

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

The Benedictine Oblate Letter ***September, 2010***

Dear Oblates and friends,

We believe that God is present with us in every circumstance of our life, so as we begin a new Oblate Letter season, my hope is that you were looking for him day by day, moment by moment, through these summer months. God loves you; your life is precious to God beyond your wildest imagination. That conviction of faith will give you strength, confidence and hope to face the daily realities. I hope your summer experiences opened new windows or avenues through which you met God and found your daily life permeated with the sacred.

Throughout the centuries people with a monastic heart have fed their minds and hearts with the words of the ancient biblical psalmody. We pray or sing these psalms daily over a lifetime, making them part of our very thought patterns, making those sacred words a guide for our own spiritual journey. Truly, no matter what our circumstances, we can draw upon the wealth of those sacred songs to help us see and embrace the divine in our human existence. God loves to share our life!

Jesus sang these very same psalms daily in his own prayer life. Their themes and words gave voice to his every human emotion and heart's concern, integrating them into his own conscious relationship with his Father. The psalms are so precious and soul-satisfying that they become, for those who grow into their use, the intimate vocabulary of their encounter with God in the daily.

No wonder our Father Benedict draws on the psalms to make his points in the chapters of his little Rule, or guideline for living lovingly. The beloved psalms teach us how to love and to pray. The Rule teaches us, quite simply, that LOVE is the goal and criterion for literally everything. Life is blest when peppered with prayer, whether it's psalmody or our own words that reflect psalm themes like trust, gratitude or human needs of every kind.

Often people who choose as their prayer form some version of the Liturgy of the Hours with a set formula of psalms, readings and canticles, tell me they struggle with the absence of personal feelings when they settle down to pray. and, because they don't feel personally invested on the feeling level, they cannot identify with what they're saying. Boredom, distractions

and restlessness set in to spoil their prayer time, leaving them feeling worse than if they hadn't prayed at all.

Keep in mind that when we give of ourselves, our time and attention, presence and energy to pray, it is Christ himself in the Spirit who prays within us because we are, right now, his Body, a mystical body on this earth.

Think about that! It's a wondrous reality of our life in Christ. If I can't identify right now with the condition of the sacred songster, many in Christ can, and this is their song.

The Spirit of Jesus speaks for all of us at sometime or other. Nothing is really irrelevant to the heart whose vision of our unity is expanded to include everyone and everything in the universe that God has made out of the divine energies. We are never alone when we pray. People somewhere in our world are feeling the very things the psalmody evokes. We join them in their condition, and the great Spirit of God prays in them as in us. This is realized unity! We, the ego WE, diminish and disappear as we become one with the living Body of Christ praying. "Through Him and with him and in him, be to you, Father, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all honor and glory now and forever, Amen!"

There is always the danger in routine forms of prayer of mistaking the forms for the real prayer, which is a relationship, not just something we do. Flexibility is a great boon in any relationship. We don't want to turn our times for presence to God into a duty, a burden of conscience or something to get through because we've made a pledge to do it or it's expected of us. I can't imagine God, the Lover, being impressed with that in an intimate relationship any more than we ourselves would be if our spouse, a family member, friend or pastor would bring so little to the relationship.

Having a loving and trusting personal relationship with God, ever present to our daily practicalities and particularities, is the goal and purpose of **religion**, which means to bind the human and the divine back together. The forms or words or songs of prayer just help us get there. It's our aim to be as consciously present to God throughout the day as God always is to us in our shared life. Forms and words might at times just get in the way. Words, even holy ones, can be a blessing or a burden. A loving gaze frequently from the heart might be our best prayer.

Benedict understands this so his advice is to keep our prayers short and

pure, that is, unmixed with other diversions. (cf. RB20:4) How do you pray? How do you pray best? Over a lifetime we learn that prayer (not saying prayers) varies according to the circumstances of our moments. Whether we are engaging in private or communal acts of worship with a set form, or with cries from the heart (I call them arrow prayers), prayer is the conversation in our relationship with God. The point is to keep God in all our moments no matter what they hold.

Soon after I wrote thus far I received an Oblate newsletter from St. Meinrad's Archabbey in Indiana. Father Meinrad Brune there is the Oblate Director and a friend of mine. I bet he would send you a copy of the summer 2010 volume 163 if you requested it. What I've been saying here is said so much better there. You might want to try it.

Till next month, when I hope to carry on from where I'm leaving off, God hold you gently and be the dearest Companion of your life!

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter *November, 2010*

Dear Oblates and friends,

“Whatever is pure, whatever is holy, whatever is gracious, think on these things and the God of peace will be with you.”

Over time, for those who follow this advice found in the Letter of Paul to the Philippians, 4: taken from verses 8-9, watching over their minds and hearts to feed them regularly with God-consciousness, begin to feel the power and truth of those words. One of the fruits of prayer is a sense of the beautiful and of joy, of sharing daily life with God. The spiritual practice of communing with God, even in wordless awareness (a loving look is enough), becomes the first language of the heart.

Praise, thanksgiving and intercessions fill our times of vocal or worded prayer. The Jewish Baraka (pattern of blessing prayers) employs all three that are familiar to us in our Christian prayer, right from Jesus' time. That traditional prayer form starts with blessing God for who God is in God's self, then moves to remembering God's constant faithfulness and giftfulness to us in our every need. The heart is filled with thanksgiving. Only then does it turn to petitions for our current needs. Believing and trusting that God hears and will do *what is best for us in the long run*, even if it's not what we wanted, the blessing prayer concludes with more praise and a spirit of abandonment to the divine Wisdom working in our life. In Christian prayer, in the prayer Jesus taught us, we say “Thy will be done” and mean it. A good Christian adaptation of the traditional Judaic formula can be found in Paul's Letter to the Philippians 4:6: “Have no anxiety at all, but in everything, *by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving*, make your requests known to God.”

Thinking about intercessory prayer, I'm convinced it's not triangular, as in the drawing above. We don't send up our prayers to God asking that God send down graces and blessings on ourselves, our loved ones, our world, our Church, etc. But rather it is linear, a movement horizontally as a personal sharing in the ceaseless caring of *God in me reaching out toward* what is of God in others, for instance. *My own thoughts and feelings have their origin in the mind and heart of God.* My concerns, words, caring actions and touch give a human body to our unseen God who loves ALL unconditionally and forever and wants only good for every creature.

How will other people (let alone our pets!) ever come to a genuine experience of love, of compassion, of empathy, of a caring touch and of the tender mercies of God unless they have already experienced and recognized these things humanly embodied? Taking time to go back over our own experiences of the

care and concern of others along life's way, with an interior eye to the divine within or behind the human, turns these experiences into sacraments of the greater, deeper, wider, more wondrous reality of God's total and forever loving of us personally.

If we are free from the dark burden of self-pity (a poor me attitude) we can find our life FULL of these little sacraments or signs of God with us. Being a bit ashamed for all the signs we have missed is part of healing and conversion, a glorious liberation from distorted thinking that nurtures adverse feelings and actions. The more we break free and reframe our life experiences, trying to look at them through God's Eye of Love, the more little sacraments of love we become aware of each day all around us. We begin to watch for signs of direct and humanly mediated divine caring and our hearts are filled with a plentitude of awe, thankfulness and joy. "Blest are the pure of heart for they shall see God" everywhere!

There are numerous scriptural texts telling us of God's heartfelt love for us, but somehow we tend to water down their impact by denying that God could really mean what the text says, at least for us! Don't do that! Let the text of the Word of God speak to your heart as if it were a phone call or a letter sent directly to you. Put your name in place of words like: Israel, Jacob, you, him, son, my child and Ephraim in the texts below, and see how that feels..

Take a Hebrew Scripture text like Isaiah 43: 4: "You are precious and I love you" and in chapter 44:2: "Fear not Jacob my servant, the darling whom I have chosen." Or ponder Jeremiah 31:1-3: "With age old love I have loved you; and so I have kept my mercy toward you."

There's a lovely, tender text, explicitly referring to God using human means to get Love across to us, in the book of the prophet Hosea 11:1-4: "When Israel was a child I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. It is I that taught Ephraim to walk, who took them up in my arms. *I drew them with human cords, with the strings of love.* I fostered them like one who raises an infant to his cheeks; I stooped to feed my child, but they did not know that I was their healer. My heart is overwhelmed with tenderness and my compassion for them is stirred up."

In the New Testament there is a marvelous parable of God's love that teaches us that if we withhold our love from anyone who needs it, we do not really love God, so much does God identify with us. You can find it in Matthew 25:31-40. "**What you do to the least, you do to me.**" The God of Love identifies with every single person created! There is something of God in everyone; we just have to look for it, recognize it, accept it, reverence it. Who is "the least" for you? Our attitudes, words and actions must reflect our insight into the presence of GOD IN ALL. Can you forgive what is not of God and love God in others, at least in prayer, regardless? This is our lifetime Christian challenge!

In the Holy Rule of our father Benedict, chapter 4:20-21, Benedict says “Your way of acting must be different from the world’s way;” and he adds “the love of Christ must come before all else.” This could mean first loving Christ in our loving of others, realizing that God’s love precedes our own and is caught up in ours. But I wonder if it could also mean Christ’s way of loving must stand out/ be seen and recognizable in us before all else people see in us.

When Benedict says to love our enemies and pray for them out of love for Christ (RB4:31) it is because Christ is still in them loving them. God loves us and is in us no matter what we’ve done to disfigure his blessed image. That is our constant comfort and hope: GOD IN and never withdrawn!

As we come to the holiday season and our nation’s Thanksgiving festival, let’s be mindful of the divine Presence as our most potent cause of thanksgiving. We’re coming to the Church’s season of Advent, of *waiting* for the appearance of Love Divine in human embodiment. Given all we’ve said and reflected upon above, let me conclude with a few verses from the Book of Lamentations 3:21-26, a personal favorite of mine. “The mercies of the Lord are renewed every morning, so great is his faithfulness. Good is the Lord to one who waits for him, to the heart that seeks him. It is good to go on *hoping* in silence for the saving help of God!” How many of our Advent hymns reflect this quiet waiting in absolute trust. Lord Jesus, come!

Happy, graced and richly blest and shared Thanksgiving Day to all! God bless your Advent season of holy longing for Love to incarnate Itself in you for the good of all the world!

Sister Jean Frances

The Benedictine Oblate Letter

December, 2010

Dear Oblates and Friends

The holy season of Advent is in full swing as we ready our hearts, yet again, to be places of warm welcome for Emmanuel, God with us. Each day, each moment might be a surprising epiphany of the Lord that holds and sustains us if we are alert to it. As one of our Advent hymns says, "Awake, awake, and sleep no longer." Our Father Benedict picks up the urgency of that call in the Prologue to the Rule, vss 8-10 f.

" 'Tis the season to be jolly," yet we all know that many carry burdens that hinder them from feeling cheerful, let alone jolly! Family worries, chronic illness, constant aches and pains, loved ones overseas for the holidays, the sheer weariness of making ends meet and grieving losses sometimes silence our will to be happy and add to the lightheartedness and exuberance of the season. Instead, there seems to be a "black hole," a dark and empty place within that is aggravated by the high spirits of others rather than alleviated. When we can't seek let alone find God, don't despair. We're not lost; God holds us safe while testing our faith, that is, our absolute trust that enables us to go way beyond our feelings and wait in silence for the coming of our God.

St. Benedict asks us to sing Alleluia in the dark hours, in all our own dark moments and places. That is where we most need to sing and go on singing. Did Mary and Joseph sing hymns and psalms of trust as they traveled and searched in vain for an inn? Emmanuel in our hearts is singing with us, a song out of darkness and the silence of our personal poverty and emptiness, a song to open closed stable doors, to soften our hardened, bitter earthiness with the clean straw of good will and to warm all around with the warm innocence of the animals around the crib.

We need to will – to choose – to be happy beyond the feeling level We try to do our best and not let our lack of hearty good cheer hurt those around us. Sometimes even the great and touching hymns and readings of our seasonal liturgies can't evoke the spirit of the holidays. We're in a funk. Yet, that too is an honest human experience and has something to teach us.

It takes a certain spiritual maturity, no matter how we feel, to sing with the Herald Angels; Glory to God in the highest and on earth PEACE to all! If nothing else, we have our poverty of feelings and our aching sense of emptiness to offer, rum – a – tum – tum! Empty as the waiting crib, empty as the swaddling clothes Mary had stacked and waiting, empty as the waiting arms of Joseph to hold Mary and God's son to his heart, our emptiness can be offered as the place to welcome and warm others, a space to be filled with God in them and in us.

We may not feel all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed in keeping with the usual holiday expectations, but we can allow ourselves to be loving and gentle and kind as the shepherds at the crib. With the divine Infant in the crib of our hearts we are rich as the Kings indeed! Jesus is Light in our darkness, fresh Life in our weariness and Power in our struggles to be as He is, Love and Goodness toward ALL. Jesus is the song we sing in the dark nights of our life. O Come, Divine Messiah!

All of the Sisters join me in wishing you the peace and contentment only God can give. I'm also wishing you as much of the warm, fuzzy, hear-cheering, bubbling excitement and happy memory-producing feelings your heart is able to produce and share all around you in the blessed celebration of Jesus' Birth. May prayer is that Incarnate Love will make our

hearts so human, so divinely human because of the Indwelling Goodness, that all who enter there may feel themselves at home. The God of Day and God of Darkness bless you and yours throughout this holiday season and on into the New Year. Sr. Jean Frances