our world. Paul adds: "Therefore putting away all falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor for we are members of one another." (4:25) Truth sharing is how we love one another best. God help us strip ourselves of our falsehoods and walk free!

A blessed Holy Week to all as we enter into and share the passion of our dear Lord, for truly, we all bear his wounds in our bodies! Be of good heart, rejoicing to be little and great at the same time IN GOD, simply because we are loved divinely! Jesus carried us all in his heart as he died for ALL, and he carries us with him into the power of Risen Life for that same ALL, every single one. Set yourself and others free by pushing out the walls of your heart. Love widely, love deeply, love loyally, love simply and the joy of the Spirit be with us all!

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

June, 2010

Dear oblates and friends,

We have closed the long Easter season with the great solemnity of Pentecost. May the fire of the Spirit at work in you cleanse and revitalize you for Jesus' ongoing mission of love and healing, of reconciliation and peace. There are so many things in our world today that disturb, anger and worry us. Will there be no end of scandals? Scandals arise, but don't take scandal! The vast Heart of God hates the sin but loves the sinner and yearns for the U-turn of repentance, of turning back to God who alone is perfect. Jesus came for all of us, loving us to his death and beyond, to a shared Risen life. Don't disappoint him with the excuse of our own or others' sins for leaving his Body, the Church, one of his modes of Presence with us on earth. We are a sinful but loved People, gathered into one around the sacred table where God feeds us on divinity to transform our humanity. We need to go to that Table more often, not less, because of all that is wrong in ourselves and our world. We Sisters meet you there daily in spirit, counting on Love's ability to overcome all that is not loving and life-giving. Don't lose faith, that is, absolute trust in God's ultimate triumph. Keep close to the Trinity within.

The solemnities of Corpus Christi, Christ, our manna for the journey, and the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the celebration of God's unbounded and unfailing Love for all who open themselves to it, fall in this new month of June. Then, there are the human love feasts so traditional to this month: weddings, graduations, gardening, vacation travel, endings and new beginnings. How precious these celebrations are to people of faith as we let God into our hearts and homes and daily living, God, our life energy, our fuel for the way ahead and the very love we pour out, ours and God's together, as we incarnate God in our world, be its sphere ever so small for each of us. Only God matters, and all in God!

I felt your prayers in the last two months as I went through a hard time physically and couldn't manage the monthly Oblate Letter. The usual July and August vacation for me will be necessary as well, but I trust God will make me as well as possible as we take up the new season again in September. You are never out of my daily prayers and those of all the Community, especially now that we here at Clyde are in the midst of the deconstruction and renovation of our 100 plus years old buildings. I'm sure you can keep in touch with progress on our website so I won't go into that here. Just be assured that we are grateful for your help, financial and spiritual, to get us through this unsettling but hopeful time. There are a lot of sacred stones and sacred stories! Our Sisters living as guests at the health care center, Our Lady of Rickenbach or in the three small guest houses at Clyde and those who traveled to our Tucson and Wyoming monasteries for the duration are one heart and one spirit in this forward momentum despite the shake up and any hardships. Hold us in your prayers!

As our Sacred Scriptures say, there is a time for building and a time for taking down. Our Father Benedict lived through the building of monasteries and seeing their destruction in his time. He understands our needs and stresses, our hopes and vision

for the future. We count on God's help and the prayers of all. Till September, one in
God's universal Love,
Sister Jean Frances