



## *The Benedictine Oblate Letter*

*January, 2016*

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Every morning at Clyde the prioress reads a short portion of the Holy Rule immediately after Lauds. Recently we heard the first part of that section of the Rule known as the “penal code.” This section includes chapters 23-30 and 43-46. The former prescribe the punishments meted out by the abbot and the latter prescribe the means of reconciliation.

Monks deserving of punishment are “obstinate, or disobedient, or proud, or murmuring, or habitually transgressing the Holy Rule in any point and contemptuous of the orders of the seniors.” Such monks are first admonished. After two rebukes, if they fail to amend their ways, they are given a public rebuke in front of the whole community. If they still fail to reform, they are placed under excommunication, provided they understand the seriousness of that penalty. If they are “perverse” and incapable of understanding it, they undergo corporal punishment (Chapter 23, “On Excommunication for Faults”).

Saint Benedict distinguished between minor and serious faults. For minor faults, monks could be excluded from table. They were still able to attend the Liturgy of the Hours, but they were prohibited from taking a leading role. For more serious faults, monks were excluded from both the table and the liturgy. Moreover, they could have no social contact with members of the community. If others tried to communicate with excommunicated monks, then they would also be excommunicated (Chapter 26, “On Those Who Without an Order Associate with the Excommunicated.”)

Saint Benedict’s purpose in excommunication was to motivate the monk to repentance and reform. He used medical imagery several times in this section of the Rule. Delinquent monks are considered sick; Benedict quotes Matthew 9:12: “it is not the healthy but the sick who need a physician.” The abbot or abbess must be a “wise physician” who has undertaken “the care of weak souls” (Chapter 27, “How Solicitous the Abbot Should Be for the Excommunicated”).

The penal code may seem to have limited application today. I have never known any sister to be excommunicated. No one has ever been whipped. We usually have to explain to newcomers the historical circumstances behind Chapter 30, “How Boys Are to Be Corrected.” In that chapter, delinquent children and adolescents are to be “subjected to severe fasts or brought to terms by harsh

beatings, that they may be cured.” As far as I know, we have never admitted any juvenile delinquents, but Saint Benedict was dealing with barbarians as well as Roman citizens. Nevertheless, I sometimes wonder if some of us might not enjoy a few days of excommunication, of doing our own thing apart from others, of not having to follow the daily schedule. Wouldn't excommunication be like a few days of retreat? Wouldn't any of us, inside or outside the monastery, like to set aside our daily responsibilities and routine, at least until we became bored?

Saint Paul realized that we cannot not avoid associating with sinners in society at large, but he urged the Corinthians to exclude those sinners who were Christians from their own community: “I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people, not at all referring to the immoral of this world or the greedy and robbers or idolaters; for you would then have to leave the world. But I now write to you not to associate with anyone named a brother, if he is immoral, greedy, an idolater, a slanderer, a drunkard, or a robber, not even to eat with such a person” (1 Cor 5:9-11). But Jesus himself did not hesitate to associate with sinners and outcasts. He ate meals with them. He told Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector, “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house” (Lk 19:5).

Those of us who are dedicated to the Eucharist cannot exist as crumbs apart from the loaf: “Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1 Cor 10:17). We must have mercy on all, for we are all sinners who need forgiveness.

***And now the news:***

***Clyde oblates*** mark your calendars! The next weekend is scheduled for March 4-6, 2016. All oblates are welcome. The theme will be *Listening with the Ear of Your Heart*. Information will be forthcoming.

***Saint Louis area oblates:*** Meetings are held on the third Saturday of the month from 1:30 - 3:00 p.m. at St. Rose Philippine Duchesne School, Room 1 (accessible from Door 1 at the east end of the school). The group has been discussing *The Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century* by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. They are also doing *lectio divina* as a group, following *Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* by Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

***Sand Springs oblates:*** The Sand Springs oblates meet on the first Sunday of the month. The group is reading *In the Heart of the Temple* by Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB. I will be giving a mini-retreat at the Forest of Peace from April 8-9 on the theme *Burning Hearts*. I hope to explore the importance of the Eucharist and Scripture in our lives. All are welcome. Further information will be forthcoming.

***Sheridan, Wyoming, oblates*** meet the first Saturday of the month. The group is reading and discussing Sr. Maria-Thomas Beii's *Study Guide for The Rule of St. Benedict with Reflections for Oblates and All Who Seek God*.

***Tucson oblates:*** there are really four oblate groups affiliated with our Tucson monastery: Prescott, East Valley, Phoenix Central, and Tucson. The East Valley group is engaged in a study of mercy, in accordance with the Jubilee Year of Mercy. The other groups are discussing Pope Francis' encyclical on ecology, *Laudato Si'*, in the light of the Rule. Sr. Hope Rodenborn conducted a day of renewal for the Tucson group in January. They enjoyed video presentations from the biennial meeting of the North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors that was held last summer. Speakers included Abbot Jerome Kodell, OSB, of Subiaco Abbey, and Sr. Macrina Wiederkehr, OSB, of St. Scholastica Monastery in Fort Smith, Arkansas. For information about the Tucson oblate groups, you can read their newsletter at <http://www.benedictineoblates.com/resources.php>.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah