

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

January 2008

Happy New Year dear Oblates and Friends,

I'm late with this letter, as usual lately! But I'm at the main monastery now, not our nursing center, Our Lady of Rickenbach (OLR) and settling in with lots of adjustments to make as I get back into larger community life. I'm grateful for your prayerful support all the way. You can be sure you, too, are held in prayer faithfully every day.

We've had a white Christmas and New Year unlike any seen here in many years. In fact, because we have a back-up generator, we had the privilege of taking in whole families and even the monks from Conception Abbey when we were all without power and water for many days due to the two ice storms followed by deep snow. The devastation of the trees is terrible to see. There are whole trees uprooted and many of our most beautiful maples and white pines stripped of branches. It will be quite awhile before our men can begin the clean up. Ten or twelve inches of snow cover the ruins to some extent. I hope and pray you all fared better.

We'll need that patience we've been reflecting on to be sure! Michael Casey's book, "The Undivided Heart," and its chapter on the virtue of patience is our mentor this year. Perhaps, like me, patience is often a part of your New Year's resolutions. I know some people give up on making resolutions, but I think it's important to show some good will by at least making an effort at some healthy and life-enhancing resolutions. Sure, we'll fail, but don't give up. It's better to have tried and failed than to not have tried at all.

Our Father Benedict aligns himself with the older monastic tradition in his Prologue (50) where he assures us that through patience we share in the Paschal Mystery of Christ's suffering and death, and by that means also share in his kingdom. Patience became known as a "white martyrdom," a bloodless one. Even more specifically, Benedict brings the concept of patience into the first four degrees or steps of Humility (RB 7:10-43) as an aspect of giving up one's own will to prefer nothing to the will of God. In 7:35 the Latin text uses the word "patientiam" in the sense of the quiet acceptance of what must be borne. That embrace of reality as it hits us takes the form of endurance without weakening or attempting to run away instead of facing into our troubles as a challenge to the Christ life within us.

If there were no troubles or anxieties in our daily life, how would we ever become strong in patience? Or how would we prove our virtue to be real and not just a fantasy of our self-image? Cassian and Basil argue that the common life with all its ups and downs is better for us because there's less danger of self-deception about how virtuous we are. Living in close quarters with others doesn't leave much room for self-congratulations or dependence on the calm and steady goodness of others for our patience.

Patience and perseverance in the give and take of life together (yours and ours) is a daily dying to our selfish ego. There is nowhere we can flee from the tensions and hurts of human interrelations. "Purity of heart," our highest goal according to Cassian, is not attained by separation from other people who bug us or hurt us in their brokenness, but by embracing that woundedness with patience and prayer.

Casey quotes St. Bernard as saying that there is a necessary impatience at times. We don't seek being a victim! Bernard calls the bad patience *slavery* when we could and

should have been free. I imagine we need to learn how to discern the difference so we only employ impatience with positive action and not as a way of hurting another. You might make an interesting and enlightening spiritual exercise of marking your Bible with a highlighter every time you come across that word "patience." Notice the context in which it occurs and the event or situation that calls for this kind of enduring strength. Endurance is NOT the end all of being patient. Casey again quotes Bernard who says that "the Christian strives to preserve his heart from rancor." I think of that as a sort of brooding, sour, resentful bitterness with maybe a touch of "pay back" in it. He goes on to say we must avoid all semblance of grumbling. Bernard must have learned this from Benedict who hated murmuring with a passion. I think of grumbling as a coward's way of resisting reality when it doesn't suit us whereas patience and perseverance have an active quality inherent in them that waits or works to better a situation.

Bernard remarks that our patience must be suffused with a buoyancy that makes it a positive force for good. My dictionary tells me that buoyancy is the ability to rise up quickly. There's lightness, even cheerfulness about a buoyant spirit. We've all known people who, when knocked down by life's harshness, get up and go on and don't linger in a morass of self-pity. They refuse to stay down. They're people who look for a window when God's permissive will has closed a door. They know how to detour when necessary, not just give up.

"The real test of the genuineness of a person's endeavor," says Casey, "is to be found in the way he deals with difficulties." This must be why Benedict has the novice director try the novices (meaning the newcomers to monastic life) to see how they react or respond to troubles and has them told quite clearly the difficulties that lie ahead on the monastic path (RB 7:35-43).

We'll go further on this subject next time, but for now, since we are in the Epiphany season I want to wish each of you many experiences of God manifesting the divine right in the ordinariness of your daily life. Epiphany means revelation or manifestation. We see Jesus revealed as the Savior of all nations in the imagery of the Kings' coming to pay their homage and bearing mystical gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. The gold is our love, the frankincense is our recognition of the homage and humility we have before the divinity, and the myrrh is sacramental of "love unto death and beyond." What gifts of adoring love, reverent devotion and fidelity did we bring to the newborn King on this great feast that urges us to look everywhere for how God might be revealed, even in the most unlikely places, persons or events.

As I close, my prayer is that the sacred mysteries, as we celebrate them one by one, will find a home in your heart and bear their particular fruit there in the growing seasons of your love and life.

With blessings to you,
Sr. Jean Frances

A reminder to the Clyde Oblates - we have a gathering the weekend of Feb. 29, March 1-2. Make your reservations as soon as you're able. God willing and weather permitting we'll welcome some of you then.

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

February 2008

Dear Oblates and Friends with monastic hearts,

Besides the lovely liturgical February 2 feast of the Presentation of our Lord in the Temple, we also have the monastic feast of St. Scholastica on the 10th. Women Benedictines call her the mother and mentor of our spiritual journey through, with and in Jesus, our Beloved, and we celebrate her feast with great solemnity.

Legend says that Scholastica was the twin sister of our father Benedict, and she followed him when he fled Roman society for the desert, that ancient and symbolic place of aloneness before God, facing into the emptiness and darkness through which all of us must pass in our own time and place.

In the wisdom of his life experience, Benedict shares with us his conviction that before we can tread our desert alone, without guides, we need a long period of purification, transformation and education in the School of the Lord's service. We need some form of community life that rubs and tames our flaws and polishes our strengths /virtues until we become transparent of Christ.

This is where we connect again to our topic of patience. Benedict lists in his 4th degree of Humility (RB7) those hard and hurtful things that we humans will encounter along the path to which God has set our feet. If we look over that list in a prayerful mood, I think we'll each find many things with which we can identify. We all suffer throughout life, and that suffering takes many forms, all of which try our patience, especially with ourselves. The child within us wonders WHY? Why me? Why us? What did I ever do to deserve this? Why are they doing this to me? When laughter has turned to tears and peace of mind turns into confusion, when we feel abandoned, neglected, overlooked or bypassed and no one is sensitive to our heart's pain, the grace may come for us to face the fact that, as Casey says, "(They) are the stuff of most human experience. Instead of asking himself why he must endure them, who is responsible for them and how such trials can be eliminated, the monk would do better to take for granted that they, or something very similar, will always be with him and so devote his energies to the task of living creatively despite them."

Yes, none of us escapes the hard knocks of life. How do you think one lives "creatively" around and despite life's grief? I think creativity is a lively, life-giving state of being, inventive, energetic and forward-looking. Benedict says we need to run while we have the light of life so that the darkness of death (or life's little deaths) will not overwhelm us. That's another metaphor of creativity, of being alive and kicking, so to speak, rather than down and out, of doing something positive and growthful with what IS, with what life dishes out to us.

What do we do to live and learn from life experience? We probably all go through stages of hurt and anger, blaming, maybe even sulking or plotting pay back. But sooner or later, IF we allow God into the picture, we move on into the arena of truth, facing reality and realizing our desperate need for divine assistance, aching to see God's hand and presence in the mess. God hears our defeatist sighs, our need to pin the blame

elsewhere, our dislike of the truth that's in our face, yet God still loves us immensely, and holds us and will not drop us, no matter what!

Despite our fears, faith, which is an absolute trust in God, tries to break through our shell of darkness and self-protection. What's real in us, our love, reaches out to grasp God's proffered hand. We only learn this over years of self-disappointment. We begin to move into that freedom into which Scripture tells us **the truth sets us free**. I'm sure we've all felt that wondrous senses of liberation when we've come through a rough patch and our spirits are lightened, humbled, quieted and ever so grateful.

Casey comments on five principal areas where patience is tried and where the monastic has to deal with the temptation either to hurry the process to an uncreative termination OR precipitately to abandon it altogether and try his hand at something else. Stop awhile and ponder what that means in terms of your own life experience. How do we sometimes rush to deaden our pain instead of listening to what it's saying to us? Or, have you ever abandoned something when the going got tough, just walked away from it and grew a hard crust against it or pulled a curtain of oblivion over it as you ran away, unfortunately, taking yourself with you?

We'll go into those five areas in subsequent letters. Meanwhile, with Ash Wednesday and the Lenten season coming so early this month let me urge you to use Lent for some serious, yet joyful growing. Let your heart smile often in the remembrance of Love's triumph over death. Jesus is our risen life energizer! Lenten graces and blessings as you need them.

If there are any of you who would prefer to only get this letter on our Web site's Oblate section where there is also news of dates and events, please e-mail me. I'll remove your address from my mailing list, which currently has 360 names! You can reach me at jeanfr@bspa.us.

A reminder to the Clyde Oblates: We have our first weekend gathering of the year from February 29 to March 2. The other dates are May 2-4, and the fall retreat is September 26-28.

I join St. Benedict who urges all of us to look forward to Holy Easter with the joy of the Holy Spirit who is hard at work within us.

Holding you prayerfully,
Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

March 2008

Dear Oblates and friends,

With March we have come to the second half of our Lenten season. Given our topic for this year, Patience, I'm thinking that, like me, you may be experiencing trouble being patient with yourself for the living out of your Lenten resolutions, the *bona opera* of the Rule, chapter 49. Still, we are coming, hopefully with "*the joy of the Holy Spirit*", to the climax of our Lenten period of grace and growth with the solemn celebration of the Paschal Triduum.

Easter Sunday of the Lord's Resurrection will come with a burst of Alleluias and a renewal of our hope ever greening. Every year as we reenact these holy mysteries in order to plum their depth better as amazing grace for our daily living, we focus on the risen Lord, still our Emmanuel, God with us, but now in the awesome power and life energy of the Resurrection. We unite with him in his glorious place at the right hand of the Father and join his prayer for the whole world that God loves so much as to send him to live fully in our humanity that we might, by oneing with him, share his divinity.

I am thinking here of the Letter to the Hebrews 7:25 which describes well for me the mission of our risen Lord and now **our** mission in and through him: "*He is able to save all those who come to God through him because he lives forever to make intercession for them.*" I figure that even if I can do nothing else I can live a prayerful life of intercession; so many people out there have a need for our care and prayer! *God, expand my caring heart to the very dimensions of the universe you love so much!* All of us can care deeply and widely, and people need us to **say** we care; that's a healing and comforting balm for them and takes our prayer out of the realms of wishful thinking, or, put another way, makes our prayer practical and real.

As a Congregation of women aiming at the unceasing adoration of God through, with and in Christ in the Blessed Sacrament, the sign of God's unconditional love and nurturing, the food for life's long journey, we try consciously to join Jesus in his own perpetual adoration of the Father. Jesus is the ONLY true perpetual Adorer. We simply join him in that ceaseless prayer as much as humanly possible, praying in and with his own divine voice for the whole world of God's beloved creatures. In this life of adoration and intercession, rest assured you are always held in God's mindfulness and ours.

Happy, glorious and blessed Easter! Feel the surge of new, risen life energy flowing into you. Believe in its power at the root of any strength you already have and trust God to help you make use of it as needed. Jesus rose to share this life energy with us. Humanity has a great destiny beyond its fallenness, beyond the hungers of the human heart, the griefs of love and loss, the violence which can only produce more violence. Even in the midst of our worst case scenario, life is worth living fully because God is with us. God holds us gently and will never drop us! Count on it!

The patient waiting of our Lord throughout his earthly lifetime for the fulfillment of his divine commission: to gather us all up in himself and return us to our Father as a Kingdom of life and love eternal, a mission sealed by his death and resurrection, is, as

we all know, far from realization in our own time. Yet it is already an accomplished fact, fully realized in eternity.

We need to help Christ along. WE are his body, his eyes, his heart, his hands, his two loving arms, and his feet moving toward those in need. It is his love in ours and his yearning in ours that hastens the reality of the peaceable Kingdom. I hope we will find spiritual joy in knowing and believing this.

The Spirit of Jesus in us works ceaselessly to bring this to pass. So let us liberate, not bind, the arms of God and ALLOW God to reach out through us. We live by faith and we wait in hope. This is another aspect of the virtue or strength of holy patience. Referring to Casey's 5 areas in which patience is most often tried, he comments first on harsh treatment and the violation of our sensibilities. We feel misunderstood, not really known well (assuming that no one cares anyway), the victim of others' neuroses and even sometimes of downright injustice or petty cruelties..

I quote Casey here: "There is no doubt that objective unfairness occurs in monastic life" (in everyone's life, I'd say), "and occasionally monstrous injustices are committed, but the more usual grinding down of our sensibilities can be understood as serving a creative role in monastic life insofar as it contributes to the downfall of the ego, which is a necessary cataclysm before the advent of total prayerfulness. Generally such difficulties result not from malice or coldness but from the thoughtlessness and selfishness of others. This is simply part of human life which the normal sane adult learns to cope with. There is no point in making a great lamentation and downing in self-pity; it is a fact of life." You might need to read this quote over several times to get his point. I think facing and accepting the woundedness and lack of holiness in my self and in all others would be a giant step toward the patience required to live in the truth.

Our own ego is probably doing to others what we feel done to our self, though we often don't see it. There's an ole saying that we readily see in others what we have not yet faced in our self. That's why seeking self-knowledge through self-observation is an important tool of the spiritual life. Casey concludes that patience with human brokenness means owning but setting aside our feelings, such as they are, and adhering to the objective teaching of faith...that we must love as Jesus loved. (Jn 15:12) That undoubtedly takes a lot of human compassion, forgiveness and letting go.

So now, in the certain joy of the Resurrection, sisters and brothers in our Risen Lord, "put on the mind of Christ" and like him, let us learn the rewards of patience in interior freedom and Easter Peace!

Sister Jean Frances

This is to let you all know that I am trying to create an email distribution list for those willing to receive the monthly Oblate Letter as an email attachment. If you have an email address and are willing to send it to me, please do. Just write me something at jeanfr@bspa.us. Those willing to get the Letter via email please let me know that and I'll add your name to my distribution list. I realize there are a number who do not have email or internet access. You would still get your monthly Letter as always by postal service. Because Bulk Mailing must have at least 200 pieces, I'd prefer not to drop below that number. Please choose how you prefer to receive the Letter OR if this applies to you, do me the favor of asking me to take your name off the mailing list if you know you aren't reading the Letter and would just as leave not get it. With the prices of mail and paper and just about everything constantly going up I need to streamline my mailing process. God bless you for your cooperation and pray as I'm rather internet challenged, ha!

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

April 2008

Dear Oblates and friends,

We're in the glorious fifty days of Easter celebration which concludes with the great feast of Pentecost, the remembrance of the sending of the Spirit of our Risen Lord Jesus on all who are baptized into him. May Mary, Mother of the Church since that marvelous occasion in the Cenacle, help us to keep our alleluias fresh and resonant as we go about living with the power of the Resurrection operative within us and reaching out through us to everyone near and far away.

Pursuing our theme of patience, I'm going to reach back a bit to Jesus' dying words: "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." (Luke 23:34) We'd do well to make this prayer of Jesus our own because that's the truth; so much that happens in life to hurt us is caused, not by deliberate malice toward us on the part of others but human weakness, selfishness and ego centeredness.

I quote Michael Casey: "The ability to love one's enemies and to pray for one's persecutors goes beyond human skills; it is possible only when one evacuates the ego so that Christ is able to love within one and from the midst of pain to reach out and negate the malice of sin."

My dear friends, we need to have such a strong conviction about the Divine Presence within us and reaching out through us that we can bring that awareness to bear on the real life situations that confront us. Our heartaches, our pain, our bewildering life hurts, our fears about handling things well, have an added dimension IF we put on Christ to the extent that we have made his dying words our own, words that we realize he is now saying from within us. Never forget that you are now God's Temple. The Trinity abides forever in you! We are never alone, especially not in the hundred and one little deaths that are our portion in the suffering of Christ our Head.

We all carry, however, the burden of our whole history, our personal liabilities, as Casey terms them. They go with us through life and are inescapable. Here I quote Casey again: "Creative living begins with understanding and accepting such limits, compensating for them where possible and making the most out of the good things that are their counter face." What's he saying there?

It's like saying we have scar tissue from our woundedness, or maybe a kind of paralysis from a grave injury, something that diminishes us in some way as the result of life's hurt's. Realism says it's there and we have to deal with it. A counter face is the other side of the coin, to use a different metaphor. There is some good in there

somewhere! Something good can come out of apparent evil and often does, by the mercy of God.

People struggle with whatever leaves liabilities in its wake and learn to compensate for what will never be quite the same again, like my Dad after a massive stroke learned to use his one good hand and make the most out of his personal gifts and talents that he could still exercise. His soul had an artist's eye and he could see beauty everywhere. He had a compulsion to paint it, and what gorgeous things resulted from his efforts! Framed, they hung in art galleries!

Don't we all have our struggles to make the best of what life puts on our plate? Hopefully, we bring a lot of prayer to those efforts because we are deeply rooted in the risen Christ whose power is available to those who open themselves to it. Here's the test of our Faith; it has to be far more than saying all the right words!

Keeping positive is essential to the healing process and a good sense of humor helps. So do realistic expectations of our self and others. That's a tall order and not easily come by without some trial and error. There's where patience comes in. There's much we can do to get up and go on and capitalize on the good things still in our life. But even better is the growing assurance that God is with us and will hold us securely when we stumble. God knows well what happens to us and why, even when we don't understand. The important thing is to go on saying, like St. Paul in his Letter to the Philippians (4:13), "I can do all things in him who strengthens me."

Clinging to the awareness of God's abiding presence and merciful care for us is our salvation from bitterness, blaming, regrets, guilt feelings, giving up or living under a dark cloud of depression. It is Christ, strong within, who helps us make the best of things and even learn valuable lessons from our own life story. The things we learn to accept as somehow part of God's providential care for us gradually lose their pain, at least the sting of bitterness and negativity. We SAY in our Christian prayers that we want to share in Christ's sufferings and death so that we might also share his Resurrection and glory. We have to mean that first part as much as the hope contained in the second. So, we are left with little room for complaint when life hurts. Remember, God never gives us more than we can bear WITH HIM!

Is it any wonder that our father Benedict made mindfulness of the presence of God one of the most essential qualities of the monastic heart? With the eyes of our heart always oriented toward God, we can indeed do all things necessary for that "life in abundance" that Jesus willed for us. "I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). There were times in my life that I felt down for the count and said to Jesus: "Just leave me dead; I'm tired of this dying and rising stuff", but he wouldn't let me be; he has such great hopes for each of us!

To conclude I'd like to refer to another Scripture text that has meant a lot to me, the more I ponder it: "God has already given us everything we need for life and for holiness." (2 Peter 1:3) I already have access to whatever I need to deal with my personal liabilities! They aren't in God's way! And, wonder of wonders, they're part of the holiness that will be mine! On Easter evening, our risen Lord appeared in the Upper Room and showed his disciples HIS wounds. That tells us that our wounds, too, will be part of our glory, so embrace them! With my love, care and prayers always,

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

May, 2008

Dear oblates and friends,

May and June bring us to the Oblate Letter vacation months, July and August. Then we begin a new Letter season with September. I haven't yet chosen a topic for the Letters next season. Do you have a need or desire to pursue some particular monastic theme? If so, write or email me. I'd welcome suggestions.

Thanks to the couple dozen of you who offered to get the Letter by email. In this economy every bit helps! On April first I had to turn in my 2008-9 Budget and I assure you, it makes a difference.

Now back to our theme of Patience in the Benedictine tradition, using Michael Casey's book, *The Undivided Heart*. There's nothing in holy patience of cynical, sarcastic, bitter resignation, a sort of victim position. It's a positive virtue that springs from love and forgiveness and human compassion. A good question: Have we learned to love ourselves and all others in our common human woundedness? My experience has been that when another humbly shares his or her woundedness with me I love them more than ever!

Casey touched on an aspect of patience I had never thought of before: the alternation of our spiritual condition as we live out our lives seeking God day by day. Here I quote him: "Life can be difficult simply because, as soon as we develop the skills to handle one set of circumstances, everything changes, our aptitudes become irrelevant and we are confronted with new and fearsome challenges. The temptation is either to stop trying altogether or to go back to doing the things which used to work, blocking out from our mind the thought that such wooden 'fidelity' seems to be accomplishing little."

He remarks that God seems to leave us forever wrong footed, always a bit ill at ease rather than self assured. We cannot save ourselves or achieve mastery in the field of holiness on our own initiatives. No matter how much we want to be holy, as Scripture exhorts us, holiness remains God's work in us through the Holy Spirit. We can only cooperate with God's grace and what God wants to accomplish in us, not strive to make ourselves what we envision or fantasize.

I recently read a conversation in a novel that sort of touches on this reality. See if you get the connection as I try to paraphrase it as best I can. It's from the book *Nora, Nora*, by Ann Rivers Siddons. The speaker says the only thing we can ever be is ourselves. But people of Faith would rather say we are more than mere human; we are divinely human because of Christ growing in us year after year. She writes: "We all try so hard to be strong or free or safe or whatever it is we think we need most; and in the end all we can ever be is just us. And that's enough."

However, we share a spirituality that affirms God's growth within our humanness, transforming us into Christ...and THAT'S enough! "Christ in us, our pledge of glory", as Paul would say. In a way, we must align ourselves with whatever God has in mind for us, not some grandiose plan of our own. The meaning of what God is doing in us at any particular time often eludes us. We may eventually come to understand some of it but

God remains a hidden God whom we seek on his terms, not ours. God's actions call for faith, for absolute trust on our part. It sometimes takes heroic faith to go on loving and giving, trusting and being patient with God's timing, never losing our hope in God's glorious future for us.

Quoting Casey: "(Patience) is no trivial domestic virtue, but the practical working out of faith and love in the arena of the real." It is in the everydayness of life that people are sanctified. How we respond or react in those daily circumstances is the barometer of our actual holiness, that is, how far we have allowed God to transform us in our present reality.

Why does God sometimes leave glaring faults, even sins, in people who are otherwise quite holy? I believe that God confounds our unreal or arrogant confidence in ourselves and allows it to come to light this way. Casey writes: "All that comes from the hand of God is good, even when it lays bare to light the ignominy of human weakness." If we could sanctify ourselves by our own efforts, who needs God?

Someday we will learn to embrace the humiliation of our woundedness and flaws as part of the person made beautiful and holy by God's doing. Remember what I wrote last month about the Risen Jesus showing his wounded hands and feet to the disciples as part of his glorification. It will be the same for us, not by denying or hiding our weaknesses but by owning them and letting God touch them with divine Healing and Mercy. God sometimes does this touching through other people, so don't be surprised! Scars of wounds may remain; we may carry them for a lifetime but these will be the trophies of our spiritual combat. Thanks be to God!

All good in creation is God's sole initiative, though we may like to think otherwise! Are you familiar with the saying: "To err is human; to forgive is Divine"? I think Benedict was well aware of this when he wrote in RB4:42-43: "If you notice something good in yourself, give credit to God, not to yourself, but be certain that the evil you commit is always your own and yours to acknowledge." All of us humans err often despite our best intentions. In owning that, we learn to forgive our self and others. We stumble; we backslide; we're enthusiastic one day and feeble the next. We do, as Paul says, the things we don't want to do and don't do the things we want. We walk under a cloud of depression or discouragement at one time on our journey and then joyously walk out into the light for awhile. We try, and then sometimes can't make ourselves try.

God does indeed teach us and humble our arrogance by these alternations in our spirit. The key in all this is not to exaggerate our feelings about these changes but accept and use them for growth and the exercise of the spiritual muscles of faith and patience. We learn not to rely on our own resources to manipulate the kind of holiness we want but surrender to what God wants for us. We learn to look in the mirror of our truth and accept our self as we are, without denial or deceit. Benedict also wrote in RB4:24: "Rid your heart of all deceit" (something we become rather adept at!) and in another place Benedict writes: "There are ways that seem to us right, but the end thereof leads to death." (RB7:21) We can be so sure we're right!

Growth in holiness is a lifetime process, a journey of ups and downs. We must expect this rather than act surprised. We need to stop looking so much at ourselves, trying to see how holy we're becoming but fix our eyes, our goal, on becoming Christ in obedience to the movements of the Holy Spirit in us. (RB4:62) "Do not wish to be called holy, but first be holy so that you may truly be called so."

In conclusion, dear oblates and friends, BE LOVE, because God is love. "Be compassionate because your heavenly Father is compassionate." Become maturely human (perfect) as God is mature, whole, complete in God's nature. Be patient with God's work in you. As the slogan goes, you're not finished yet. Lighten up, and even learn to laugh at your not yet-ness. God is still at work! That's why we have time, as our father Benedict reminds us.

Let the holy days and feasts of May nurture your heart. God hold you gently and be the deepest love of your life. In Him,

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

June, 2008

Dear Oblates and friends,

We've come to the end of another Oblate Letter year with grateful hearts for all that Divine Love has done with, for and through us. Here at Clyde we're rejoicing in the steady progress of repairing and renovating our nursing center after the Easter Sunday fire. The Sisters who were rushed out of the building that fateful day are fewer by three. Perhaps it's their prayers in heaven that are hurrying things along. The staff and the firefighters were treated to a THANK YOU picnic in May to express our gratitude for what was and is being done. Patience, patience!

Michael Casey's wisdom on "patience" has been our year long theme. He concludes his reflections by enumerating four stages of patience which he identifies from St. Benedict's 4th degree of Humility. I'll condense those remarks here for you.

First, there is ENDURANCE. (See RB7:35) Patience isn't a passive virtue, he says, in the sense of resignation but is hard work at whatever life brings. To be able to bear up when suffering and hardship come our way is partly a habitual attitude that is able to guide our life beyond the so called pleasure principle. We keep on an even keel with determination strengthened by trust that God is ever with us in our varied conditions and situations, so we can be strong and firm, standing in trust and not exaggerating the difficulties, even when our feelings war with our faith vision.

Second, Benedict adds EQUANIMITY to endurance and calls it "having a quiet mind." Those with a solid monastic sense know that an inner stillness is necessary for the holy, human handling of things when they've gone wrong, created a lot of stress or really hurt! I quote Casey here: "Patience is really a matter of faith in the providence of God." If we can accept in our hearts that this unpleasant moment is a vehicle of God's concern, then we will much less angry or depressed because of human idiocy and more able to avoid inward rebellion. We need to learn how to steady ourselves and hold ourselves in peace in difficult circumstances, and how to be a force for peace and reconciliation with others. Without some skill at these things, patience won't just happen.

Third, Casey lists JOY. Now this may seem a hard one for most of us. He says Benedict doesn't just want us to keep ourselves in equanimity during hard times but even to be glad for them...a tall order! "Secure in their hope of God's retribution they continue joyfully...But in all these things we overcome because of him who has loved us." (RB 7:39) Good people suffer plenty in daily life, without a doubt, but their confidence is that God knows their hearts and will never, under any circumstance, abandon them. God IN them makes the journey of life with them, whether hard road or easy.

We learn to look for the hidden blessing in the midst of ALL life's moments. God's in there somewhere! And God can turn all sorts of hard things to our good. Patient suffering makes us better, not bitter, IF we are convinced in our inmost heart of the personal love of God for us, as we are, where we are on the journey. God's care will see us through life's rough patches. Perhaps part of our problem with being joyful under

most circumstances is that we aren't all that convinced of God's personal concern and profound love for us. Can we learn that? How?

Maybe a starting place would be to try to see God's care and providence in the little sacraments of Love that occur in daily life: in all types of beauty around us, in good health, a precious, close knit family, solid and faithful friends, this good earth, an agile mind, good test results, an affectionate heart open to others without prejudice or judgment, etc.

Fourth, Benedict seems to want us to accept even more troubles than we originally offered up with Christ, borne up with a sense of solidarity with Jesus as we make the effort to love our perceived enemies and pray for those who hurt us. Only our deep relationship with Christ who is here, loving others from within us, can keep us patient in trying circumstances, forgiving and reaching out from the midst of our pain or anguish. Casey concludes by saying: "To accept pain cheerfully is not mere stoicism; it is ultimately altruistic." In other words, pain borne for the sake of others is redemptive; it has the potential of being transformed by the impress of the cross of Christ.

As each of us progress in life and holiness, maybe some of us will reach that exalted capacity for unselfish love and care for others. That there is JOY in loving and giving no one doubts. Our failure is to see the love possibilities in times of distress or any of the myriad types of suffering that beset us in life. But we can take encouragement from this, that God's caring Heart never misses a beat even when ours falters.

Before closing this Letter I want to thank all of you who came to our aid in any way at all after the Easter Sunday fire. The dear little old Sisters, thanks be to God, are back in their repaired and newly cleaned home, Our Lady of Rickenbach. Resettling has also been a strain but that will pass with time and PATIENCE!

Our faithful staff of nurses, house cleaners and cooks is to be commended for their adjustment in difficult circumstances and the frustration of their usual routines, too. Our own workmen and the local volunteer firefighters were right with us in the turmoil and so helpful! And the various crews of the companies that worked on the restoration were super! God in us has seen us through!

Happy, healthy and graced Summer months till we resume the Oblate Letter writing season with the September Letter. If there are more of you who want to try receiving the Letter by email, don't hesitate to let me know. My email address is: jeanfr@bspa.us and our snail mail address is: 31970 State Hwy P, Clyde, MO 64432-8100.

God hold you gently in his vast Love and care,

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

September 2008

Dear Oblates and friends,

So, we begin another Oblate Letter season. I hope you had a good summer and are as well as can be. You may remember I asked for suggestions about topics for the Letters and the only suggestion I got was about “the great silence”, from one of our Tulsa, OK Oblates. Thank you, Barb! I haven’t received any divine inspirations yet so we’ll start the season with that. These will simply be my own reflections from personal experience about the place of silence in the monastic regime.

It seems ironic to write a letter about silence and its place in monastic tradition; perhaps silence had better speak for itself. Some people crave it and can’t find it; some people have it and hurt because of it. Some people fear it and the emptiness it seems to imply to them, while others aren’t ready for it and don’t know what to do with it when suddenly a silent space opens up before them and in them. Are we afraid we might meet God or our true self in that silence? That’s been known to happen!

It has been said that silence is God’s first language. When God spoke and all created things came to life in him, it was out of that eternal, divine silence. Our Jesus is the humanly enfleshed, definitive word of God, that is, God spoke God’s self most fully and completely in the person of Jesus. All the rest of us and the created universe itself are particular configurations of the divine energy for life and love but don’t have it all, so to speak. God spoke and all the words of God are actions or energies put to use for God’s purposes. Did you realize you are a word of God? Is it essential to human happiness to know what God intends for us, what the purpose of our little life is? One thing we DO know is that Love created us, wants us, cherishes us, or we wouldn’t even exist! Do we really believe that?

Scripture tells us that our Father asks that we “listen to Him”, to Jesus...look at him, listen to him, imitate him, enter into his mind and heart to know what God would have us do and be. (Mt.17:5)

When we listen with the heart as Benedict taught us, God continues to speak through Jesus a word that is life and light and love. That’s why Lectio Divina, especially on the scriptures, is such a treasured part of monastic practice. How are you doing with your Lectio? One thing I know is that we can’t put ourselves into something that we don’t love and value.

Lectio is not just reading something to fill time, to distract ourselves, to learn something to grab our interest, or for trying to stimulate ourselves spiritually. Lectio is daily exposure to the story of God’s infinite and unconditional love for us, an intentional love full of purpose and meaning; it is the story of God’s interaction with humanity all through history. It is our story if we’re hearing it correctly. Given half a chance it can fill us with wonder and gratitude and a strong sense of commitment to love in return for so much love. It becomes part of our daily converse with the One we love.

Many of you have quality times of sacred silence planned into your day on a regular basis. Many others may hunger for periods of silence and solitude but don’t know how to make room for it. Some who find sitting or centering prayer their present best form of relating to God, tell us how blest they are in that holy silence of wordless

adoration. Others find a swift, silent, loving glance of the heart toward God, locking their heart's eyes with God's, also bears much fruit in their daily living. The warmth of love exchanged in that one instant carries them for hours as they embrace what each moment brings.

The monastic term, "the great or grand silence", stems from the ancient practice of solemn night silence after Compline as opposed to the general quiet or silence of the day in the monastery. For you, our lay brothers and sisters in the world, the challenge is always there to make a little monastery in your heart or home where solitude can produce a healing, calming and prayerful presence to God.

Years ago when I was young in the monastery, night silence was so sacred that we wrote notes rather than speak from after Compline until after Eucharist in the morning. We tip toed in the halls and stepped out of our shoes before entering the dormitory to protect the solemn quiet of the night where more conscious communion with God was possible before sleep. I recall there were 24 of us in the novitiate dorm at the time.

It was a very sacred thing to be the caller and wake up the Sisters for their night hour of adoration..."Jesus Christ calls you to his holy adoration". God did the calling and we were his messengers, an awesome thing.

Everyday we had to learn the discipline of guarding our senses and choosing to speak rather than saying the first thing that popped into our head, learning when to speak and when to be silent. St Benedict says (RB6:2) that there are times when even "good words" are left unsaid out of esteem for silence. There's also a passage somewhere in the Book of Sirach about learning to put a bolt on our lips and carefully weighing every word we say. And then, of course, there is the NT Letter of James about the use of the tongue; we'd do well to review that, too.

Why is silence so important? Why was it a big value to Benedict and is it relevant today? You might take up your copy of the Rule, and reread Chapter 6, noticing all the biblical quotes Benedict pulls into that short chapter on silence or restraint of speech. He reminds us that we are all students in the school of God's service so we should be quietly attentive, a good listener and quick learner. What he condemns there are things that are not fitting for a heart that is always facing God as our life's Center.

Silence is a desert where we face God alone; there, as on the mountain top of the Transfiguration, words fail us. Solitude and silence go hand in hand to create a certain optimum environment or atmosphere for meeting God. All the more superficial layers of daily living fall away into deep silence before the God of life and love who challenges and

invites us into intimacy. We learn for the most part, as do all people, how to handle intimacy from our human relationships. What do they say, right now, about our real communion with God?

Prayer practices, such as sitting or centering prayer, need to fit the wearer....there is no one size fits all, or all the time. Prayer is a relationship, not a technique. Monastics have an ancient saying, "pray as you are; pray as you can, not as you can't." find what works for you, what fits you best, at least for now, and just DO IT...with or without words.

The fruits of silence and solitude in the soul are many. I'm sure you can list some from your own experience. It is such a blessed relief not to have to "do it right" but, with

or without words, to speak to God straight from the heart. One of its fruits is a sense of the Divine Mercy that holds us securely in arms of love, cherished beyond all telling!

Silence and solitude are not foes but friends of our soul. Make room for them somehow in your conscious day and entrust yourself to God in them at night.

Till next month, waiting with you in holy silence for God's visitation,
Sr. Jean Frances

**A REMINDER TO THOSE INTENDING TO COME TO THE ANNUAL OBLATE
RETREAT AT CLYDE, SEPT. 26-28:**

I need you to confirm your intention of coming so I have enough rooms reserved.
Please do this real soon by email or otherwise...many thanks!

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

October, 2008

Dear Oblates and friends,

Out here in the boonies (Clyde) we don't get many Trick or Treaters at Halloween; I don't know what the Halloween experience is like at our other houses. Here we mostly get the children of our employees and their parents who go home after work, change and bring the kids back in costume. We invite them all to celebrate at Our Lady of Rickenbach nursing center with the nursing staff and our dear older Sisters who get so much joy from the interaction. Last year we had lots of Pirates of the Caribbean and even someone's pet dog dressed up as a ballerina! At any rate, happy All Hallows Eve. May all the saints who have gone before us intercede for us and the needs of our worry-weary world!

We don't come to perfection in this lifetime but rather in the eternal life to come, as a prayer in our liturgy reminds us. **Here** is the arena where we work out that future maturity (fullness, completeness) usually termed "perfection", so, we expect a lot of work toward that goal, yet in scripture, we are already saints because we are rooted deeply in Christ. You might check out the greetings of the Letters of Paul, for instance, 1Cor:1:2 or Eph.1:1.

What does Benedict say about our desire for holiness? To first really **be** holy before imagining ourselves so. We work toward putting on Christ, but holiness remains entirely God's free love gift to us. Whatever we do in that "labora" here is simply a sacrament of our willingness to cooperate with God's work; it's our way of loving God back with grateful hearts.

Can we be like the Saints we celebrate in this autumn festival? Remember, we are honoring not only the canonized saints of the Church but all good people who have gone before us, as Benedict says in RB4:74, "trusting in God's mercy." That means our loved ones, neighbors, parishioners, victims of the slaughter of war, aborted infants, even people we haven't liked. No one is excluded from God's vast Love! We are sinners all, but we are **loved sinners**, people touched and healed by Divine Mercy.

Most of us, I'm sure, have a strong felt need for that infinite and unconditional mercy. As we age we become more aware of how far short we fall to becoming another Christ in our own time and place. Benedict, too, was well aware of human sin, faults and weaknesses. His years in silence and solitude before he started organizing small monasteries must have acquainted him well with his own as well as the sins of the world he fled. He faced them head on and wrote a Rule of life designed to turn things around and set genuine seekers on the path of holiness, a Rule built around human weakness and its process of transformation. "The workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery (your life and lifestyle in the little monastery of your heart and home) and stability in the community (your church, your family, and your oblate community)." RB4:78

Mindful of human frailty, Benedict wrote: "Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evil ways in the future." That doesn't mean brooding on past sins but remembering our weakness which thrusts us back on God's love and mercy. "Lord, have mercy" is perhaps my most frequent, heartfelt prayer.

Benedict also counsels the monastic to be totally open with someone, Abbot, Prioress, confessor, close friend, etc. (RB4:44-48) I think this is where they got

one of the steps in the Twelve Step Program. Too, his chapter on Humility (RB7:13-18) reminds us that we are always in God's sight, for God searches the mind and the heart, sees and loves us, knowing us as we are. **We** know what we're like, and so do those around us long enough for our outward face to lower its defenses and show our truth. This is one of the many blessings of community and family, come to think of it. Haven't I quoted before something that goes: "If three people tell you that you have a tail, you'd better turn and look"? Others often are a mirror for us and challenge our pretensions and our phoniness. We need each other on the path, fallible as we are, so we join hands as we run.

Benedict knew when he fixed a goal of holiness, that failure to meet the mark is to be expected, not shock us. So, he created a healing process called **excommunication** (chapters 23-28 and 44), designed to help us address our personal issues, lead to a better frame of mind, genuine sorrow, owning the truth, and being reconciled, which brings us back onto the right track. We experience a homecoming. Peace and inner freedom from the dominance of our dark side, which, we have to admit, causes **us** an awful lot of pain, and reunion with others and with God in our deepest soul, are the end product. These are not irrelevant chapters for any of us today.

Sometimes we get overwhelmed with stress or Acedia, which is boredom with spiritual things, or just plain disgruntled with life, sour of mind and heart. We say we're just not ourselves...how true. We have lost touch with our Center and so, we've lost our true self as well.

The very fact that Benedict had no blinkers on when it came to human fallibility and knew several ways of treating it says a lot for his identification with Christ. Divine mercy and compassion, not anger and judgment, are what Jesus holds out for each of us. Isn't this reminiscent of the Gospel story in Luke 15:17ff of the wayward son and his prodigal father? In that powerful image of God's unconditional love lies our hope that when we, like the boy, have hit rock bottom and come to our senses, we will also get up and say: "I will go back to my Father." Jesus has promised us that those who go to God through him **he will never turn away**. We cling to that hope with all our might!

The monastic meaning of excommunication is time apart to calm down and do some serious rethinking. We can only do that for ourselves and need time out to do it, so Benedict doesn't want do-gooders to be interfering in the process as though the person was under their patronage. There can be a lot of self-will in our care-giving if we aren't aware of our motivation. Today we speak of spiritually companioning one another, not being someone's spiritual director; it's the Holy Spirit in our deepest heart we want to listen to first, never as an afterthought.

So much for now. I believe our Sister Sean will be finding a way to keep you all posted about the happenings here at Clyde during the deconstruction and rebuilding process over the next two years. The guesthouses will become the Sisters' living quarters as of December first so, no overnight visitors can be accommodated after that date. We count on your prayers for us during this difficult time and assure you that we hold you in prayer as well.

God give you and yours health and joy in this Fall season!
Sr. Jean Frances