



The Benedictine Oblate Letter

June, 2015

Dear Oblates and Friends,

Saint Benedict was not always popular during his lifetime. In his early years, Benedict was asked by some monks to take charge of their monastery. At first he was reluctant to take on this responsibility, and for good reason. When Benedict attempted to reform their ways, the monks became very angry and tried to poison him. Gregory the Great, in his *Dialogues*, writes:

Taking counsel together, they agreed to poison his wine: which being done, and the glass wherein that wine was, according to the custom, offered to the Abbot to bless, he, putting forth his hand, made the sign of the cross, and straightway the glass, that was held far off, broke in pieces, as though the sign of the cross had been a stone thrown against it: on which accident the man of God by and by perceived that the glass had in it the drink of death, which could not endure the sign of life. (<http://www.osb.org/gen/greg/>)

Monks in those days were obviously a rough sort. In various places, Benedict resorts to corporal punishment for recalcitrant monks. In Chapter 23, for instance, a monk who is disobedient or obstinate is excommunicated “provided that he understands the seriousness of that penalty; if he is perverse, however, let him undergo corporal punishment.” In Chapter 28, a monk who fails to amend after being excommunicated is to undergo “the punishment of the rod.” In Chapter 30, Benedict outlines his educational method:

Every age and degree of understanding should have its proper measure of discipline. With regard to boys and adolescents, therefore, or those who cannot understand the seriousness of the penalty of excommunication, whenever such as these are delinquent let them be subjected to severe fasts or brought to terms by harsh beatings, that they may be cured.

Those who hear or read this chapter for the first time are often shocked. We need to know a little about the culture and society of Benedict’s times. Many monks came from nomadic Germanic tribes. Many were barely Christian and not all had been baptized. Many were slaves, and surely most were illiterate.

Benedict, however, was not really a harsh taskmaster, despite the use of corporal punishment. Rather, he took a middle way. Benedict’s rule is marked by its moderation, especially when compared to other early monastic rules. In the Prologue, Benedict states that he wants “to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome.” In Chapter 64, on the election of an abbot, Saint

Benedict states that the abbot should be “discerning and moderate, bearing in mind the discretion of holy Jacob, who said: ‘If I drive my flocks too hard, they will all die in a single day.’”

Here and elsewhere in the Rule, the abbot or abbess is advised to take the Good Shepherd as a model of good leadership. In Chapter 27, “How Solicitous the Abbot Should Be for the Excommunicated,” Benedict writes: “Let him rather imitate the loving example of the Good Shepherd who left the ninety-nine sheep in the mountains and went to look for the one sheep that had gone astray, on whose weakness he had such compassion that he deigned to place it on his own sacred shoulders and thus carry it back to the flock” (Lk 15:4-5).

Realistically, Benedict knew that dismissal from the community may sometimes be necessary. He did not want to be overly lenient. In extreme cases, delinquency can spread like cancer throughout the entire community. Thus, Benedict writes in Chapter 28, that if other measures fail, “then let the Abbess use the knife of amputation, according to the Apostle's words, ‘Expel the evil one from your midst (1 Cor. 5:13), and again, ‘If the faithless one departs, let her depart’ lest one diseased sheep contaminate the whole flock.”

With the image of the Good Shepherd in mind, Benedict provides for a series of measures to bring them offenders back into the fold. In Chapter 27, he mentions the assistance of senior monks called *senpectae*. These are mature and wise brothers “who may as it were secretly console the wavering brother and induce him to make humble satisfaction; comforting him that he may not ‘be overwhelmed by excessive grief’” (2 Cor. 2:7).

We can look to Benedict as a model of moderation and discretion. Let us pray that more and more of Saint Benedict’s wisdom and prudence may characterize our own lives as well.

Now the news:

All oblates should be receiving our bi-monthly magazine, ***Spirit&Life***, which is complimentary (that means free) for all our oblates and friends. Let me know if you are not receiving it, or if you have family members or friends who would enjoy it.

I am attending a conference of the North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors (NAABOD) from July 10-15, at Subiaco Abbey in Arkansas. Sr. Hope Rodenborn, director of our Tucson oblates, is also attending. I hope to bring back new insights and creative ideas.

Clyde oblates mark your calendars for the next weekend. September 25-27, 2015. This weekend is open to all oblates. The topic not yet determined. Further information will be forthcoming.

Sand Springs oblates are not meeting during the summer months. The next meeting is October 4, 2015, and I hope to be there. The group has chosen *In the Heart of the Temple: My Spiritual Vision for Today's World* by Sister Joan Chittister, OSB, as the next book to read and discuss.

Sheridan, Wyoming, oblates are also not meeting during the summer. Meetings pick up again in September. 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*.

Peace,

Sr. Sarah, O.S.B.