



## *The Benedictine Oblate Letter*

*February, 2014*

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Lent will soon be upon us. Prior to Vatican II, there were three Sundays before the beginning of Lent that had special names: Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima. These terms mean “seventieth,” “sixtieth,” and “fiftieth” respectively, marking the days before Easter. The seventeen days before Ash Wednesday were meant as a preparation for Lent. Since Lent is a preparation for Easter, this period of time was a preparation for a preparation. Although preparations can multiply, we should prepare for Lent. It is a holy season for spiritual renewal. St. Benedict calls it a holy time to “wash away...all the negligences of other times” (Chapter 49).

When the liturgical calendar was reformed in 1969, the three pre-Lenten Sundays became part of Ordinary Time because each Sunday is a celebration of the resurrection. Sundays are always feast days, and for this reason Catholics do not fast on Sundays. Sundays are not counted in the forty days of Lent. If you actually count the days between Ash Wednesday and Easter Sunday, you will come up with forty-six days rather than forty. Thus, if you are so inclined, you can enjoy a piece of chocolate on the Sundays during Lent.

Another point to remember is that fasting is more than abstinence from food. In 1966, Pope Paul VI issued the *Apostolic Constitution on Fast and Abstinence*. This document speaks of the “intimate relationship which exists in penitence between the external act, inner conversion, prayer and works of charity” (54). Those who are infirm or ill should not fast physically. No one should engage in practices that might prove to be harmful. Instead of abstaining from food, penitence can be “exercised in persevering faithfulness to the duties of one’s state in life, in the acceptance of the difficulties arising from one’s work and from human coexistence, in a patient bearing of the trials of earthly life and of the utter insecurity which pervades it”(56). Pope Benedict XVI reminded us again in a 2011 General Audience:

In the Church's tradition, this journey we are asked to take in Lent is marked by certain practices: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Fasting means abstinence from food but includes other forms of privation for a more modest life. However, all this is not yet the full reality of fasting: it is an outer sign of an inner reality, of our commitment, with God's help, to abstain from evil and to live by the Gospel. Those who are unable to nourish themselves with the word of God do not fast properly.

St. Benedict's approach to Lent was moderate. In Chapter 49 of the Rule, "On the Observance of Lent," the monks are told to "withhold some food, drink, sleep, talking and jesting." However, to avoid pride, the monks are to obtain the Abbot's blessing for whatever it is they want to offer. The March-April issue of *Spirit & Life* includes an excellent article, "The Continuous Lent of St. Benedict," by Sr. Judith Sutera, OSB.

One practice for Lent that you might consider is the reading of Scripture. In Chapter 49 of his Rule, St. Benedict legislates: "In these days of Lent they shall each receive a book from the library, which they shall read straight through from the beginning. These books are to be given out at the beginning of Lent." The short selections we hear at Eucharist are often taken out of context or leave out significant verses. Reading a Scriptural book "straight through from the beginning" provides a whole new experience, enabling the reader to sense the drama and movement of the narrative. You might pick out a prophet or choose one of the Gospels. I encourage you to try it.

***And now the news:***

***The Clyde meeting for Feb. 28-Mar. 2 was cancelled because of the threat of inclement weather and the long drives that it entails for most of our Clyde oblates. The next meeting is scheduled for May 2-4.*** Mark your calendars! Hopefully by then we will have beautiful spring weather.

***An invitation is extended to all oblates*** to attend the 7th Annual Monastic Institute, July 17-20, at Sophia Center, the spirituality center of Mount St. Scholastica Monastery, Atchison, KS. The speaker is Kathleen Norris. Space is limited and registrations will be taken as they come in. For information contact Sr. Mary Elizabeth Schweiger, OSB, at [maryliz@mountosb.org](mailto:maryliz@mountosb.org) or phone her at 913-426-7355.

*A reminder:* I still intend to post short video clips on the oblate website, discussing various aspects of Benedictine spirituality and prayer. Go to [www.benedictinesisters.org](http://www.benedictinesisters.org), click on oblates, and the videos are under “resources.”

*St. Louis area oblates are meeting monthly.* Meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month at the St. Rose Philippine Duchesne parish office. Anyone in the St. Louis area is welcome to attend, but email me first at [sarah@bspa.us](mailto:sarah@bspa.us) to check on the meeting time and place.

Peace,

*Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.*