Yankton Benedictines
SACRED HEART MONASTERY
Yankton, South Dakota

OBLATES' HANDBOOK

NEBRASKA CHAPTERS

affiliated with

SACRED HEART MONASTERY

Yankton, South Dakota

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Sister Phyllis Hunhoff, OSB
Associate Oblate Director, Nebraska Oblates
Sacred Heart Monastery
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A LETTER TO NEBRASKA OBLATES

> *In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and* to safe guard love. *Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset.*—RB Prol. 46–48

Welcome to the study of the *Rule of St. Benedict*!

This formation program is for you to explore and develop a new devotion to Scripture, prayer, and work through the practice of the Rule. The formation program may initially seem burdensome and overwhelming to you, however, as St. Benedict says, the *Rule of St. Benedict* is supposed to be a "little rule for beginners"! It is important during your formation that you become aware of the many complexities of the application of this little rule to our daily lives as we journey towards God. And know, in association with your community of Sacred Heart Monastery, "we shall run the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (RB Prol. 49).

The following materials will give you an orientation and overview to assist you in the preparation of leading an enriched Christian life according to the Gospel as reflected in the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Continuing direction will be provided to you as you move through the steps of formation.

Sister Phyllis Hunhoff, OSB
Associate Director

THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED!

PREFACE

> *Are you hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule that we have written for beginners. After that, you can set out of the loftier summits of the teaching and virtues we mentioned above, and under God's protection you will reach them.—RB 73:8–9*

In journeying to learn to "prefer Christ" in all things, we have found certain practices to be particularly helpful. As new members in this, your new community, you will find that we are here to help you to grow further in your love for God by following this beginner's guide to the *Rule of St. Benedict*. As with any journey of great significance, there will be easy going and difficult challenges.

> *In drawing up its regulations, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and to safeguard love. Do not be daunted immediately by fear and run away from the road that leads to salvation. It is bound to be narrow at the outset.—RB Prol. 46–48*

GUIDELINES
FOR OBLATES OF ST. BENEDICT

Introduction

In June 1971, a group of directors of oblates came together at St. Procopius Abbey, Lisle, Illinois, to consider how Benedictine oblates might best be served in the light of Vatican II. One year later, a second meeting was held, this time at St. Mary's Abbey, Morristown, New Jersey, to review papers that had been written in the interim and to exchange ideas pertinent to Benedictine oblates.

The second meeting resulted in a document, "Guidelines for Oblates of St. Benedict." This document has since been generally endorsed by a considerable number of directors of oblates across North America. It is intended to serve both as a constitution and as guidelines for the spiritual lives of oblates; it is hoped that its availability will assist all directors of oblates in their efforts to interest men and women who, while retaining their positions in the world, wish somehow to identify with a given Benedictine monastery or convent.

I am grateful to those directors of oblates who have given their time and effort to make this document a reality, and I join my prayers to theirs that the days and years ahead will see ever-increasing numbers affiliated with our Benedictine houses as oblates of St. Benedict.

Martin J. Burne, OSB, President
American-Cassinese Federation

Preamble

Vatican II Council has made it clear that the laity should exercise a very active role in the Church's mission to the world. Oblates of St. Benedict are in a favored position for carrying out this admonition. They are spiritually associated with a Benedictine community. They have pledged themselves to order their lives in accord with the spirit of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. They are therefore encouraged to be faithful witnesses of Christ by striving to bring the Gospel message and God's way of holiness to the world around them. This is, in fact, the chief reason for their being oblates of St. Benedict.

So that the lives of oblates may be a true and effective response to the call of God and His Church, these guidelines have been written to help oblates in their mission as lay apostles, so that they can openly bear witness to Christ and promote the salvation of humanity.[1]

CONSTITUTION

Oblates of St. Benedict are Christian men and women admitted into spiritual union and affiliation with a Benedictine community of monks, nuns, or sisters so that they may share in the spiritual life, prayers, and good works of the community.[2]

Oblates do not usually live in the monastic house of the community, yet they remain one with the community while they continue faithfully to carry out the duties of their particular state in life and occupation, wherever they may be.[3] We are therefore not concerned here about those who wish to live as oblates with the community in the abbey

or convent itself. Such cloistered oblates must qualify for community life, be accepted by the vote of the community, and be ready to work and pray under the same conditions as the monks, sisters, and nuns themselves.

Within the framework of their daily lives in the world, oblates strive to lead full Christian lives enlightened by personal efforts to understand Christ's teaching in the Scriptures as interpreted by St. Benedict in his Rule for monks. Oblates are guided and inspired by their continued spiritual association with the monastic community.[4]

Oblates are a "spiritual arm" of the Benedictine community, reaching out into all areas of life, seeking to share with others what they gain as oblates of St. Benedict. Their affiliation with a community of monks or Benedictine women is not therefore for their own personal good alone. It is chiefly by their Christian example, even by their very presence among others, that they hope to bring St. Benedict's ideal of service to God and man into the world where they live and work.[5]

Since Oblates of St. Benedict primarily offer themselves for the service of God and others, they will, therefore, strive for God's honor and glory before all else, keeping in mind the Benedictine motto: "That in all things God may be glorified."[6]

GUIDELINES FOR OBLATES OF ST. BENEDICT

A. OBLATES STRIVE TO BE LOYAL AND ACTIVE MEMBERS OF CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH.

Oblates involve themselves in the full life of the Church, "sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and royal office of Christ … being witnesses to Christ and promoting the salvation of others."[7]

They foster the ecumenical spirit as called for by Vatican II. They will meet with those not of the Catholic faith, strive to understand the religious beliefs and customs of others, look for teachings on which others agree with them, enter into friendly discussion of teachings on which there is disagreement, put aside all prejudice, and foster the spirit of universal brotherhood in God our Father.[8]

They seek to be true lay apostles according to their abilities and the circumstances of their lives, with a spirit of mission, a spirit of vocation from God through the Holy Spirit working in them, eager to help in proclaiming and spreading the Word of God to the ends of the earth.[9]

Oblates recognize that their success as lay apostles depends on their living in close union with the Spirit of Christ in the Church and that this intimate union with the Lord is especially nourished in the sacrament of the Eucharist. Service to others will then be the immediate effect of true union with Christ.[10]

B. OBLATES STRIVE FOR THEIR CONTINUED CHRISTIAN RENEWAL AND IMPROVEMENT

As their states in life permit, oblates make use of various means for improving themselves spiritually, intellectually, culturally, and socially, by making a retreat, a day of recollection or renewal, attending a workshop, seminar, lecture, or prayer meeting, as occasion offers from time to time.[11]

They make the study and reading of Holy Scripture an important part of their lives, concentrating especially on the Gospel teachings of Christ.[12]

They listen attentively to the public proclamation of the Word of God in the Eucharist, and to the homily of the celebrant who shows how the Word of God is applied to daily life.[13]

C. OBLATES STRIVE TO BE MEN AND WOMEN OF PRACTICAL SPIRITUALITY

They combine prayer and work by living and working in the presence of God, aware of God's presence everywhere, knowing that God is nearer to them than they think.[14]

They are patient and content with their lot in life in so far as they cannot change it for something better, calmly and courageously accepting the sufferings and hardships which sooner or later come to everyone.[15]

They practice patience, especially by accepting the daily crosses and burdens of life willingly and bravely, with full trust in God, no matter how heavy these burdens may be, knowing that God can turn sufferings into blessings.[16]

They are generous and warmhearted to the poor, the needy, the unfortunate, the sick, the sad, the afflicted, and the lonely.[17]

They are concerned about the needs of others, regardless of race, nationality, creed, sex, age, occupation, profession, or social status.[18]

They give generously of themselves in working for the religious education and Christian formation of youth.[19]

They faithfully fulfill the duties of their states in life, especially concerning the care of their families and dependents.

They practice the spirit of poverty, by not being unduly attached to material things, by thanking God for what they have, and by using God's gifts in a sensible way for the glory of God and the good of all.[20]

They seek the Christian reformation or constant renewal of their lives by fostering the spirit of obedience, stability and fidelity in accord with the three Benedictine vows or principles of Christian living which St. Benedict asks his followers to practice.21

They often read some part of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and meditate on how it can be applied to their lives.[22]

They seek guidance and instruction when they are in doubt or troubled.23

D. OBLATES STRIVE TO BE MEN AND WOMEN OF PRAYER.

They highly esteem the Eucharist and take an active and intelligent part in the celebration of the sacred mysteries of the altar.[24]

They strive each day to pray some part of the Divine Office or Liturgy of the Hours, as the circumstances of their lives permit.[25]

They strive to appreciate the beauty and spiritual wealth contained in the Psalms which form the core of the Church's prayer.[26]

They harmonize their private and public prayers and devotions with the liturgical seasons and feasts of the year, as Vatican II recommends.[27]

E. OBLATES STRIVE TO BE MEN AND WOMEN OF CHRISTIAN VIRTUE.

Oblates proclaim and practice the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and charity, by believing, hoping, and trusting in God, and loving God and others in thought, word, and deed.[28]

Oblates foster a positive Christian attitude toward the many other virtues flowing from the practice of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance.

They observe Christian *prudence*, which is true divine wisdom, by directing their lives to the final attainment of God, who is known to them by faith and loved by them through charity. They therefore use the means provided them in prayer and the sacraments. Prudence guides them "in seeking first the kingdom of God and His way of holiness" and teaches them "to be wise as serpents and innocent as doves."[29]

They exercise the Christian virtue of *justice* by recognizing their personal and social moral responsibilities toward individual persons, toward their community, city, state and nation, and toward human society in general, by striving for the common welfare of all.[30]

They foster a deep respect for the God-given rights of others, especially for human life, for the property of others, for freedom of religion, for the privacy of the home, for the right of all to know the truth and to speak the truth, for freedom in the education of one's children, for the right as well as the duty to work and provide for oneself and one's dependents.[31]

They pay their laborers a just wage and give their employers an honest return in labor for the wages they receive.[32]

They protect the rights of the poor and the helpless, the oppressed and the persecuted, and all who are victims of injustice of any kind.[33]

They practice Christian fortitude or courage by seeking to do God's will at all times without fear of the difficulties and sacrifices involved, bearing the burdens and trials of life with calm trust in God's mercy and goodness.[34]

They practice Christian temperance or moderation by making use of the good things of life in the way God intended them to be used for the good of humanity.[35]

F. OBLATES FOSTER A SPIRIT OF COMMUNITY.

They love the Benedictine community to which they are affiliated as Oblates.[36] They keep in touch with their community through their Director of Oblates. They let others know about their monastic community, support its apostolic works, and encourage young men and women in their vocations to the monastic life.

They visit the monastery or convent occasionally, become familiar with the monastic life, and assist at the community Liturgy and community prayer whenever this is possible.

They tell others about the Oblates of St. Benedict and encourage them to become Oblates if they seem to be in search of such a special way of life in the world.

They foster the spirit of community in their family circles and the groups and organizations to which they belong.

G. OBLATES ARE MEN AND WOMEN OF PEACE.

They use all rightful means for establishing peace in the world around them, mindful of the centuries old Benedictine watchword: PEACE![37]

They strive to practice the truth of God in love and join all true peacemakers in pleading for peace and working to bring it about.[38]

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Vat II—by chapter, page references refer to *The Documents of Vatican II*, edited by Walter M. Abbot, S.J., not necessarily the online translation. Austin Flannery OP's translation may be found online without authorization.

[1]Vat II, Church Today, 43, p. 244.
[2]RB Prologue: "The Lord seeks His worker."
[3]Vat II, Church Today, 43, p. 243.
[4]RB 73: "this least of Rules;" Prologue: "Faith and good works."
[5]RB 2: "Teachings of abbot a leaven of divine justice;" RB 7, Eighth degree of humility: "example of seniors;" RB 60: "example of humility;" RB 61: "instructed by his example;" RB 27: "imitate loving example of Good Shepherd;" cf. also Vat II, Missions, 11, p. 597.
[6]RB 57: quotation from 1 Pet 4:11.
[7]Vat II, Laity, 2, p. 491.
[8]RB 27–28: the excommunicated; cf. Vat II, Ecumenism, 4, pp. 348–349; Laity, 31, a), p. 519.
[9]Vat II, Missions, 11, p. 597.
[10]Vat II, Laity, 4, p. 493.
[11]Vat II, Laity, 16, p. 507.
[12]RB 38, 42, 47, 48, 49, 73, on reading of Scripture; Vat II, Revelation, 21, p. 125.
[13]RB 38; Vat II, Revelation, 25, p. 127; Liturgy, 51-52, p. 155.
[14]RB 49, on work; RB 4, 7, 19, 58. the presence of God and seeking God; Vat II, Liturgy, 7, pp. 140–141.
[15]RB 58, on hard and rugged ways; RB 55, 48, on manual labor; RB 7, Sixth degree of humility; RB 4, instruments of good works; Vat II, The Church, 41, p. 70.
[16]RB Prologue, at end; RB 25, 52, on penance and satisfaction; RB 7, Fourth degree of humility; Vat II, The Church, 41, p. 70.
[17]RB 4, 31, 55, 59, 59, 66, on care of needy and poor; Vat II, Laity, 31, pp. 519–520.
[18]RB 4, instruments of good works; RB 55 and other parts of Rule on concern for the poor and needy; cf. preceding note 16.
[19]RB 59 and 63, the sons of nobles and of the poor, and training of boys; Vat II, Education, 1, p. 639.
[20]RB 7, 6th degree of humility; RB 58, on property; Vat II, the Church Today, 72, p. 282.
[21]RB 7, 1st degree of humility; RB 58, on receiving the brethren; RB 3, on discipline and observance; Vat II, Ecumenism, 6, p. 350.
[22]RB 66 and 73; Vat II, Religious Life, 2, p. 468.
[23]RB 3, 4, 7, the Fifth degree of humility; Vat II, The Church, 37, p. 64.

[24]RB 35, 38, 63, reference to Mass and Communion; 60 and 62, reference to the priesthood; Vat II, Liturgy, 11–14, pp. 143–144.
[25]RB 8–20 inclusive; Vat II, Liturgy, 100, p. 167.
[26]RB 8–20, praying of psalms; Vat II, Liturgy, 90, p. 165.
[27]Vat II, Liturgy, 13, p. 143.
[28]RB Prologue, good works; RB 7, Fourth degree of humility; RB 4, good works; RB 55, the poor; Vat II, Laity, 4, p. 493.
[29]Mt 6:33, 10:16; RB 61.
[30]RB 2, 3, 63, 41, 9, 11, 20, 52, 6, 63, 65, 60, 4; Vat II, Church Today, 29, pp. 227–228.
[31]RB 4; Vat II, Religious Freedom, 2–7, pp. 678-688.
[32]RB 57; Vat II, Church Today, 67, p. 275.
[33]Vat II, Church Today, 69, p. 278.
[34]RB 64; Prologue, "weapons of obedience;" RB 1; Vat II, The Church, 41, p. 70.
[35]RB 41–64; 22, 70, 41, 40.
[36]RB 55; 3–4; 17, 21, etc.
[37]Vat II, Church Today, 78, p. 290.
[38]Vat II, Church Today, 78, p. 291.

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www.osb.org/obl/guidelns.html

OBLATE FORMATION PROGRAM: SACRED HEART MONASTERY, YANKTON, SOUTH DAKOTA, AND THE NEBRASKA COMMUNITY OF OBLATES

Adapted from formation material of the draft Oblate Manual of St. Andrew's Abbey Valyermo, California

Abbot Francis Benedict, OSB
Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB
The Rev. Douglas Vest, Obl.
Norvene Vest, Obl.

Guiding Philosophy

> *Our guiding philosophy serves to focus our study of the Rule on our very conversion which brings us to the Oblate Formation. Benedict tells us "The labor of our obedience will bring you back to him whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience" (RB Prol. 2).*
> *Most assuredly, we are reminded we are not alone on this journey. "What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace" (RB Prol. 41).*

The Guiding Philosophy also reminds us that although each of us is responding to God's unique call, we are going so with the support of our community. As the rule provides, "the younger monks, then, must respect their seniors, and the seniors must love their juniors" (RB 63:10).

Here is the philosophy underlying the preparation and offering of these guidelines:

- Christian formation is a dynamic process of becoming ever more a child of God in the context of the Body of Christ. An individual's response to God's unique call can be likened to a progressive unfolding of the person God intends and enables that individual to be and become.
- Oblate formation takes place within a supportive community holding Benedictine values and commitments, particularly in deep listening to God's will, to the stability in life's setting and openness to the Spirit.
- The process of formation necessarily involves individual and interpersonal elements: personal prayer and service on the one hand and support by the community on the other.
- Both spirituality and service are involved, in congruence with the *Rule of St. Benedict* (RB).
- The offering of guidelines for a wide range of individuals requires both structure and flexibility. In the Rule, we read, states: "In drawing up its regulations, we hope to do nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. The good of all concerned, however, may prompt us to a little strictness in order to amend faults and safeguard love …. [The road] is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life and faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love" (RB Prol. 46–49).

Nurture and accountability, on the part of both individual and Sacred Heart Monastery, are essential for healthy individual formation and community life. There is, in other words, a strong interdependence of community and oblate.

INITIAL FORMATION—NOVITIATE PROGRAM

No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself, but instead, what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers; to God, loving fear; to their abbot, unfeigned and humble love—RB 72:8–10

The following describes the Novitiate Program. Novices will receive necessary and appropriate support from the oblate director, deans, companion group leader, and other oblates.

INITIAL FORMATION

Inquirer and Novice

The journey to becoming a Benedictine oblate involves a two-stage novitiate as an inquirer and then a novice. One becomes an inquirer by attending informational sessions. The purpose of this stage (which lasts approximately two and one-half months) is to allow a period of reflection on a personally experienced call to journey deeper into the mystery of a deepened relationship with God through the way of St. Benedict and to respond appropriately to that call.

After attending the inquirer sessions and choosing to continue learning more about the way of St. Benedict, one becomes a novice through a simple ceremony. The ceremony dedicates one's decision to continue responding to God's unique call to one in this way. The novitiate lasts approximately one year in preparation for final oblation.

Companion Program

The Companion Program, led by oblates who have made their final oblations, is a formation program for novices. The program provides support to novice members in their study, discussion, and living the Benedictine charisms and values. It is also to provide guidance in developing a personal rule of life. The emphasis is on helping the novice to integrate his or her growing commitment as an oblate into personal life circumstances, including regular soul-searching to ponder how God is leading him or her. The Benedictine charisms guide the companion gatherings and find expression in each companion's personal rule of life.

Associate Oblate Director and Deans

Deans are oblates who have made final oblation and have been selected by the director to offer service and counsel toward becoming a Benedictine oblate. The associate oblate director (director) or deans conduct the informational sessions and monthly meetings, direct the formation program, and accept candidates to the novitiate and final oblation. These leaders are available to meet one-on-one with candidates, novices, and oblates.

Novice Oblates

Once you have decided to respond to God's unique call with the Benedictine oblates, you will join a companion group and begin a year of study of Benedictine spirituality. This handbook, which will be the primary study guide, has numerous articles to help you

discern how to live the Rule. You may want to read and reflect on the article, "Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*." You may also want to read the chapter, "Adopting a Personal Rule of Life."

The ten lessons that follow were developed by the Benedictine Sisters of Perpetual Adoration. These lessons succinctly delineate the charisms of Benedictine spirituality. They should be read and listened to with the ear of the heart in the spirit of *Lectio Divina*.

Also, during your year of study, the following criteria are suggestions to help you fully integrate the Rule into your daily spiritual life. You are encouraged to reflect first on the "basic" components and determine which ones you currently employ and those with which you may need assistance or more attention. You are not expected to immediately jump in as if to conquer each one right away. The Rule is explicit in reminding us, "… our life has been lengthened by way of a truce, that we may amend our misdeeds."

If, after reflecting on the list, you are still uncomfortable, read this passage from the Rule:

> Assignment of Impossible Tasks to a Brother: A Brother may be assigned a burdensome task or something he cannot do. If so, he should, with complete gentleness and obedience, accept the order given. Should he see, however, that the weight of the burden is altogether too much for his strength, then he should choose the appropriate moment and explain patiently to his superior the reasons why he cannot perform the task. This he ought to do without pride, obstinacy or refusal. If after the explanation the superior is still determined to hold to his original order, then the junior must recognize that this is best for him. Trusting in God's help, he must in love obey (RB 68:1–5).

The following details describe different facets of your life as you will intend to live them in keeping with the *Rule of St. Benedict*. During your novitiate, take note of the areas in which you thrive and the areas that challenge you. You may want to keep a journal to help you continue to grow. Note that you will be asked to be mindful of these areas of your life even after you have completed your novitiate. Remember, this is a little rule for beginners, and each day we can begin again to renew our love for God.

Basics

Every novice is encouraged to:

- Apply thoughtful preparation through *Lectio Divina* for monthly companion meetings to study the handbook;
- Read the Rule through carefully at least three times, making notes to ask questions;
- Practice daily prayer (Liturgy of the Hours), both contemplative and intercessory;
- Make an annual retreat to Sacred Heart Monastery as circumstances allow;
- Regularly study the Scriptures, especially the Psalms or Benedictine spirituality texts in the mode of *Lectio Divina;*
- Adopt a personal "rule of life" which incorporates at least one item from each section of the following list of enrichment items; the "rule of life" is prepared under the guidance of their Oblate Companion and/or the Oblate Director;
- Be an active member of a local church, including regular worship.

Every novice may seek enrichment. Supplementing the basics, novices work with their oblate companion group leader to develop and practice a personal rule of life, which may include items from of the following list.

- Study of the *Rule of St. Benedict*. Here are some resources for a deeper study of the Rule:
  - Study Norvene Vest's *Preferring Christ*.
  - Read Esther de Waal's *Seeking God*.
  - Study Benedict's sources, such as John Cassian's *Institutes and Conferences*.
  - Refer to the Recommended Reading List for more options.
- Prayer
  - Practice *Lectio Divina* daily or weekly (Refer to the section on *Lectio Divina* in the Monastic Tradition section of the handbook.).
  - Participate in some form of the Divine Office.
    - Pray the Liturgy of the Hours either individually or communally.
    - Pray the *Benedictus* in the morning and the *Magnificat* in the evening.
  - Read works on prayer (Ask oblate leaders for suggestions.).
- Bible Study
  - Develop a regular personal daily (and/or weekly) plan of Scripture study.
- Community Life
  - Participate in ongoing Oblate community events (e.g. retreat offerings, group Morning Prayer or Vespers).

The novitiate concludes when the novice makes his or her final oblation. At this time, the entire community of sisters and oblates rejoices in this person's decision to make a deeper commitment to Christ. May wisdom be yours as the Spirit forms in your heart.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- What does Benedict say about holiness? (RB 4:62)
- What personal attitudes lead to true holiness?
- What are the fruits of holiness in daily life?
- Is holiness something that is achieved "once and for all"?
- How are other people involved on this path to holiness?

Why should one choose to become a Benedictine oblate? Life is busy enough. Why add more? The fact is that we are searching for meaning. It has been said that after the age of thirty all questions in life are questions of meaning. Our desire is to find more in life, to have our life really matter; in fact, we desire to be holy. Though we wish to be holy, "holiness" is a word that tends to frighten us. "Me, holy? Well, hardly!" But that is not the way that the Bible looks at it. St. Paul clearly says that we are called to be saints. That is why God sent us the Son, why God set Jesus up as our source of mercy, our place of healing.

Remember the old *Baltimore Catechism* and one of its first questions: "Why did God make you?" "You were made to know, love, and serve God in this life, and to be happy with God forever in the next." That answer is talking about holiness: knowing, loving, and serving God as best we can with all the strengths and weaknesses we have and being happy with God forever. What we need to remember, to lean on, is the fact that God wants us to be holy. God keeps on calling us to holiness and stands ready to help us. God wants to give to us and wants our response.

One of the great documents of the Second Vatican Council was the document on the Church. That document makes no bones about holiness. It says: "In the Church … everyone is called to holiness." It goes on to say,

> The Lord Jesus, the divine teacher and model of all perfection, preached holiness of life to each and every one of his disciples, regardless of their situation …. The followers of Christ are called by God, not according to their accomplishments, but according to God's own purpose and grace. They are justified in the Lord Jesus, and, through baptism sought in faith, they truly become children of God and sharers in the divine nature. In this way they are truly made holy. Then, too, by God's gifts they must hold on to and complete in their lives this holiness which they have received.

The statement continues,

> Thus it is evident to everyone that all the faithful of Christ, of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of Christian life and to the perfection of charity …. In the various types and duties of life, one and the same holiness is cultivated by all who are moved by the Spirit of God …. All of Christ's faithful, whatever be the conditions, duties, and situations of their lives, will grow in holiness if they accept them in faith from the hand of their heavenly Father, and if they cooperate with the divine will by showing all through their earthly activities the love with which God has loved the world (*Lumen Gentium* 41).

This document of the Church in our times makes clear that we are called to be holy. It does not matter what our life is, each of us is called to be holy in the way of life we have chosen. No way of life, in itself, is better than any other. Each way is the best for us if it is the one to which we have been called. What counts is how we live our lives, how we carry out the promise of our baptism, because it was in baptism that we began our lifelong journey to holiness. The spiritual journey is a constant process of renewal. We try, we fail, we get up and try again. Baptism is a sacrament of continual beginnings. It is not a once-and-done action, but a beginning, a direction.

As adults, our baptism, if it has any real meaning for us, has to be expressed in the way we live our daily lives. When we were baptized, we became members of Jesus's family. From then on Jesus had to matter to us, and matter supremely. Jesus has to become the context out of which we live. Of course, this does not happen all at once. It is a process and a long one. The decision to become a Benedictine oblate is part of this process. It commits us to a more serious living out of the promise of our baptism. It also gives us additional help in doing this.

Being an oblate gives us a community to back up our desire to live out the promise of baptism and become holy. We cannot do it alone. God knows that we need help, usually from one another. Each of us is redeemed, and each of us is a sinner; we have to live with this tension, our lack of wholeness, and our awareness of our weakness and selfishness. But we are not left alone. We have a community. In choosing to become an oblate, we choose others to help us in our striving. Our strength will help them, just as they will help us in our weakness.

Baptism demands that we share in Christ's love for his world and his people. However small and humble our part may be, we do have a part in the world's redemption. Holiness is not a rejection of the world, but a way of giving witness to God's saving action in this world. "All Christians," says the document on the Church, "are most intimately united with the life and mission of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium* 34). That is why Jesus identified himself with us and his people during his life on earth. He participated in the ordinariness of life, allowing himself to be baptized to show this identification. His baptism was the first step in our growth in faith and personal holiness.

To understand what the Benedictine oblates offer to people seeking holiness, we will go on to consider St. Benedict's life and Rule in our next reflection.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- What is "religious conversion"?
- How might a religious conversion impact one's life?
- Benedict's main basis for the Rule is what?
- How did Benedict deal with the foibles of human nature?
- What was Benedict's view of work?

St. Benedict is universally recognized as one of the greatest figures in monastic history, yet we know very little about him. What we know depends on one book, *The Dialogues of St. Gregory the Great*. St. Gregory became pope about the year 590 and is a vital link between the early Church and the Middle Ages. All of St. Gregory's writings have a pastoral purpose. His specific purpose in writing about St. Benedict was to show how God can work in the life of a person who responds to God's gifts. This intention of Gregory leads to some questions about the facts that he narrates. Are they actual or symbolic? Scholarly opinion now holds that these facts are for the most part genuine, though it is not easy to separate these from what is imaginative.

According to Gregory, Benedict was born in Nursia, northeast of Rome, around the year 480. Sent to school in Rome, Benedict experienced a religious conversion, which led him to renounce the kind of life he had been living. He left Rome to live first as a hermit at Subiaco; later, after a bitter experience with some unworthy monks, he returned to Subiaco. There he was joined by numerous followers for whom he founded twelve monasteries. Once these monasteries were firmly established, Benedict left that region, going to Monte Cassino, some eighty miles from Rome on the way to Naples. There he built a monastery on the heights overlooking Cassino and lived the rest of his life, writing his Rule and acquiring a reputation as a man of God known for working wonders. St. Benedict died around the middle of the sixth century.

Gregory describes Benedict's Rule as notable for its discretion and clarity of language. Benedict was, in fact, a great monastic teacher with a profound sense of tradition. He knew how to use the works of his predecessors. Acquainted with the writings of Pachomius, Basil, Cassian, Augustine, Caesarius of Arles, and the *Rule of the Master*, Benedict blended these sources into a Rule that includes both spiritual teaching and practical regulations for the ordering of daily life in a monastery. Like all the ancient monks, Benedict considers the true and ultimate rule of life to be the Word of God itself, as contained in the Scriptures.

Monasticism was simply the Christian life lived in a fashion that helped the monk to experience God. That is why Benedict called his work, "a little Rule for beginners." He was not downplaying the importance of what he had written but merely implying that the Great Rule is the Word of God.

The *Rule of St. Benedict* is a masterly synthesis of previous rules, combining traditions from Gaul, Africa, Egypt, Cappadocia, and Italy. Its broadness and vision of humanity set it apart from other Latin rules. Such clarity and liberality of mind could only have come from one who had long pondered the Word of God and could see all the varied strands of tradition in their essential harmony. Eventually, Benedict's Rule supplanted all other monastic rules in the West because of its ability to bring out the

fundamental gospel principles of monasticism in an enduring way, free of details bound to particular times and places.

The *Rule of St. Benedict* is very short. The first chapters contain his spiritual doctrine and deal with the fundamental aspects of monastic life: unity among members, the role of the abbot, obedience, silence, and humility. Then come the chapters dealing with monasticism in its ascetic discipline: how can a group live together in peace and charity; how can such unity be structured? This section has chapters devoted to liturgical prayer, times for meals, sleep, and so on. There is a section dealing with corrections, setting out how to help the monks live up to the best that is in them. Next, a section presents guidance on the reception of new members, order in the community, work, hospitality, and similar topics. A semi-final chapter deals in a short and gem-like way with community relations. Obviously, Benedict understood human nature. He knew its variety and complexity. He recognized that individual problems required individualized solutions. Benedict's Rule leaves a great deal to the discretion, good sense, and charity of the abbot. His writing shows a vast understanding of human weakness, along with compassion for the troubled and expectations for the strong. Benedict insists on the value of reading (*lectio* is the term used in the Rule).

Meditation on what has been read leads the monk to prayer and Christian life. St. Benedict also insisted on the value of honest work, not only to support the monastery but as a physical discipline and as a means of giving alms to poor people.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- How does religious conversion compare to monastic conversion?
- How is faith involved in conversion?
- Where might be the most difficult struggles?
- How is a life of conversion a continual "turning around"?
- What external behaviors befit such a lifestyle?

At the heart of the monastic person's life is the promise of conversion. It is one of the three vows Benedict asks of the monk in his Rule: stability, conversion, and obedience. Conversion is at the root of it all. It is a promise to keep trying, an explicit commitment to trust God enough to keep turning to God and away from anything that would make us ashamed of the Gospel. In many ways, then, conversion of heart is a rejection of living in the past. It is a willingness to let things go, to let the future happen, to keep responding to God's abiding faithfulness to us.

This means, of course, that conversion is closely linked to faith. It helps us carry out the decision we spoke of before, to follow Christ in the spirit of the Gospel, living our baptism. We tend to think of faith as a matter of the mind; an intellectual assent to truths the church presents to us. But that is only one aspect of faith. In the biblical sense, faith is really a surrender of ourselves to a person, the person of Christ, who shows us the Father. Faith is a relationship. By choosing to be an oblate, you are choosing a certain set of values which put a priority in your life on deepening this relationship with your God, developing a more personal relationship with Jesus Christ. This is what conversion means: a change of direction, a turning, a continuous turning and returning to God.

Think of the famous scriptural parable of the Prodigal Son. The father was out daily, waiting, longing, and looking for this beloved son to return to his home. Finally, the son came to his senses and set out on this homeward journey. It was not that he needed to ask forgiveness, he was already forgiven, always forgiven. He just needed to return to his father. It is the same with us. We are never *not* forgiven. We just need to realize this and open ourselves to the welcome that awaits us.

Probably one of the reasons Benedict stressed humility so much is that he realized it would be needed for any genuine conversion of our hearts. Genuine conversion is going to conflict, time and time again, with our human desire to be self-sufficient. We said that conversion means entrusting ourselves to God, and this means opening ourselves to the unknown, realizing that we must be open to the possibility of change, realizing that God can ask anything. And this frightens us. We would feel better if it meant obeying rules, rules that we knew and could total up, like a supermarket tally. But conversion is, instead, a free, personal response to God who speaks to us through the challenges of human events and persons.

A good example of what conversion can mean is what happened in the Church after the Second Vatican Council. Many people had been comfortable with the Church they had always known. Then it began to change, and some panicked. But the spirit of conversion means a willingness not to cling to customs, regulations, and signs that have, for a time, been bearers of God's grace to us. When God asks us to move on, we have to be ready. Think of St. Paul's words: "Forgetting what is behind me and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press toward the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the

life above, in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:13). We can move on like this, if we rely, not on our own pitiful strength, but on God's fidelity. God has never broken a promise.

In his Rule, St. Benedict listed his "twelve degrees of humility." Translating them into more familiar concepts can be a help toward understanding what conversion involves. Conversion means the effort at awareness: keeping in touch with the God-dimension of our lives, not letting this get swamped with other things. It means restraint: trying to overcome those little addictions that beset us and looking squarely at our compulsiveness to see where this interferes with our relationships with God and others. Conversion involves the ongoing struggle with our self-centeredness. This is the Easter struggle: to die a little more to our vanity and our desire to be first and to surrender more of ourselves to God. It also involves patience, our being willing to wait, not to judge too quickly, and accepting things we cannot change.

Conversion means openness, freeing up some of the energy we use to protect ourselves and then reaching out to others. It means working for self-knowledge: stripping away, layer by layer, those illusions that keep us from the real. Conversion involves trying to overcome competitiveness: not defining ourselves by comparison with others, not making our worth depend on what we have. It involves, too, the effort at stillness, in which we stop the outer and inner chatter that reveals our fear of silence.

Benedict promises us that as we try to do this, we shall run the way of God's commandments. We shall be turned ever more to God and God to us.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- How does Benedict consider obedience to be "labor"?
- What is the purpose of obedience?
- To whom or to what are we to direct our obedience?
- What are the fruits of genuine obedience?
- What can be most difficult about obedience?

Obedience is part of our ongoing conversion, part of that constant turning to God that is conversion. Benedict begins his Rule with the verb "listen." Obedience, basically, is listening. It is hearing God's word to us. We have forgotten how to be hearers, and this gets us off center. Listening obedience calls us to be centered again in our seeking God. "Obedience," says St. Benedict, "is the mark of those who hold nothing dearer than Christ" (RB 5:1–2). Like us, he returns to the Father "by the labor of obedience."

The Scriptures never place genuine freedom and obedient service in opposition. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophet Ezekiel has God saying, "I will give them a different heart and put a new spirit into them … then they will conform to my statutes and keep my laws" (Ezek. 11:19–20). St. Paul writes that we are to serve God "in a new way, the way of the spirit in contrast to the old way, the way of the written code" (Rom. 7:6).

The scene of Jesus's baptism shows us Jesus confidently turning to God as the only reference point and justification of his adult life. Jesus knows that salvation is a free gift from God's prodigal mercy. So Jesus never absolutized the law. The law is always relative, a means to an end. Good laws are instruments of our fidelity to God, supporting structures for freedom in love.

Looking at Christ in his humanity, we can see from the Christian Scriptures that obedience to the Father meant for Jesus a straightforward acceptance of concrete reality in his life. This was not something abstract, but the realities of everyday living. Like us, Jesus had to look at his gifts, his background, the social situations of his time, and what the circumstances dictated. Then he acted with prudent judgment. Christ's human obedience was always that of complete honesty with life. This is fundamental to all obedience, both Christ's and ours: we accept the life situation, which, here and now, is the result of our decisions and choices. Genuine Christian obedience means a free and courageous decisiveness, not just conformity to a pattern of behavior. We have to choose our obedience!

In the seventh chapter of his Rule, Benedict explicitly associates obedience with the redemptive obedience of Jesus. This is not managerial obedience, the need to get a job done. It is an attitude of the heart. To be obedient really means to cultivate a loving union with God, which becomes the basis for all our choices. We often speak of trying to find "God's will." First of all, when we say this, we need to remember that God's will is God's love. There is no separation between them. God's will and God's love are one. If we can see the face of a friend behind the mask of the law, it can help us to find God's will.

Another thing we need to know is that God's will for us is not some blueprint that we must painfully decipher to discover what God wants us to do. Our job is not to try to find out what God already knows and is not telling us. That would make our freedom a fake. It would be like doing a crossword puzzle where the answers must fit an already designed

outline. No, to seek God's will is to make the most loving choices of which we are capable, using divine help.

In choosing a particular way of life, Christians put their doing of God's will in a particular setting. Priests and religious are not more obliged to seek and do God's will than are married and single people. But they have chosen different settings, which will significantly affect how obedience will touch their lives. Those who are married will find God's will by taking into account in a special way their spouses and children. Religious will do so by taking particular account of the community in which they live. Lay persons who are single will take into account the circumstances of their lives. By the act of choosing a particular state of life, Christians give a very definite shape to their obedience. This shape arise from the mediations of God's will that become paramount in this life: spouses and children, community, rule, and superior.

At no time, however, do these mediations of God's will relieve us of the effort of discernment. Our family's wishes and needs and our community's customs and rules are privileged mediations, but we have to listen carefully to God in our hearts. That is why prayer and a mature life of prayer are so important to obedience.

Prayer prevents us from allowing any mediations of God's will, rather than God himself, to become primary. If it is true that God has called us to live in a certain context, then we are justified in believing that the realities of this context make up a responsible mediation of God's will for us. A wife has a right to trust that her husband and their life together are a genuine mediation of God's will for her. A sister has the right to trust that her rule, the leaders, and members of her community are such a mediation for her. But there can be no mechanical certainty. Always we must listen to God's voice and pray to understand what God is saying to us.

With Jesus, we want to say to our Father, "I come to do your will." Then, like Jesus, we have to grow through suffering, through the confusions and uncertainties of daily life, and through prayer and faith to knowing and doing this will.

PRAYER

Here are some questions to ponder:

- What is prayer?
- Is prayer connected to ordinary daily life?
- Is there some connection between prayer and the depths of the human heart?
- What kinds of prayer are there?
- What is the most important aspect of prayer?

At the heart of our ongoing conversion and obedience to God is prayer. Probably prayer has more definitions than most things in our Christian life. One of the oldest definitions is that prayer is a "lifting of the mind and heart to God." This is quite true, provided that we realize that it is God who does the lifting. The initiative is always God's. Fundamentally, we are a capacity for God; that might almost be our definition. Jesus came to us to tell us and to show us that God is not a remote force, an unmoved cause in the heavens. No, God is personal and wants a personal union with us. We do not have to go looking outside ourselves for God. As St. Augustine said, "Behold, you are within me, and I was out of myself when I went seeking you." In the Hebrew Scriptures, Jeremiah had already compared our knowledge of God to the migratory instinct in birds, something almost instinctive in us, built into our nature.

Deep in us is a kind of wanting, an unidentified anxiety which reveals our creaturehood, telling us that we are not our own answers, driving us to seek the foundation, the grounding of our being. This personal conviction of unsatisfied need along with our experience of weakness, guilt, and loneliness is simply a part of our human condition. So is the lack of fulfillment that often haunts us, driving us to a restlessness that makes us seek God. This seeking is a kind of surrender, an offering, a movement that is a leaving of self. If our prayer is Christ, then it will be made in and through Christ Jesus. Belonging to Christ in baptism makes our praying easier. We are continually called by God as Jesus called his first disciples: Come and see! It was in prayer that Jesus realized he was the Son of the Father. For us, also, prayer leads to recognizing ourselves as sons and daughters of God.

In his Rule, St. Benedict makes plain that prayer is a habitual awareness of God present in our lives and a willingness to conform to what God wants. This is another way of saying that prayer closely links to faith. We believe, says St. Benedict, that God sees us everywhere (RB 19:2).

Whatever good work we begin to do, we should first pray that God will bring it to completion (RB Prol. 4). Prayer should not consist of many words, but be short, pure, frequent (RB 52:4). When the abbot is having difficulties with any monk, he must above all pray for this monk (RB 28:4). From all this it is clear that Benedict perceives prayer as mindfulness, an alertness to God and God's action in our lives.

St. Benedict begins his Rule with the word "Listen!" Listening to God in the Word, in the liturgy, and, fundamentally, in life, is what prayer means to St. Benedict. It is a way of saying yes to God, as Mary did at the annunciation. For us, as for Mary, this will require faith. Do we really believe that God is listening to us, that God cares? Or do we, perhaps unconsciously and secretly in our hearts, treat God as a powerful trickster, responsible for the unaccountable sufferings and confusions in our lives?

Prayer, in Benedict's matter-of-fact treatment of it, is daily, humble, and ordinary. It often comes out of our human brokenness. It means living in the actual moment and not being focused on the past. Anger and sadness are the two greatest obstacles to prayer, and these usually arise from the rejection of the here and now. Prayer means the faithful struggle to keep ourselves attentive to God, dealing with an imagination that often gets out of control, with distractions, weariness, and lethargy, with the loss of concentration and a sense of unreality. This kind of prayer means we cannot depend on our feelings about it and that we simply pray as we can, believing that even a half hour of what seems to be nothing but vacant daydreaming can still be an offering to God.

St. Benedict had a contemplative way of seeing things. He implies this when he talks about using simple things as if they were vessels of the altar (RB 31:10). He understands that prayer is not a desperate attempt to get God's attention, but the quiet discipline of allowing God to claim our attention. As the great Rabbi Abraham Herschel used to say, "Prayer is turning self-consciousness to self-surrender." This means asking God to reveal himself to us in what we are thinking and doing. This revelation can come in very ordinary things, like conversation with a friend. How did God take part in this? Consider listening to music, sharing its beauty with God, finding God in it, or enjoying a drink of cold water on a hot day: thanking God for this refreshment. We can bring prayer into so many things.

Much of life is ambiguous, unfinished, and contradictory. Even so, life offers so much goodness.To pray is to name this goodness that we all recognize. And since so much of life is ambivalent, prayer means allowing the goodness in it to come out of its hiding place, believing and hoping in our God who keeps promises. Finally, prayer means helping to create goodness in life, expecting good things from God, because to pray is to know, with Jesus, that we are going home, that God is father and mother to us.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- How is *Lectio Divina* part of the spiritual craft in Benedict's Rule? (RB 4)
- How does *Lectio Divina* involve the whole person?
- What are the different aspects of *Lectio Divina*?
- Why is *Lectio Divina* important in Benedictine life?
- How might conversion be involved with *Lectio Divina*?

Lectio Divina is one source of prayer for a Benedictine reading, but not just any kind of reading. The monastic term for the sort of reading that ends in prayer is *Lectio Divina*. *Lectio Divina* means more than spiritual reading in the modern sense. *Lectio Divina* is a meditative holy reading, a reading that involves more than the mind. Benedict was very insistent on this kind of reading. He regarded it as one of the "tools of the spiritual craft" (RB 4). The Benedictine rule was written centuries before methods and techniques of prayer became popular. Even so, spiritual methods that have stood the test of time rest in the heart of the Benedictine life. The monastic tradition envisions the person as a whole. It is to this whole person that the word of God is addressed. And it is our *Lectio Divina* that enables us to hear this word and listen attentively.

Some people are surprised that the Benedictine Rule has nothing to say about "mental prayer." The reason is that holy reading in the sense Benedict intended contains all that can be put under the title of mental prayer and a great deal more. Consider the opening word of the Rule: "Listen." One of the essential acts of monastic life is listening; this is not passive listening, but a listening that is capable of an active response to what is heard. St. Jerome wrote long ago, "If you pray, you are speaking to your Lord; if you read, God is speaking to you." Because holy reading is an active thing, it comes close to meditation. Now, in the old monastic tradition, meditation meant to reflect on, to think over, with a view of doing something about it. The early monks read and meditated chiefly on the Bible. The texts of Scripture were seldom far from their minds and hearts. They knew the Christian Scriptures, as well as the psalms, by heart. They were looking not for information or science in their reading but for savor. They wanted their lives to be flavored by the Word of God.

To read like this, chewing over the text, ruminating on it, is to experience the realities of faith; it is to "taste and see that the Lord is good." Such reading is an act of faith, and of recognition. It is intended to lead to commitment. This means that we need to read in a peaceful way. We are not doing *Lectio Divina* when we are tense about finishing a certain number of pages or so many chapters. We do not read on and on, so as to be completely informed about the subject. No, our reading is to be contemplative, without haste, fragmentation, or overstimulation. If we let this reading become a way of prayer, it can help us do it in a fashion that leads us to God.

Suppose we just sit down with the Scriptures. We read for a while, then pause and reflect to see if something strikes us. If something does, we stop and let the passage do its work. Perhaps now we can begin to speak with God, simply and naturally, letting the passage console or strengthen us. This awareness may last only briefly; then there is some distraction, so we resume our reading with the same simplicity and peace. There are no practical goals to this kind of holy reading. Only a deep, sacramental use of God's word in order to encounter God. At one time we may encounter God quickly after only a

few lines; another time we may be tired and distracted, so we simply keep on reading, letting this be our offering to God. “Hear with an attentive ear what the divine voice daily cries out to us,” urges St. Benedict in the Prologue to his Rule. This is what we are trying to do in our reading. We are letting the Scriptures be contemporary, asking what God is saying to us today.

In the monastic tradition, there are four aspects to *Lectio Divina*: the reading itself, then reflection or meditation, next, prayer, and finally, contemplation. These are four aspects of one organic activity. It is good to choose with care what we are going to read and then stay with it until we have made it our own. Take one of the gospels, for example. Read it through to get a grasp of the whole. Then read it again slowly and carefully. Next, read the parallel passages in the other gospels; then go to a commentary. After this comes meditation, the effort to understand, to connect and apply what we have read to our own experience.

Where does this fit into our lives? Such meditation helps us to personalize what we read. It is true that, when we read the Scriptures, we want to know first what the words meant to the original hearers, but our search for understanding does not stop there. “These words were written for our instruction,” says St. Paul (1 Cor. 10:11). God is speaking to us. God’s word is liberating, transforming, and living for us. The question is not what was Jesus asking of the people of his day. but what he is asking of us today.

From such meditative reading, the next movement is to prayer, to a quiet presence before the Lord to movement in our hearts of thanksgiving, sorrow, adoration, or petition. This involves our hearts more than our heads. The final step is contemplation. Contemplation is both a relaxation of our faculties and their total alertness. It is the gaze of the heart, its total attention to the Lord. It is the Lord praying in us rather than our prayer. It is God unifying our entire being at the very center, “in the cave of the heart,” as the Eastern writers liked to say. *Lectio Divina* like this nourishes our faith and feeds our awareness of the presence of God in our lives.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- Why is the Liturgy of Hours important in Benedictine life?
- How does the Liturgy of Hours make us aware of the sacredness of all time?
- How do the different Hours reflect the uniqueness of their particular time of day?
- How much of the Rule does Benedict devote to the Liturgy of Hours (Divine Office)?
- What is the Scriptural foundation for the Liturgy of Hours?

St. Benedict's Rule give ample evidence that he considered the practice of praying together in the community to be a sustaining force in the life of his monks. He put it plainly in RB 43: "Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God." That was what he called the regular assembly of the monks who prayed together at stated times; later this came to be the called the "Divine Office," and today it is known as the "Liturgy of the Hours." In our own time, the Second Vatican Council affirmed the importance of Christians praying together. The document on the liturgy reaffirms that the Church ceaselessly praises her Lord and intercedes for the salvation of the world through the celebration of the Eucharist, and in other ways, "especially the Liturgy of the Hours." The Council went on to say that this Liturgy is "arranged so that the whole course of the day is made holy by the praise of God."

For Benedictines, the Liturgy of the Hours has always been a central element of their spirituality, a response to the basic human need to pray, to pray often, and to pray together. Worship in every culture is a very human act, arising not only from faith but also from the cultural experiences of those who gather to pray. Praying the Hours offers the occasion to sanctify daily life and make it an offering to God. But this life, so sanctified and offered, must be our authentic life, shaped by the influences of our time.

These strong moments of daily prayer together emphasize the continuity of our search for God. As a group of believers, we contemplate the mystery of salvation and pray for its completion. Praying these Hours together is one of the principal means by which we overcome the tendency to lose ourselves in the ordinary activities of daily life and so forget our source and destiny in Christ and our present call to live as Christians. Christ is truly present in Scripture as in the Eucharist, and there is always growth in the understanding of the realities and words which Scripture hands down to us. This happens through the contemplation and study of believers who treasure these words in their hearts, as Mary did in the gospels. Part of this treasuring is the constant praying of the Hours through the ages.

From the beginning of Christianity, believers used to pray in private at significant times of the day, particularly at morning and evening. St. Clement of Alexandria, who died in A.D. 215, noted that some Christians also had the custom of praying at the third hour of the day (this came to be the prayer Hour of Terce), and at the sixth hour (Sext) and also at the ninth hour (None). These were private prayers but they could be prayed in common. Morning and evening prayers were always regarded as more obligatory. It was the desert monks in the early fourth century who instituted a common liturgical celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer. This custom spread to the churches in the cities, where it became common to have a public celebration of Morning and Evening Prayer for the people. These Hours usually consisted of a hymn, some psalms from the

Hebrew Scriptures, readings from both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, and silent prayers between the psalms. St. John Chrysostom writes of prayer for the whole Church and the word at these hours in which the faithful exercised their common priesthood. By the end of the fourth century, the Sunday vigil of the Resurrection appeared.

There is a different spirit between Morning and Evening Prayer. Since morning conveys the notion of rebirth and renewal, the Lauds (Morning) Hour has the air of dedication. It is a preparation, consecrating the day and all that happens in it to the Lord. That is why the psalms used at Lauds are for the most part joyful songs of praise. But songs of repentance are also part of Morning Prayer, to purify our awakening hearts and enkindle a desire for God. We invite all creation to praise God for the coming of light, especially the light of our Savior. Vespers (Evening Prayer) has two main themes: thanksgiving to God for the good that has come to us during the day, and repentance for the sins of the day. This Hour ends with the beautiful song of Mary, the Mother of God, called the Magnificat, a song of jubilant faith in the God who loves the humble.

In the early Church, the faithful considered participation in these two Hours as part of the Christian way of life and were present daily for them. Together with an occasional celebration of Vigils in preparation for the great seasons and feasts, this embedded their celebration of the Eucharist in a rich and varied rhythm of daily and weekly prayer. In this they were only following the example of Jesus their Lord, who was a man of prayer, born of a woman who was a true contemplative and to a people who knew how to pray.

For these Christians, the psalms of the Hebrew Scriptures made up a Christian prayer book, saturated with Christ on every page. They viewed the psalms as the prayers of Christ to his Father or as their own faith experience. The psalms were not predictions of what would happen in Christianity, but they can be used to reflect on God's definitive work for us in Jesus Christ. As Spirit-filled prayers, the psalms were originally composed to be used by a variety of worshipers year after year. Their general character allows them to be used in many situations, as they bring our experience before God in praise, love, repentance, and submission. The psalms of Israel give us words to bless God, to repent, to bear trouble and sorrow with courage, and to rejoice together. They help us translate our groping search for God into lyrical hymns of praise, cries for mercy, quiet hope, and bursts of joy.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- How do the passages in the Rule that relate to meals and fellowship help you to reflect on the meaning of the Eucharist?
- What do your tradition's Eucharistic practices do to strengthen the bonds of the Christian community?

As a Christian family, the monastic community finds the culmination of its worship in the regular celebration of the Eucharist. Here the faith community allows the Christ of Calvary and Easter to gather it up into his own sacrificial obedience to God, to increase the community's life, and to make it ever more his Body. Like all Christians, the monastic community with its friends, oblates ,and guests continues to celebrate the Eucharist because the Lord Jesus at the Last Supper commanded us to "do this in remembrance of me." The remembering takes place in and through a doing. It is a remembering action done with others.

When we gather together for the central, sacramental experience of Christian life, the Eucharistic action, we gather to do a very human thing: to celebrate. But we do not gather to celebrate something that is going to happen, hoping that the Eucharist might somehow work something miraculous. No, we gather at the Eucharist to bring ourselves to a deeper awareness of a reality that is already present. We are a community of faith, a people united to God and one another. Surely there are times in all our lives when we do not feel in the least united either to God or to anyone else. There are moments when our actions threaten this union, and most of the time we are willing to work at it. We do want to celebrate and intensify our union with Jesus Christ and one another.

This means that we do not come to the Church's great, central act of thanksgiving—the Eucharist—to create an experience in our lives out of nothing. We come to intensify and experience what is already ours. The moment of Eucharist that gathers us together is one faith moment in a whole series of such moments. The Eucharistic moment captures and capsulizes many other faith moments and brings them to a new intensity. If we fail to experience any kind of union with God or with others in the daily affairs of life, we can scarcely expect to experience that union in the Eucharist. That is the point of Jesus's words about leaving your gift at the altar and being reconciled first.

The American Bishops' Committee on the Liturgy expressed it this way: "We assemble together at the Eucharist in order to speak our faith over and over again in community and, by speaking it, to renew and deepen it. We do not come together to meet Christ as if he were absent from the rest of our lives. We come together to deepen our awareness and commitment to the action of his spirit in the whole of our lives at every moment …. People in love make signs of love and celebrate their love for the dual purpose of expressing and deepening their love. We, too, must express signs of faith in Christ and in each other, our love for Christ and each other—or they will die. We need to celebrate!"

Why do we as Christians celebrate the Eucharist as a sacred meal? In most cultures coming together to eat has been regarded, historically, as a sign of God's life-giving presence among the people and the announcing of that presence. That is why some of the Jews at the time of Jesus disliked the idea of eating with sinners; they understood very well that this meant he was sharing his life with them in a real way. Jesus's whole

ministry consisted of announcing that his Father is the giver of all good gifts. And this is what he expressed symbolically by eating with literally anyone. No one was excluded from the table of the Lord. Christ ate and drank with some sinners throughout his public ministry. He ate with his disciples the night before he died, and that night he told them that this meal was more than the usual Passover commemoration. His own body and blood, the blood of the Son of God, was liberating them. After his resurrection, Jesus again ate with his disciples on the shores of Lake Tiberias (the Sea of Galilee). This clearly expressed the lived experience of the first Christian communities; sharing their food was sharing their lives.

It is the same with us today. We eat with the Lord at his table. The Lord says to us: "Do this in remembrance of me." This Eucharistic meal we eat today is still that of a pilgrim people. It is not yet a complete banquet: just as a piece of bread and a sip of wine. It is never enough; there is always a longing for more, a hungering for completeness. Waiting together we cry: "Come, Lord Jesus?" Meanwhile, we do the Eucharist together—until he comes.

The sacred community meal is an action we do together. It is not merely a ritual that we attend. It is true that the priest presides at our Eucharist, but he is not the only celebrant. We are all celebrants! Our action of receiving communion commits us to becoming ever more the body of Christ. As St. Augustine said so long ago: "We must become what we receive." The Eucharist is the Christian Passover meal. It is not just something that happened to and with Jesus more than two thousand years ago. It should be happening to us today. If our food and drink is the Lord himself, then the important thing is that sharing this food makes us pass over into what we receive. When we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist, we are saying that our struggles, the many kinds of small deaths we suffer from day to day, are tied up with the death of Jesus. We are saying that his death gives us hope and that life will come out of this dying for us, just as it did for Jesus.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- In what ways are work and creation related?
- What role does work play in the spiritual journey?
- How is work a significant part of Benedictine life in particular?
- From a Christian perspective, is work a curse or a blessing?
- How does a Benedictine perspective of work compare to other perceptions of work more prevalent in modern society?

Work is one of the elemental facts of our human condition, but it is a fact on which Scripture and revelation cast a new light. Our Creator-God is a worker whose tireless act of creation never ends. Christ labored mightily at our redemption; day by day his Holy Spirit continues this work in us. As Christians, we are co-workers with God. In work, we know something of the joy of creation and something of the burden of our earthiness in a world where redemption is not yet complete.

We know our God by studying the work of our Creator's hands. And we are a part of this work! "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works" (Eph. 2:10). As the main activity which takes up a good deal of our time, work helps us to earn a living and can be an expression of our identities. It can be made into a means of expressing our relation to God as we do our share in cooperating with the evolution of the created world. At the same time, the painful, tedious, and laborious elements in work are a constant reminder that we live in a fallen world. The pain of work, its disappointments and failures, our own weakness and the sheer stubbornness of things are a part of our whole experience of the human condition as dislocated by sin.

Manual work was not highly valued in the ancient Greek and Roman world, partly because there were slaves to do it and also because of an exaggerated esteem for political and military life. But the Jews in both Old and New Testament times did value physical labor. They saw it as a part of the pattern of work and rest, recorded in the book of Genesis. God also followed this pattern, working for six days and resting on the seventh. The Jews believed that good, hard work achieved discipline, security, and the avoidance of evil.

The Gospel atmosphere is one that finds people at work. Farmers, fishers, shepherds, and vinedressers throng around Jesus, who himself was known as the son of a carpenter. Jesus worked more years than he preached. He took work for granted as a human necessity, and, in fact, spoke of his supreme mission as Savior in terms of work. Once, matter-of-factly, he said that the Son of Man came to serve, not to be served.

The apostles taught that work is a moral essential for the Christian life. St. Peter wrote that hard work in patient union with Christ guards us from evil. St. Paul, too, had a good deal to say about work. He proclaimed that there is no distinction between a slave and a free person in the Christian life. Christians work to earn their living and to keep away from evil. Those who refuse to work should not expect to eat. Work makes almsgiving possible and should be done for Christ's sake. Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians links work with charity to the poor and to Christian discipline; this combination has become an essential element in a Christian theology of work.

The early Fathers of the Church add another note in their insistence that work is not a punishment for sin, because Adam and Eve worked in the Garden of Eden before any sin.

They were put there to till and care for it. "God blessed them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and increase, till the earth and subdue it, rule over the fish of the sea, the birds of heaven and every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gen. 1:28–29).

In monasticism, work is valued as a spiritual exercise and a discipline. It can be penitential when it is burdensome, but that helps guard the monk against laziness and sloth. St. Benedict says with no hesitation, "They are truly monks if they live by the labor of their hands" (RB 48). In his Rule, prayer, reading, and work comprise the acts that fill the hours of the day. All three find their common center in God; balance among them is vitally important to the well-being of the community. Work provides a relaxation from and a complement to the mental activity of reading and prayer. As St. Benedict summed it up, "Let the brethren serve one another … for this service brings increase of reward and charity" (RB 35).

From the sixth through the twelfth centuries, the monastic philosophy of work inspired monks and nuns to develop model farm systems and to create centers of trade and home industry. Monastic innovations in agriculture during the medieval period helped the recovery of unused land to feed a growing population. It also improved the working conditions and economic opportunities of neighboring peasants. Shops built in monastic compounds gave a livelihood to carpenters, cobblers, furniture-makers and others; besides this, artistic gifts were provided for the benefit of society. They were influential in the development of civil and Church law, in handing on a knowledge of medicine, in the growth of art and architecture, and in the progress of education.

The rise of capitalism and the spirit of unrestricted acquisition gradually dominated the world of work, producing modern economic life. Nature was explored and exploited as never before; science began to control all expansion. Human beings suffered worse exploitation. Many workers labored under inhumane conditions for long hours at starvation wages in jobs of mind-numbing sameness. By the end of the nineteenth century, labor unions had begun to come to the rescue of workers. The Church, too, gave them support through the great social encyclicals of some modern popes. Today, economic justice must be the concern of all Christians.

In Benedictine communities, the traditional purpose of work has not been unlimited productivity and profit, but rather the provision of service for others and sufficient production to support a simple lifestyle. Benedictine oblates in Christian communities anywhere must refuse to be dominated by things in order to be free for God and neighbor and to have something to give to the poor.

Here are some questions to ponder:

- What is the biblical foundation of hospitality?
- How is faith involved in the practice of hospitality?
- How is the practice of hospitality part of the spiritual journey?
- What does Benedict's Rule have to say about hospitality?
- How do you experience hospitality when you are the guest?

The most universal and the oldest way monasticism has made its presence felt in the world is through the practice of hospitality. Of course, hospitality was a tradition long before the Christian era. In the ancient world, it usually had spiritual overtones. The Greeks used to consider readiness to offer hospitality the criterion that distinguished the civilized person from the barbarian. In the Bible, hospitality is seen both as a work of mercy and a witness to the faith. Think of Abraham who left the shade of his tent in the noonday heat to welcome three strangers who turned out to be messengers from God. Having been a stranger himself in desperate places, Abraham was willing to open his life deliberately to what was unknown and unprogrammed.

In one of the last climactic chapters of Matthew's Gospel, the evangelist has the Last Judgment scene. Here Jesus reveals the depth of the mystery of Christian hospitality: to welcome strangers is to welcome Christ. "I was a stranger, and you took me in" (Matt. 25:35). In Luke's Gospel, we have the wonderful Emmaus story. Two distinguished disciples are walking along the road to Emmaus. They meet a stranger and tell him about their sorrow at the death of all their hopes. The stranger, who is Jesus, then begins to tell them why the Messiah had to suffer. When they come to an inn, the disciples persuade him to eat with them, and only when eating together do they recognize him as their crucified Lord. Only in breaking the bread of hospitality did their confusion turn to hope. And the Book of Revelation says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and sit down to supper" (Rev. 3:20).

To welcome the stranger is an act of faith. That is why St. Benedict stresses, as he does, hospitality to guests. The stranger is not just a person, but also all the ambiguity, the unknown, the otherness in life. Faith can help us greet this otherness not as a threat, but as a possible gift. God is the ultimate stranger, unpredictable, potentially threatening our security. Faith is the attitude of one who, looking for God, searches the face of every stranger and guest.

The first monks, those men and women of the Syrian and Egyptian deserts, who lived in austerity, silence, and faith, knew the meaning of hospitality and were ready to dispense with their usual practices of asceticism to welcome guests. There are some endearing little anecdotes on this theme. Consider the following. Once a monk came to a hermit, and as he was taking his leave, he apologized, "Forgive me for hampering you in keeping your rule." But the hermit answered, "My rule is to welcome you with hospitality and to send you on your way in peace." Another time, two monks came to an old hermit whose custom it was not to eat every day. When the hermit saw them, he greeted them gladly and said, "A fast has its reward. Those who eat from a motive of charity obey two commandments; they leave their self-will and refresh their guests."

In RB 53, St. Benedict provides for guests and is quite evidently glad guests always will be present in a monastery. He is prepared for to face considerable inconvenience in

taking care of guests because he is convinced that they represent Christ. Benedict goes on to make clear that the care of guests is to have a distinctively religious tone and that it be done in a way that does not disturb the peace of the community. The Rule shows Benedict's belief that spiritual values can be transmitted through hospitality. It does not consider that guests merely are to be entertained, but that the monks are to witness to a life experienced as deeply meaningful, with Christ as its center.

Guests who come to our Benedictine monasteries today find many reasons for visiting. Basic to all these is a desire to experience God through a lifestyle that speaks to them of peace and deeply held convictions. So many people today are wearied of a hectic, impersonal existence, wearied of the kind of competition and materialism that seems to lead only to despair. These people come to monastic houses looking for a vision of life with Christ at the heart of it, Christ with his power to reconcile and transcend differences of age, background, education, and opinion.

Benedictine oblates who share the monastic experience and the monastic vision can witness in this fashion to their own guests and in their own kind of hospitality. For the greatest source of hospitality is not our houses but ourselves. It is we who can allow them to be what they really are and who through this gift of self can help restore some measure of balance and wholeness to their lives. Hospitality is the challenge of welcoming the other who may look at first like the gardener whom Mary Magdalene saw in the garden at Easter, or like the traveler on his way to Emmaus, but who turns out to be Christ.

ONGOING FORMATION—OBLATE PROGRAM

Following the Rule of St. Benedict is a life-long commitment and one that requires consistent and constant vigilance. In that way, your formation is ongoing. The following represents a more detailed approach to integrating the Rule into our daily lives. But, it also reflects that as we mature in our commitment, we are also responsible for living the Rule according to our station in life. This is an individual decision and one that should be reviewed and reflected upon regularly.

ONGOING FORMATION

General

The formation of the oblate is ongoing throughout life. The specific form within which this formation occurs will vary person-to-person and at various stages of life. Nonetheless, it is desirable that each oblate regularly consider a personal formation program by which he or she undertakes to employ the tools of the spiritual craft taught in the Rule, thus directing all actions toward acquiring that love which, when it is perfect, "casts out fear" (1 John 4:18).

Accordingly, the following flexible framework is presented as a guide for this ongoing and deepening consecration to Christ of oblate lives through the way of St. Benedict.

Formation Program

The final oblation of the oblate contains the essential form of the oblate's commitment, and the Oblate Constitutions embody a guide to the oblate's formation. The program finds its foundation in those documents.

As in the novitiate, there is a basic, normative pattern of ongoing formation for all oblates, and there are also optional considerations from which each oblate will periodically select, according to the conditions of their life and their oblate guidance.

Basics

At a minimum, Oblates are encouraged to:

- Attend regular monthly meetings after thoughtful preparation
- Pray the Liturgy of the Hours individually or communally both morning and evening.
- Read the *Rule of St. Benedict* through at least twice annually, pondering the relevance of those practices and ideals of Benedictine life;
- Practice daily prayer, both contemplative and affective;
- Regularly study the scriptures, especially the psalms and Benedictine spirituality texts in the mode of *Lectio Divina;*
- Make at least an annual retreat to Sacred Heart Monastery for renewing personal life and deepening relationship with God;
- Renew oblation annually;
- Give thought and care to simplification of life and "contemplative availability" to family, church, vocation, citizenship, and overall life setting.

- Choose some personally meaningful way of participating in Benedictine community, e.g. cells, or with other oblates (See "Participation in a local Benedictine community" in the next section.)

Enrichment

The following list includes an elaboration of the above and of the Constitutions, and is presented as a "menu" which oblates are encouraged to review, selecting one or two appropriate to his or her present situation in life, and adopting those choices as a personal supplemental rule for approximately a year at a time, working closely with the oblate director/dean or oblate companion to discern appropriate choices and to be accountable for them. However, in making these choices, the oblate shall take care that he or she first fulfills the normal duties of his or her status in life with utmost fidelity, recognizing that to neglect what is necessary in order to take upon oneself extraordinary obligations is contrary to the gentle spirit of St. Benedict.

- **Prayer**
  - Daily intercessory prayer
  - Liturgy of the Hours (Morning and Evening Prayer)
  - Regular worship/Eucharist
  - Careful celebration of Sabbath
  - Regular practice of silence
  - Attentive reflection on the cycle of liturgical year for its formation possibilities
  - Prayers before and after meals.
- **Ongoing reading**
  - Bible Study: Develop a regular personal daily or weekly plan of Scripture study, choosing from such resources as the Recommended Reading List
  - Study and integration of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and related sources
  - Sources listed in the Novice program
  - Sources listed in Constitutions
  - Recommended Reading List.
- **Simplification of life**

  You may want to read and reflect on the chapter "Adopting a Personal Rule of Life." This section outlines how one may go about developing a personal rule of life and why it is helpful to do so. Even if you don't think you are ready to formalize a rule of life for yourself just yet, this chapter provides an opportunity for insightful review of your current station in this world.
  - In the morning offer the actions of one's day to God, praying most earnestly that he bring those actions to perfection.
  - In the evening review one's day to recollect where one has met God in Christ during the day, giving thanks.
  - Ponder and choose how to simplify one's daily and weekly schedule, using time expenditure as a guide.
  - Pray and reflect alone or with a group, considering what is "sufficient at this time of life," and take follow-up action.

- Cultivate a warmhearted generosity towards poor and unfortunate people and offer appropriate aid. Consecrate one regular day of every week by attending mass, a church service, setting aside a special prayer time, or by doing some other good work in honor of God.

- **Service to God and humankind**
  Recognize that the Benedictine life is a focused way of living out the Gospel and is always asking, "Where and how may I serve Christ in the setting God has given me?" Oblates accept a call in love and prayer to find Christ everywhere and in all. Sample life vocations might include:
  - Contributing to your local Church community
  - Family care and nurture
  - Being a caring presence in a work environment
  - Volunteer contributions for a better world
  - Informed citizenship
  - Other, according to one's situation.
- **Volunteer service to the local oblate community and Sacred Heart Monastery**
  Each oblate lives in a particular life setting of domestic and vocational responsibilities. The *Rule of St. Benedict* invites each oblate to respond to the call to be a witness to the gospel within that life context. Sometimes this means finding support to persevere in existing life settings and areas of brokenness; always it is the discovery of value in the ordinary settings of everyday life. Oblates are encouraged periodically to explore with a spiritual director, the oblate director/dean, oblate companion, or other leaders regarding their specific vocation as an oblate.
- **Contemplative availability**
  The call to service is always founded in prayer. To serve Christ is, first of al, to be nurtured by our union with Him in prayer and contemplation. Conversely, this union makes a difference in the quality of the oblate's availability to family, friends, and associates. Oblates are encouraged to consider the nature of their presence in the circumstances of their daily lives as emerging from their prayer. In particular, oblates may wish to dialogue with one another formally and informally on a question—"What difference does it make that I am an oblate?"—within the context of the commitments which constitute their present life settings and to take action accordingly.
- **Participation in a local Benedictine community**
  Community life is essential to Benedictine spirituality. Since oblates do not live in the cloister, their communities are more fluid than those of the sisters, but they are no less central to their lived spirituality. Oblates are encouraged to take their Benedictine communities seriously as opportunities for meeting and serving and being nurtured by God.
  The oblate community is an invaluable source of support and insight in the ongoing process of living out the Rule in a lay secular environment. Chapter gatherings of the oblate community are the primary locus of oblate community. Oblates are encouraged to take an active part in such meetings and to attend regularly, getting to know and praying for each other between meetings.

Oblate small group cells are a supplemental resource for the oblate community. These are optional groups, formed under the direction of the oblate director or deans and are meant for mutual study and support. They are modeled on the ancient small houses (cellae) of monks. After making the final oblations, oblates are invited to establish such groups for common prayer, study of the Rule, discussion of applying the Rule in lay settings, and the like. Cell groups are reserved for those who have made their final oblations in affiliation with Sacred Heart Monastery, unless other arrangements have been made with the director or the deans.

- **Personal and spiritual response to the *Rule of St. Benedict***
  Benedictine oblates or novices of Sacred Heart Monastery are expected to exhibit the highest level of personal and spiritual response to the *Rule of St. Benedict*. According to the *Guidelines for Oblates of St. Benedict*, "[Oblates] foster a deep respect for the God-given rights of others, especially for human life, for the property of others, for freedom of religion, for the privacy of the home, for the right of all to know the truth and to speak the truth, for freedom in the education of one's children, for the right as well as the duty to work and provide for oneself and one's dependents."
  Any appearance of impropriety in the conduct of an oblate or novice is unacceptable. An oblate or novice should avoid any appearance of impropriety, whether it is towards the leaders of the oblates, other oblates, or members of Sacred Heart Monastery. Should there be any such behavior, the oblate or novice will be advised by the oblate leader to discontinue this behavior. Should the behavior in question continue, the oblate will be suspended from the oblate program until such behavior has been resolved.

Transfers of oblates from other chapters

In the event that an oblate from another oblate chapter wishes to join the Sacred Heart Monastery's oblates chapter, the following procedure addresses such a change in membership.

Using guidance from *The Code of Canon Law* and the *Rule of St. Benedict*, the following principles should guide that process:

- There shall be a formal written request from the oblate stating his or her intention to transfer current membership to the new oblate chapter. The request shall include reasons for the transfer.
- While there is no formal period of probation found in *The Code of Canon Law* or the *Rule of St. Benedict* and before such transfer can take place, it shall be the duty of the oblate director/dean(s) to determine on a case-by-case basis the length of any introductory period. In conversations with the prospective oblate member, the oblate director/dean(s) will encourage him or her to become more acquainted with Sacred Heart Monastery and participate in meetings and activities of the local oblate chapter.
- The oblate director/dean(s) shall determine the status of the oblate requesting a transfer. At their discretion, the oblate director/deans(s) may elect to contact the leadership of the individual's previous community. Upon acceptance into the community, the oblate will contact their prior monastery to inform them of their transfer.

- References
  - *The Code of Canon Law* 684, 684–2, 684–3, 684–4; 685.
  - RB 61.

Summary

The Formation Program as outlined above shows the importance of structure in developing one's spiritual life. During our formative years and in our ongoing formation, learning *Lectio Divina* and saying the daily Divine office in light of the Rule constitute the basics of Benedictine spirituality. Along with many like-minded individuals who are creating a Benedictine community, we are aided in this journey.

THE MONASTIC TRADITION

St. Benedict and His Rule

BENEDICT'S LIFE

One of the first questions we normally ask soon after we come into contact with Benedictine spirituality is "Who was St. Benedict?" Yet the first questions that spring to our minds are not necessarily the ones earlier Christians thought to answer (as we often discover in reading the Bible!). Many times the issues that most concern us appear to be left unaddressed by our ancestors in the faith.

We know little about the life of St. Benedict. Our only source is Pope St. Gregory who wrote "Life and Miracles of St. Benedict," Book Two of a larger work, *The Dialogues*. While interesting reading, Gregory's work is not intended to be biographical, serving rather as a pastoral and evangelical document. Yet from that work, which is partially based on testimony from men who knew Benedict personally, we can and do cull certain data about Benedict's actual life.

Benedict and his sister, Scholastica, were born in Norcia, (Nursia in Latin) Italy, a town northeast of Rome. Benedict's birth is believed to have been about AD 480. He died as abbot of a large monastery at Monte Cassino around AD 540. As a young man, he was sent to Rome for schooling. But before finishing, he chose to withdraw to a cave in Subiaco to seek God. There he lived for years, after which he began the monasteries at Subiaco and finally, Monte Cassino (with another daughter house at Terracina). We believe that he wrote the Rule around AD 525, during his tenure at Monte Cassino.

What can we glean from his life that will help us in our own journeys? Several points for reflection occur at once. First, Benedict lived a life centered on the love of God in a historical time fully as tumultuous and anxiety-laden as ours. He lived in the century of a barbarian sacking of Rome in AD 410, which so staggered Augustine that he wrote *City of God*. Although there was considerable poverty, inflation, and random violence, Benedict's life basically spanned a period of relative quiet under the Ostrogoth Emperor Theodoric. Following his death, the world entered an era of turmoil, during which monasteries of men and women, guided by his Rule, kept alive the light of civilization. We do well to ponder what inner vision and kindness he discovered in his life experience that so sustained him and others in such difficult times.

Second, Benedict made several important shifts in his life in relation to "worldly" matters, which are suggestive in light of our own struggles to live holy lives. As a young man, he lived in Rome, the center of power and influence. Since he obviously had gifts of leadership, he might have been tempted to advance his interests there, but impetuously, he rejected all Rome stood for, both good and bad, as unhelpful to his great desire to be God's man. Then he adopted the pattern of the Egyptian desert monks, that of withdrawal from all human companionship, to be tested and refined. Apparently, in this solitude, he studied Scripture intensely, discovered much about his own strengths and weaknesses, and was powerfully touched by the transforming power of God's love. But, he left solitude no less decisively than he had left the competitive center. Benedict's final choice, reflected in the Rule, was to live in the midst of ordinary human activities (i.e. physical labor, craftsmanship, providing one's own food, and preparing and serving it)

while centered on the love of God as expressed in regular prayer, scripture reading, and the support of like-minded persons. What might such a choice look like for each of us in today's world?

It is interesting that in his Rule, Benedict recommends the reverse of the procedure in his own life: he indicated that the *cenobium* (the community of monks) is the place of testing *prior* to making the choice for solitude. From what Gregory tells us, Benedict's return to human society was certainly a time of testing for him, no less than that of solitude. Upon his return, Benedict encountered several efforts from "colleagues" to poison him. One time he was served by the raven so often seen in visual depictions of Benedict.

Writing later in his Rule, Benedict teaches us that it is not easy to live with one another, but that we deepen our capacity to love precisely by living our discomfort to the full in such situations. Something in this whole process had readied Benedict to be a man of God in the heart of the world. Again, here is much food for our reflection on the right mix of this rhythm of solitude and community for our own lives. What do we expect of community and how have we experienced the possibilities for loving God and neighbor authentically in the midst of our human societies? Where are the discomforts which might teach us each more about loving if we were to live into them fully, expecting to meet Christ there?

The third point for reflection in Benedict's life appears when we notice that Gregory's primary purpose in speaking of Benedict's life is to show him as *vir Dei*, or man of God. In order to highlight this image, Gregory relates Benedict's miracles of healing and prophecy. He deliberately makes a comparison between elements of Benedict's life and that of famous persons in the Scriptures: Moses, David, Elijah, Peter, and finally our Lord, Jesus Christ. (See Chapter 8, "Simplification of Life", following.) While in contemporary times, we might not approach this description in the same way, it is helpful for us to consider what we do think to be qualities of a man and woman of God, living in our present times. How would such a one act and think? In modern and practical terms, how might we let our lives be filled with the spirit of the just and the fullness of Christ so that we become leaven to the world around us? The questions help us integrate the fruits of Benedict's life into our own lives.

THE *RULE OF ST. BENEDICT*

These questions turn us to the *Rule of St. Benedict*, where the spirit of the man shines through. The Rule itself is the best answer to the question, "Who was Benedict?" No doubt Benedict would have been uncomfortable with all the focus on him personally. He saw himself primarily as a transmitter of the tradition to the specific community of which he was spiritual father. He did not think of himself as an originator, but rather as a synthesizer. Indeed, he relied heavily on existing monastic sources.

The Rule itself points us toward most of Benedict's primary sources. (RB 73:3–5) He recommends Scripture as the truest of guides for human life, and indeed, there are over 300 citations of and allusions to the Bible in the Rule (*RB 1980*, Appendix 6, p. 468.) In addition, Benedict suggests several monastic sources, which we will examine. There is also a "hidden source" for Benedict's Rule, and that is the so-called *Rule of the Master*; we know even less about the Master than we do about Benedict. Yet the fact is that modern scholarship acknowledges that Benedict had the text of the *Rule of the Master* in

hand, and simply edited it in the crafting of his own Rule. Why then, since we now know that, don't we simply abandon Benedict's Rule and turn to the original?

Benedict's editing of his sources shows clearly the mind, or perhaps better, the heart of the man. In every case when he shortens or abbreviates the *Rule of the Master*, he does so in the interests of charity, flexibility, or gentleness on behalf of his fellow human beings, those wayward monks under his charge. Occasionally the love of God, which so possesses his heart, will break through. Benedict no doubt considered himself a very ordinary man, and his Rule always has the feel of gentle advice for ordinary persons, for each one of whom Christ died.

In effect, what Benedict has done for us in the Rule is to open up the Scriptures and to open up the Fathers, so that we may obtain access to the riches of both in terms that can help us live out our daily lives; receiving and giving Christ in all our exchanges with one another. What he always wants to do is to point beyond himself. He presumes that our hearts burn, as did his, with a yearning for life and a desire to see good days, with a deep desire to dwell in God's house (RB Prol. 15, 23). In response to these desires, he directs us through his Rule to the monastic tradition he inherited and beyond it, ultimately to Christ himself.

How can we read the Rule so that it helps us to see this dynamic in our own lives? We modern readers often find the Rule hard to understand, even though it emphasizes daily life. That is because it is written within the context of the ancient monastic art of *Lectio Divina*, and it needs to be read in that way if it is to be fully appreciated. Here is one way to take the process of *Lectio Divina* and apply it to our reading of the Rule:

- Take a few verses of the Rule and read them very slowly. Perhaps you might write out the verses in your own hand, paraphrasing to be certain you have understood the text or at least read the text aloud slowly.
- Ponder for a few moments what you think Benedict meant by the passage, what he was trying to get at, what he is doing in these few verses, and why. If there is a scripture passage quoted, open your Bible and read the full section near the quote, and ask yourself why Benedict might have thought of that passage in connection with his subject in the text.
- Shift now to a more personal and subjective mode and examine your own feelings and response to the passage. What connections do you notice in your own life with Benedict's thought here? What images come to mind from your life experience? What feelings surface and how are they connected with the text and your life? Explore resistances as well as resonances, treating everything reverently.
- Pray and respond to all that has arisen. Perhaps you will wish to journal or offer a prayer of petition, confession, intercession, thanksgiving, or even adoration. Finally, wait on the Lord in silence for a time.

THE EARLY MONASTIC TRADITION

Introduction

Benedict's Rule and spirituality cannot be understood apart from the continuing monastic tradition upon which Benedict depended and in which he was formed. Good overview orientations to this tradition can be found especially in the supplements of *RB 1980* (Liturgical Press) and Claude Pfeifer's *Monastic Spirituality*. At some point, oblates will want to go directly to the sources themselves, and this section is designed to

introduce some of the key monastic sources. In RB 73, Benedict recommends that we study not only the Old and New Testaments but also the *Conferences and Institutes* (of John Cassian), the *Lives of the Fathers*, and the Rule of Basil. Let us look briefly in turn at each of these sources, plus two other pivotal sources written by St. Anthony of Egypt and Evagrius Ponticus.

The Life of Anthony

The Christian monastic tradition is said to have begun with St. Anthony of Egypt, often called the father of monks, a man born in Central Egypt in AD 251. Certainly, there are traditions of ascetical hermits even in New Testament times, but during Anthony's lifetime, the monastic experience began to be a major model for Christian experience, not unlike that of martyrdom, which was more common during the first several centuries of Christianity. *The Life of Anthony*, like Benedict's, was told by another Christian saint (in this case, Athanasius) more to inspire and encourage the reader in the transforming power of God than to "report data." Again, it has much to offer us.

According to *The Life of Anthony*, he was eighteen when his parents died, and praying one day, he felt called to sell his goods, give the money to the poor, and simply follow Christ. In time, he withdrew to an abandoned tomb where he remained for twenty years without seeing anyone except a friend who brought him bread to eat. Friends and disciples sought him to no avail, until, at last, they broke down the entrance to the tomb. What they saw is described this way:

> Anthony came forth as though from a shrine (*memoustagogemenos*), having been led into mysteries and inspired by God. This was the first time he appeared from his tomb for those who came out to him. And when they beheld him, they were amazed to see that his body had maintained its former condition neither fat from lack of exercise, nor emaciated from fasting and combat with demons, but was just as they had known him prior to his withdrawal. The state of his soul was one of purity, for it was not constricted by grief, not relaxed by pleasure, not affected by either laughter or dejection. Moreover, when he saw the crowd he was not annoyed any more than he was elated at being embraced by so many people. He maintained utter equilibrium like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature. Through him, the Lord healed many of those present who suffered from bodily ailments; others he purged of demons and to Antony, he gave grace in speech. Thus he consoled many who mourned, and others hostile to each other, he reconciled in friendship, urging everyone to prefer nothing in the world above the force of Christ. And when he spoke and urged them to keep in mind the future goods and the affection in which we are held by God, who did not spare his only son, but gave him up for us all, he persuaded many to take up the solitary life. And so, from then on, there were monasteries in the mountains and the desert was made a city by monks, who left their own people and registered themselves for the citizenship in the heavens (Quoted from St. Athanasius by Fr. Isaac Kalina in the *Valyermo Benedictine*, Vol I, No. I.)

The Life of Anthony invites us to ponder for ourselves this invitation extended to every Christian to "become like God" and to "rise with Christ". Perhaps we think that is work only for holy people, for saints, but we remember that the New Testament calls all believers in Christ "saints." God invites each one of us to become most fully what we

were meant to be by birth and baptism. To do this as oblates, we do not withdraw to abandoned tombs but pray, fall in love with the Scriptures, practice *Lectio Divina*, and, in all things, listen for Christ.

St. Basil's Rule

Benedict's Rule depends upon Basil's Rule at many points. Although Benedict probably did not read Greek, he probably had before him a Latin version of the great Greek Cappadocian's Rule. Basil was born about AD 330 and was educated in Caesarea, Constantinople, and finally Athens. He was deeply influenced by the spirituality of his sister, Macrina, and decided systematically to explore the monastic life in Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia. Returning, he became a priest and then Bishop of Caesarea and drew around himself a community of like-minded persons. Basil's monastic legislation establishes several of the key themes found in Benedict's Rule: love of God and neighbor; mutual service (as required in Matthew 25); goods shared in common (as described in early Acts) and a sense of the community as the Body of Christ.

Basil's Rule takes the form of Questions and Answers about issues common in monastic life. The extent to which Basil (and Benedict following him) understood and related to problems of "the world" is perhaps best described in Questions 37–42 on work (which clearly form the background for Benedict's Chapter 48 and help illumine its purpose and meaning). Basil's principle is this: "labor in proportion to one's strength is essential."

He insists that we work to provide our own bread, as well as to show charity to our neighbor. Our work is most effectively undertaken when we acquire a recollected spirit from joining our prayer and our work honoring the appointed hours and allowing them to inform our work time.

Basil discusses what sorts of trades are suitable ("our special aim is simplicity and frugality"), the method and manner of selling products, the interdependence of tasks, and the attitudes with which we should work. The Christian emphasis should be on sufficiency, not excess nor deficiency, and on service of the Lord by means of the work of our hands. Above all, our work is to deepen our trust in Christ.

Far from being outdated and irrelevant, Basil's advice touches each of us in our daily occupations. Do we work in proportion to our strength—neither too little nor too much? Do we share the fruits of our labor with others in need? Do we allow our prayer to inform our work and offer up our work at prayer? Do we strive for simplicity, frugality, and above all to deepen our trust in Christ by whatever we do? It might take a long time to begin to integrate the results of our reflection on such questions into our daily life experiences. Perhaps, we might want to take a hint from Basil's emphasis on life in common and join in groups with a few other oblates to help bring accountability to our resolve in this regard.

Evagrius Ponticus

Evagrius was born in AD 345 and was briefly a disciple of St. Basil, who ordained him a lector. After Basil's death in AD 379, Evagrius went to Constantinople and later to Palestine. Finally, he went to Egypt and took up the monastic life there, writing thoughtfully on "the practical life." It may surprise us to realize that the practical life, as understood by these early monks, involved becoming most fully that person which God

created each of us to be. Evagrius's primary interest was human freedom, learning not to be subject to compulsions, irrational passions, and undesirable chains of sin and death. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he did not place his focus primarily on doing away with vices. Rather, it was on accepting those virtues that would, in fact, give us the freedom to choose right and to use our energies for good to say "Yes" with all our being to the call of God. In this preoccupation, he came to see that every human capacity and energy is capable of being transformed into a gift worthy of being offered to God.

- The rational part (mind) is the organ of contemplation or union with God and can be expressed in prudence, understanding, and wisdom. (The negative uses of this part are pride and vainglory, which is a turning inward of a capacity intended for communion.)
- The desiring part (attractive, even erotic emotion) is the organ which causes us to respond to God's desirability and can be expressed in temperance, continence, and charity. (The negative uses of this are lust, gluttony, and avarice—desire fixed on things incapable of bringing satisfaction.)
- The valorous part (aggressive and enduring emotion) is the organ which enables us to persist in spite of adversity toward our goal in God. (The negative uses of this part are anger, despondency and hopelessness—aggression turned against the helpless or weak.)

The *Praktikos* is written as a letter and contains one hundred relatively brief chapters. In his first chapter, Evagrius sets forth his project:

> Christianity is the dogma of Christ our Savior. It is composed of *praktike*, of the contemplation of the physical world and of the contemplation of God.

The first element, the *praktike*, or the active life, is the underlying task of daily human life: self-awareness and discipline such that our experience teaches us wisdom so that our whole being becomes more and more attuned toward God. The second element, contemplation of God in creation, is the basis of *Lectio Divina*, that meditation on life itself by which we learn to see Christ in all things. The third element, contemplation of God, reminds us of the importance of Sabbath, of silence, and of simple waiting on God in awe and wonder. These three elements are always intermingling.

Although the influence of Evagrius on Benedict is indirect rather than direct, we can see in his project the foundation of Benedict's Rule. Work, *Lectio Divina*, and the daily office are one triad expressing this same project. Although the language of virtue and vice is relatively remote from modern thought, even Evagrius's model offers interesting issues worth pondering in our own lives. Do we have a vision of a way in which all of our appetites and desires can be offered to and transformed in God's hands into gifts of the Kingdom? Are we regularly reflective on what is going on with us interiorly and willing to let everything be drawn into and refined by our love for God? Is there a balance in our lives of activities which exercise the various parts of our being and integrate them into a harmonious unity? Perhaps we might wish to join with other oblates regularly to meet and discuss what Evagrius might be saying to our modern oblate lives. A thoughtful exploration of Evagrius offers many specific suggestions for ways of becoming transformed in Christ.

John Cassian

John Cassian was born about AD 360. He spent much of his later life in Marseilles, so it is conjectured that he was born there. Having received a good education, he joined a monastery in Bethlehem as a young man and became familiar with monastic customs throughout Syria. However, he and a fellow monk, Bermanus, were eager to make further progress toward salvation, so they set off on a journey to Egypt, where monastic life flourished. Years later, Cassian wrote up the fruits of this journey, setting forth in his *Conferences* the content of discourses received from the holy men they visited and systematizing in his *Institutes* the desert wisdom on the life of virtue.

At least one of the conferences contains advice which was succinctly passed on through Benedict and forms a daily part of life at many monasteries today. Abbot Isaac's second conference on prayer (or Conference X in Cassian's system) tells the method of continual prayer. The formula is: "O God, make speed to save me: O Lord, make haste to help me." (Ps. 70:2, RB 18:1)

Of course, this is the versicle used at all monasteries to begin daily vespers! The monks use this phrase, remembering that Cassian urges us to know it as that verse "picked out from the whole of Scripture" for the purpose of keeping continual recollection of God.

Cassian quotes Abbot Isaac as urging us to ponder this phrase always, ceaselessly revolving it in our hearts and letting go of all other thoughts. Isaac considers that this phrase embraces all the feelings which can be implanted in human nature:

> Since it contains an invocation of God against every danger, it contains humble and pious confession, it contains the watchfulness of anxiety and continual fear, it contains the thought of one's own weakness, confidence in the answer, and the assurance of a present and ever-ready help. For one who is constantly calling on his protector is certain that He is always at hand. It contains the glow of love and charity …. For one who always and in all matters wants to be helped, shows that he needs the assistance of God not only in sorrowful or hard matters but also equally in prosperous and happy ones, that he may be delivered from the one and also made to continue in the other, as he knows that in both of them human weakness is unable to endure without assistance.

How succinctly in this passage does Cassian suggest the essence of that spirituality, so formative of Benedict himself and so richly passed on for our assistance! The goal is always to remember God and always to know oneself to be in God's presence. One of the most useful means is to take a word or phrase from scripture, letting it take root in our minds and hearts. We do not ignore the *meaning* of the phrase: indeed for us, its meaning is a fundamental aspect of its value for us. Our basic existential position is that of calling upon God, urging God's aid and assistance in all the activities of our lives. Unlike so many of our contemporaries, we do not idolize self-sufficiency. No, on the contrary, we humbly acknowledge our dependence on God for all things, good and bad, at the same time rejoicing in the knowledge that God is providing all that is necessary. Cassian, Abbot Isaac, even Benedict—they understood that this attitude is easy to describe but very challenging to live. It takes a lifetime of practice to let it truly be our own. That is why we begin with simply keeping the phrase before our consciousness at all times and letting it teach us what we need to know in each of the activities we undertake each day.

Summary

These major sources in the monastic tradition may seem to us sometimes to be remote and forbidding. We have perhaps glanced through one or more of their writings and felt quite bewildered by the language of a much earlier century. Yet, when we read them slowly and thoughtfully, they can often surprise us by the discovery that, in their time, they were struggling with issues very similar to our own. We can find friends across the centuries who help keep us on the right course and in a community. This section has been intended to introduce a few of the major monastic sources very briefly, in the hope that something here will appeal particularly at this time. Begin where you are attracted, read slowly and carefully, ask another oblate to share the reading, and discuss together what it might mean and how it might touch your life. May you find a good word!

THE PLACE OF MONASTICISM IN THE MODERN WORLD

In reviewing the monastic tradition, it is important to recall that the tradition is ongoing. Monastic history did not stop with the Middle Ages, nor is it confined to the inside of cloisters. An important ferment is happening with monasticism today, and it involves each one of us. The impulse of monasticism continues to attract, to energize, and to be leaven for the human world. Yet, it is not always easy to say just what the nature of this leaven is. What is monasticism about for monks, for oblates and for the world?

As always, asking this question is the fundamental creative activity. And the primary purpose of this section is to invite each oblate to reflect regularly on it: "What is monasticism about for me in my life setting?" Or, perhaps, the question is more simply stated as "What does it mean for my life that I am an oblate?" In answering the question, it is well to remember that the answer is important for many persons, not just ourselves. Our most immediate effect on the world is on those whose lives we touch each day. They too will be impacted by how we understand ourselves as "monastics" even if only to be puzzled that we take regular time for retreats. After all, Sabbath—resting in the Lord—is a very counter-cultural value!

A useful way to start answering this question for ourselves is to recall the beginnings of our Benedictine faith journey. We might wish to jot down some notes and think of various peak moments, or high points, within our faith journey, which led to our oblation. As we consider these peak moments, it is also helpful to recall whether there were others involved. After reflecting on such moments, it is helpful also to reflect upon various valleys, or low points, which mark our faith journey, noticing as we recall them what insights were gained from such experiences. It is often helpful to repeat this process of reflection periodically in our lives and even to share what we discover with other oblates and novices. In such reflection and sharing, we become more closely attuned to what God is doing with our lives and how we can cooperate more effectively with that work.

Another way to approach a personal answer to the question of the present influence of monasticism on the world is to give some thought to how we understand the world in which we live. Each of us sees a slightly different piece and has a slightly different understanding. Yet all of us are affected by certain fundamental tendencies in our culture. Our world today is very busy. There is very little "time" and not much authentic human contact. Our lives feel fragmented and complex. We are overwhelmed with data and responsibility. We are influenced by modern psychology. Who among us doesn't know something of compulsive behavior, co-dependency, our shadow side, etc.? Yet despite

this emphasis, by and large we are restless and anxious, perhaps even despairing. We speak freely of sex, money, and power, but almost nothing about death. Seldom do we talk about a vital relationship with a living and active God.

It helps to reflect on the messages our culture gives us about the "way to the good life," because all of us are influenced, more or less, by the dominant themes of our culture—monks no less than oblates. And yet, alongside these tendencies, we choose to set another view. We use the Rule and the Gospel as ways of helping us interpret our daily reality. We come to the monastery and the tradition to help us make sense of what happens to us in our ordinary lives in light of something more than the obvious biases of modern daily life.

Monasticism is a direct challenge to much of the bias of modern culture. Monks are leisurely; their time frame is that of eternity. Monks are contemplative; they live out of a center of prayer ,and other things fall into place around it. Monks are simple (i.e. *monos* means "one" or "unified)" because their focus is on the discovery of God in all things. Monks are hopeful because they place the power of resurrection beside the suffering of the cross. Monks are willing to die to cherished aspects of the self because they know that is the way to live in God's life. The monastic tradition recognizes that God constantly challenges us not to get stuck at the points of our weaknesses. God is always inviting us to change what we think we know about ourselves in order to become what God envisions for us. And this is true, not only for us as individuals, but also for the community of human experience that is our world.

This monastic work, which is the work of monks and oblates in our age, no less than those before, is a challenge to what the culture thinks of itself. It is very difficult work because it requires continuing attention, and God often invites us to grow at precisely the place we feel vulnerable. (Growth can happen best at the "soft" places!) This difficult work can only really be done in the context of a community where we share these monastic values in common, where we belong to each other, and where we are able (mostly) to be for each other. The community, with all its weaknesses, provides essential support and nourishment, enabling us to be who we are. For us, the monastic tradition and the monastic community are lively invitations to let our love and longing for God be the central fact of our experience and to seek to find and respond to God in the most unlikely places of modern life. And our small, hesitating, real-life response helps to continue to build the tradition.

The primary witness that a monk can give is to know God. This witness is primarily lived rather than spoken. It is a way of being that may invite curiosity because it is subtly different than the way the world lives. And yet, curiosity may lead another person to hunger for what lies at the heart of that monastic life and join in the journey. Each of us is invited to let this witness be ours within the simple and difficult confines of our ordinary lives in the world.

"What is monasticism for me?" Let this be the question that stays with us and helps our lives become an ongoing part of the monastic tradition.

THE FAMILY TREE OF SACRED HEART MONASTERY

In 1880, a heroic little band of five sisters from Maria-Rickenbach in Switzerland answered the invitation to join the sisters in Maryville, Missouri. The zealous missionary, Bishop Martin Marty, OSB, the newly appointed Vicar Apostolic of the Dakota Territory,

came to their doorstep. He invited the sisters to help at the Indian Mission at Standing Rock. Some sisters later homesteaded in Zell, South Dakota, and eventually moved the novitiate there from Maryville. In 1887, Bishop Martin Marty sent a letter to the sisters, saying he would turn his school property in Yankton over to them. The call of the Benedictines to establish their monastery at Yankton not only responded to an appeal from the bishop, it also offered a response to the plan of God. From this beginning, Sacred Heart Monastery in Yankton has grown to its present status of eighty-seven sisters. Over the years, the sisters have become noted for their liturgical music, spiritual studies, and specialty artwork. They continue their ministries in the areas of teaching, health care, social work, parish ministry, and providing support services for Native Americans and others.

The charism entrusted to Benedictines is, in essence, the gift to seek God in cenobitic (monastic) communities, to praise God through prayer and ministry, and to listen with eagerness to the Spirit's call into the unknown future. Our charism is seen as both flexible and stable. It is an ongoing task and an ever-present gift, calling for a fresh response each day in the context of faith.

THE DAILY OFFICE

A major portion of the *Rule of St. Benedict* devotes itself to arranging those times during the day when the community assembles to praise God and to pray together. These hours of the daily office provide a way to consecrate the whole day to God and make it holy. The daily office combines both holiness and ordinariness; its purpose is to integrate prayer and our lives. The office itself is actually a "domestic" form of prayer—a form designed for a "family," sharing life events and creating the climate in which we become Christ's body together. In praying the office, our family expands. We not only join with the community of Sisters at Sacred Heart Monastery, but we also join with all those Christians around the world who are praying the office during all twenty-four hours of the day. Through Jesus Christ—and indeed as he did in his human life at Nazareth—we also join the communion of saints, living and dead, who have offered and will offer these prayers to God.

> Christian prayer is primarily the prayer of the entire community of mankind joined to Christ himself. Each individual has his part in this prayer which is common to the one Body, and it thus becomes the voice of the beloved Spouse of Christ, putting into words the wishes and desires of the whole Christian people…. The official prayer of the Church is at the same time the very prayer which Christ himself, together with his Body, addresses to the Father. Thus, when the Divine Office is said, our voices re-echo in Christ and his in us. (*Apostolic Constitution*, nn2, 8, Pope Paul VI)

The heart of the daily office is the Psalter. These ancient songs based on Jewish patterns of thought often seem to be the opposite of spiritual nourishment and cause us spiritual indigestion. As with any indigestion, the best remedy is to take small portions and chew thoroughly. The psalms are meant to be prayed with attention and at a much slower pace than our modern life generally allows. Surely we too have had occasions to experience the lament, the darkness, the longing for vengeance, the praise, the fullness of heart, and the celebration that the psalms often mark! They are a summary of the entire Old Testament and promise of the New, condensed as songs and deep feelings of the

people who owed everything to Yahweh. When we take them in bite-sized portions, our voices can indeed teach our hearts the wisdom of our ancestors.

Benedict gives us advice on how to pray the psalms in his summary of the Office in RB 19–20. When he uses the term "psalmody" in RB 19, he refers to the spoken and supplicating moments of prayer, the reading of the psalms and the offering of our intercessions and petitions. When he uses the term "prayer" in RB 20, he refers to the silent and listening moments of prayer: the spaces we offer after each reading to allow God's word to "catch fire" in our hearts and thereby warm us throughout the day. This is the way we are meant to pray the office. First, a psalm or a reading from the Scriptures or even a prayer is said. Then a time to listen, ponder and wonder about connections to our own lives. And finally, silence, in which we await the Lord, present with us now. Then we take another bite, reading, listening, and maintaining silence until our allotted time is concluded. It is this rhythm of activity and receptivity that enables the psalms to become prayers of our own hearts, prayers that empower our days.

It is often helpful to leave our prayer time with a short word or phrase taken from the psalm or readings to warm us throughout the day. This word or phrase can be used in every encounter to bless the service persons we see, to sanctify a difficult meeting, to "offer up" our exasperation at a broken machine or to re-center us in a minor lull (say, a bathroom break!). In this way, our prayer time can begin to penetrate into all the aspects of our daily routine, even as it does for professed monastics.

Some oblates may wish to pray the full daily office. Others may like simply to pray the Benedictus in the morning and the Magnificat in the evening as an abbreviated way to join in the spirit with the prayers at the monastery. Others will pray morning, evening and night prayer from *Shorter Christian Prayer*. The office, or the Liturgy of the Hours, serves as a way both to balance our own oblate lives on these central monastic "hinges" of the day and to deepen our preparation in ordinary dimensions for an extraordinary sharing of prayer during our visits to the monastery.

THE ANCIENT ART OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

See "Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*," by Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB, at the end of this section on "The Monastic Tradition," for guidance in practicing *Lectio Divina*.

LIVING IN COMMUNITY

Introductory Note

Four original co-authors tied to St. Andrew's Priory wrote the oblate handbook upon which this handbook is based. They wish to introduce this chapter with a word about purpose and process.

> We have met together monthly for several years to talk and pray and simply enjoy each other's company. An important part of this experience of community has been our ongoing conversation about community. We are convinced that the experience of Christian community is basic to Benedictine life, but we have discovered some real difficulty in making a definitive statement about what Christian community is! Neither individually nor collectively do we feel able succinctly to characterize this

central facet of Christian and Benedictine spirituality. We are much like several blind persons, each touching a separate section of an elephant, each with some facet of a common reality, but not capable of presenting a definitive description of the reality we mutually perceive. However, we are willing to offer a few ideas-in-progress, which have emerged out of our ongoing conversations, as a springboard for the reader's own reflection and integration. We make this offering in the conviction that, like prayer, living in a community involves a commitment to act rather than merely to talk about acting; to begin with things as they are, rather than holding back until things—and ourselves—are perfect.

Primary Ingredients of Christian Community

Center in Christ

The origin and ongoing nature of Christian community are found in Jesus Christ. We agree that the term "community" makes no sense without the specific adjective "Christian." The communal experience of Christian unity in diversity is impossible without Christ at the center of that experience. Our ideas about community start with this conviction.

Everyone enters community because of a real identification in Christ: "Christ is my life; Christ lives in me; I pattern my life on Christ's. Christ is with and for others; I am so committed to him that I want to be like him." Our commitment to and longing for Christ naturally expresses itself in the love shared by sisters and brothers in Christ. We are able to express and receive Christ's love from each other only with the assistance of Christ. Nature without grace is insufficient for this mystery of communal life, but grace does build on and express itself in human nature.

We are the body of Christ. Bonded to one another, we become the gathered embodiment of Christ's spirit in the world. Community is the embodiment of Christ shared among us. Community has a firm and completely secure center in Christ and is not soft as gelatin or erratic and wind-tossed as choppy seas.

A Rhythm of Solitude and Togetherness

Community can only be experienced fully when it expresses a harmonious blend of the fruits of solitude and commitment to one another. Community is harmed equally by the separatist pressure of idolized individualism, as well as by mindless conformity in idolized fellowship. Each human is unique and precious in the eyes of God; community encourages the support of and rejoicing in the particular giftedness of every member, and provides regular opportunities for solitude, especially that solitude in which the person experiences himself or herself as a beloved child of God. Equally, there is something sacramental and uplifting about the people of God gathered in mutuality. When two or three are joined in Christ's name, then the Spirit of Christ is truly vital there.

And, a new wholeness—indeed a new creation—is brought forth in the midst. The individual somehow deepens authenticity when she or he freely yields to the limitations on personal freedom required in life together.

Community is necessarily a balance of attention to each and commitment to all. It is a dynamic rhythm between solitude and relationship. This balance or rhythm is very

difficult to learn, especially when our culture, in general, gives us limited and poor opportunities to practice either element of this dynamic balance. In our time, we think self-actualization consists in discovering and doing our own will. It is difficult for us to imagine solitude that becomes self-transcendence—moving beyond our individual limitations. In our time, we tend to think true fellowship consists in a sort of merry, slap-on-the-back affirmation, which avoids the truth rather than finding its only source and wellsprings in it. So, the balance of solitude and relationship which co-constitute Christian community may call us first to risk new conversions of heart toward greater ease with contemplation (solitude), and greater humility with communication (relationship). Community grows out of practice in both. And, it requires both in full bloom for optimum fruitfulness.

Conscious and Sustained Choice

Community consists of an intentional coming together to seek unity in the Lord. As children of God, we long for union with him. The way we receive the first fruits of such a union is to intend unity. To intend is to lean toward, to orient oneself in the direction of, and to be predisposed in favor of. To intend is to choose to be committed to others, in the awareness that our life with others penetrates to the core of our receptiveness to God. It is no accident that the two great commandments are always given together. If we say we love God and do not love our neighbor; we are liars (See 1 John.). We consciously and continuously choose to be committed to each other in the conviction that it is the best way to be united to God's own life.

It is such a cumbersome and unheroic thing to commit ourselves to act in love toward those given to us in our present circumstances! It is such a small and obvious and seemingly "wasted" sacrifice of our pride and our energy and our face! It is such a constant and unrewarding discipline to submit ourselves to these churlish clods with whom we literally share earth-space! It doesn't feel like prayer. It doesn't feel sublime. It doesn't feel fruitful. Surely this ordinary act can make no difference at all to the kingdom of heaven or to my salvation!

But, community calls for conscious commitment and intention toward just such foolish and ordinary actions. It insists that precisely one's conscious commitment to Christ in the specific humans met every day is the primary means by which we make our way to God. And it asks that this conscious commitment toward unity with each other be remade anew each and every day of our lives. Benedict calls us specifically to this commitment in the language of his Prologue (See especially RB Prol. 45–50.), where he invites us to see in community life an opportunity for contemplative growth that is a real participation in the Pascal mystery, touching as it does both the sweetness and joy of our journey together as well as the ability to accept with patience the limitations and pain community also imposes.

There are three aspects to this salutary work of community toward our personal salvation. Our commitments to others in community necessarily include all three aspects.

1. Community provides support, an environment in which we can receive essential nurture to have confidence in and act upon each unique call into life. We do not perceive Christ growing in ourselves nearly so well as other see it in us, and we need each other's care in order to see and act in fidelity to the child of God we each are uniquely to become.

2. Community provides challenge, an environment in which we are confronted with the implacable differences of others, giving the opportunity for refining the basic aspects of ourselves in the crucible of common life.
3. Community provides for service, opportunities to care for others and to know that one's care is important to others. It gives a place in which to express the fruit of Christ's love as it ripens in our hearts.

So we commit ourselves to a community to find our full humanness as beings who become whole in ongoing relationships of support, challenge, and service. Expressing all three aspects of our humanity provides a stable base, enabling us to intend unity in a community. We seek to be for and with one another primarily as and because Christ mutually dwells in us. We commit this intention to each other in the sight of God.

Willingness to Live in the Uncontrollable

Commitment to community is founded in the movement of Christ's Spirit, which blows at will and cannot be contained. An essential part of the contemporary experience of Christian community is the willingness to persist in this fundamental reality, intentionally directed toward others, often in the face of apparent unfruitfulness, without even being able to explain what we are doing or why we are doing it. Living in community, we experience to the full the tension inherent in the lived paradoxical mystery of God's Kingdom which is and, yet, is coming. We are incarnated and spiritual. We are individuals in communion. As a community, we are the meeting place of human and divine because we are the Body of Christ in the world. Often the experience of tension as we live into paradox is exactly the stimulus that precipitates the movement which is the sign of the Spirit.

In a community, we become aware that our lives are intersecting and overlapping so that we often don't know quite where one of us ends and where another begins. This belonging to each other is not unhealthy enmeshment, but the manner in which the transcendent God is embodied in us, as we actually become participants in the life shared among us all. This does not happen without reasoned willingness to risk our emerging selves with each other and to receive the gifts of emergence with tenderness and reverence. Community is founded in good communication with central concerns shared in openness. Community involves acting in love— both when another is vulnerable and when self is! The gift of gentleness with one another at our tender edges is an expression of our developed capacity to receive Christ in our midst. In a community, we increasingly live into the truth of this mystery of Christ drawing all things to himself. We do not control this mystery, but simply trust that it will carry us.

Letting Community Emerge from Conflict

Perhaps the fundamental puzzle about Christian community is that it is so seldom apparent to those who live in it. Living side by side without Christ in the center is not community. Indeed, such living is often hell. But why, when Christ is in the center, does community itself so often feel like hell? St. Bernard is not the first monk, nor the last, to answer the question about the hardest aspect of monastic life with a laconic phrase: "my brothers!" And many of us often escape the pain or shallowness of our own parish life to the relative peacefulness and vitality of the desert monastery! Why is Christian community so often experienced as the painful abrasiveness of knuckle-on-knuckle?

Inevitably, in a committed relationship with another human being, one becomes disillusioned. Others are discovered to be what they actually are and not what we fantasized. Monastics know this realization to be that of the choice between life and death. "Will I forgive you for not being my projection? Can I accept you in your full 'otherness' and not merely my idealized soul's companion? Will I respond to this painful moment by either mentally separating myself from the community or physically running away to find yet another projected ideal being? Or will I embrace this disillusionment, grateful to be introduced to the truth, trusting that somehow Christ is always embraced in the truth of things as they are?" Death is the refusal to forgive; death is separating oneself. Life is freely and consciously giving up our momentary preferences in order to open up on a deeper level to receive Christ more fully. In such a moment of humility, we experience our own limitations as the essential vehicle of self-transcendence. In order to receive God in our lives, we must be aware that we each carry only part of the truth and that receiving Christ in others as they actually are is essential to our fullness of life in God. In a culture addicted to self-sufficiency and independence, we Benedictines acknowledge our dependence on one another for growth at our deepest and most vulnerable levels—our sense of intimacy with God.

So, in willingness to let the ideal of the community be lived out in the specific, boring, or broken circumstances in which we humans inevitably find ourselves, we embrace our own embodiment, receiving our own lives and those of our neighbors with gratitude and intentionality. Identifying Christ at the center, we find a rhythm of solitude and relationship, consciously choosing our own here and now as the place we are invited to give and receive Christ. We trust the Spirit's guidance even in utmost perplexity and humbly offer our actual selves to the service of Christ's Body Thus, we are given human community.

Finding Community as Benedictine "Laity-in-the-World"

We believe that the primary foundations of community for those in the world, as well as for monks, rest in the awareness and conscious intentionality suggested so far. However, laity in the world experience some special issues connected with the highly fragmented nature of modern life. First, it is possible that most of the settings in which a person finds himself or herself involve others who are non-Christians or persons of no faith at all. How does the principle of finding Christ and being part of the Body of Christ apply in such circumstances?

Sacramentally, it is clear that a community experienced with other persons baptized in the name and power of the Trinity includes special dimensions not present in other settings. Nonetheless, Christ is Lord of the Universe, drawing all things unto himself, and as Christians, we can trust that Christ particularly waits in all settings to meet those of us with eyes to see. Thus, we can still open and express our awareness and intention toward Christ's presence in every created bit of God's world.

Second, given the multiple "communities" of daily experience common to contemporary life—home, work, church, social settings, and so on—it may be necessary or appropriate for a layperson to seek and commit to multiple group settings rather than a single one. We have in mind the several aspects of community mentioned above as essential elements of Christian growth. Specifically, that community provides support, challenge, and opportunities for service. It may be that something like a small, face-to-

face Bible study group or a twelve-step meeting will be the primary community from which one experiences support. Yet another setting, such as the parish's daily soup kitchen or visiting the sick or tutoring, may be the primary community for service. And still another environment, perhaps even one's own family setting, may provide the primary community of challenge. The basic suggestion is that it may be necessary for one in the world to seek out several apparently discrete group settings in which to find all the elements necessary for the full Christian experience of community. Our experience is that a regular experience of Eucharist with a worshipping community can help enormously to integrate the various groupings in which one finds community. All these settings may be brought together and offered up to God at Mass (or a worship service), as a way of discovering wholeness.

Community Roots in the Holy Scripture and the Rule of St. Benedict

Holy Scripture

The Old Testament is full of references to the chosen people who worship one God. The primary covenant of the Old Testament is this central idea, "I will be your God and you will be my people." Examples might be taken from the Pentateuch (Gen. 17:8), the Prophets (Jer. 32:38), and the Psalms (Ps. 66:4), to name a few.

In the Gospels, Jesus gives the first commandment as loving God with heart and mind and soul and strength and the second commandment as loving one's neighbor as oneself. He further says, "A new commandment I give you: that you love each other as I have loved you" (John 15:12). Why does Jesus give a command to do what may seem to be impossible? He does so to stress its utmost importance in life with God! In addition to these commands, Jesus himself lived in a community. First, with his family and in the village of Nazareth for thirty years and then with twelve disciples as he undertook his ministry. Why did he choose to be with disciples unless he was convinced there was something about his message that is best understood in life together? Even the incarnate Lord sought out a community, perhaps as an embodiment of God's own communal life in the Trinity.

The other New Testament authors support the centrality of community for Christian life. Luke describes the first Christian community in Acts as an essential guide to life in the Spirit. Paul uses many images to express his pivotal notion of the fellowship founded in our sharing of Christ and his benefits (1 Cor. 10:16), especially that of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:14f). Peter refers to sustaining love as expressed in the twofold relationship with God in Christ and with our brothers and sisters in Christ (1 Peter 4:13). John uses earthy images of vine and bread and door and shepherd to describe our union with Christ in his gospel (John 6). In his epistles, he emphasizes the fellowship with one another and with God which is granted us through Christ (1 John 1:3).

The specific term used by these New Testament authors to describe the community of believers is *koinonia*. It comes from the Greek root, *koine*, meaning "common," the ordinary and the shared. It develops into the Greek word *diakonia*, meaning service or charity toward others.

The Rule of St Benedict

Benedict calls his monks "cenobites," meaning those who share a common life (under a rule and an abbot), and calls them "the strong kind" (RB 1:2, 13). He is strongly influenced by the descriptions of community early in Acts, which he cites six times at central points in the Rule (RB Prol. 50, 21:1, 33:6, 34:1, 55:20, 57:5)

The most severe punishment in the Rule is excommunication. We must remember in its original meaning as literal removal from the experience of community, whether in the chapel, at common meals, or actually expulsion. In these punishments, we see how valued community is, a thing not accidental but central in the life of the monastic. The punishment of excommunication makes real for the offender that which his behavior has claimed: "I am separate; I am distinct." To live in community as a means of salvation expresses the contrary value. Specifically, the uniqueness of every child of God finds its most complete fulfillment when unfolding within the life of the community!

Benedict follows St. Basil in his emphasis on the common life as the best setting for one seeking God. The capstone of Basil's argument in favor of community is this saying addressed to the hermit: "Whose feet will you wash?" Again, the implication is that the love of God necessarily overflows into a life of charity toward neighbor. Even monastic communities cloistered and entirely contemplative understand the fruit of their work to be an overflow of love and prayer on behalf of the suffering world! But in our comfort with the sound of the two great commandments side by side, we must not forget their radical nature. We are permitted to welcome and serve and be blessed by the God of all creation in the improbable human being just now before our eyes!

Benedict repeats this radical assertion over and over in the Rule in many ways: Christ is received in the sick (RB 36:2), in the stranger (RB 53:1 and 66:3), and in the superior (RB 2:2), among others. The fundamental monastic discipline—for all who follow the Benedictine way, whether they be monks or ones living in the world—is to learn to let this be the truth of our every moment, our every motive, and our every action.

SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE

Theory: The Call to Simplicity

The Oblate Constitutions remind us of our oblate commitment of "the reformation of my life" or *conversatio morum*, as Benedict calls it. Our Constitutions call this a never-ending process of integration, a deepening of our awareness of and responsiveness to God … in the deepest parts of ourselves and our lives. One specific practice which is to characterize our reformation of life is the simplification of life.

What is this simplicity toward which our lives are to be directed? Is it the same thing as poverty? Apparently not or the word poverty would be used. In any case, a vow of poverty seems inappropriate for an oblate, committed as she or he is to living in the world. Even Benedict does not ask of his monks a vow of poverty. Rather he encourages simplicity of lifestyle, building on St. Basil's concept of sufficiency. Basil describes sufficiency as "a state both free from want and without superfluity" (Long Rules, Question #20). In other words, sufficiency is something between the extremes of great need and excess; it is a golden mean. Benedict's simplicity has often been described as similar to the conditions at Nazareth before Jesus began his public ministry. He lived in a village as one of the ordinary people. He worked honorably for his food and prayed

regularly with his neighbors, assuring a balance of work and leisure and prayer. And yet unquestionably, this quite ordinary life was deeply marked by a total dedication to God.

Dedication to God is at the heart of simplicity. What makes a life simple is its focus. Modern society often seems to be so complex, so fragmented, so bewildering in its multiple claims. What allows us to have a sense of unity and coherence, what assists us in living with "a single eye," is that our focus is on God. We let the desire of our hearts direct our attention to the deep longing for union with God, and then we let all the details of our lives fall into place around that desire and longing.

Benedict establishes a framework of prayer for life in his monastery so that regularly throughout the day the monk can remember God's presence in praise and re-dedicate his life to God's service. Having set prayer as the framework, Benedict then proceeds to show how stewardship is important. Those in charge of kitchen service are to wash the towels and return the utensils intact at the end of their week of service (RB 35:7–10). Garments assigned to the monks are to be carefully tended so that when the monk is finished with them they can be carefully stored in a wardrobe for the poor (RB 55:9–14). Within the monastery, all the crafts and useful labors are practiced with the disposition that everything is to be done for the glory of God (RB 66:6 and 57:9). This is a life of simplicity, a life rooted in ordinary human activities, yet, receiving every element of it as a gift. The simple life is attentive and caring for everyone and everything that is encountered with an eye to see God. God is, of course, never contained in creation, but rather revealed there in such a way that creation itself can be appreciated afresh.

The biblical model for simplicity is perhaps that of the response of the disciples to Jesus's call to follow him. Simon, Andrew, James, and John "immediately" left their fishing nets and followed him (Mark 1:16–20). Matthew rose from his tax office and followed him (Matthew 9:9). In every case, these men recognized the priority of Jesus. They knew that what he offered was the only thing worth having. They were like a man who, having searched all his life for fine pearls and finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it (Matthew 13: 45–46). We often interpret this simplicity as meaning that we must leave behind everything else in order to follow Jesus. Yet for the oblate (and even to some extent for Benedict himself), the question is not so much leaving everything else, as rather always looking for Jesus in the midst of everything else.

Simplicity is that attitude of heart in which we have allowed ourselves so greatly to long for relationship with the Lord that we are willing (and increasingly able) to meet him anywhere and everywhere. Benedict advises us to prefer nothing whatever to Christ (RB 72:11). Simplicity is letting that longing for Christ have preference in it. It is greeting each day with the expectancy that Christ will be met in its many aspects wherever we are.

Yet even having said this, we have clearly not provided a specific answer for any individual oblate asking, "How can I achieve simplicity in my life?" Living a life of simplicity is an active and continuing task, taking a lifetime of careful attention to God's particular call within each individual's life.

Practice: The Response of Simplicity

We have emphasized above the way in which simplicity is fundamentally a matter of the heart and its orientation to prefer Christ everywhere. Yet being human, we can work back

and forth between our actions and our intentions and between our outer activity and our inner orientation. Each supplements and informs the other. We can also begin a process of simplicity in our lives with some external changes so long as we continue to reflect on and allow the inner deepening of these external actions. The Oblate Constitutions and formation program both make a few specific suggestions which are supplemented and elaborated here. There are two fundamental aspects of life in which simplicity can be developed. One is time, and the other is material things.

Time

Simplification of life may necessarily entail a simplification of schedule. If simplicity starts with a focus on Christ, who is central to all else, this implies both that some regular time is "cleared" for God and that God is invited into all time. A beginning approach to the possibility of simplifying our schedules is to take a time inventory. Before we can simplify, we must know how things already are. Two methods are presented below as ways of evaluating how time and life are currently being experienced. Take your choice of suggestion (A) or (B), writing down your thoughts as they evolve.

Suggestion A

If you wish more specific guidance, then move to Suggestion B.

- List the major categories of what you do during a "typical day. Follow your own definition of *typical*.
- Assign hours (or fractions thereof) that would be involved for each category during your typical day.
- Review the listing of categories and assigned hours until you are comfortable with what you have written making certain that time involvements faithfully describe the way you are living.
- Only now add the listing of numbers to determine a total of time assignments in one day.

Very likely your typical day is not an exact twenty-four hours in length. Ponder silently whether there is some helpful message in why the total hours in your typical day do not add up to twenty-four. Also consider whether you are satisfied with the proportions among categories (that is, whether there is too little time "for God" or for any personal relationship or too much for another category).

Suggestion B

Major time involvement in my "typical" day:

- _____ hours assigned to various categories of work: outside the home, at home, care of children or aging parents, volunteer activities, etc.
- _____ hours assigned to food: eating, preparation, clean-up, marketing, etc.
- _____ hours assigned to sleep.
- _____ hours assigned to travel: car or other.
- _____ hours assigned to recreation, exercise, leisure, study, etc.
- _____ hours assigned to intentional personal relationships, intimacy, etc.

- _____ hours assigned to spiritual nourishment, reflection, prayer, *Lectio Divina*, evaluating the quality of life, etc.

Having completed this inventory, use it for reflection and evaluation. Does your actual distribution of time reflect your preferred priorities? What points of flexibility are there in your schedule? Where are the places in which you can make reasonable changes? What one or two changes might it be realistic for you to try to make at this time? Sometimes simplicity may be adding something to our schedule and sometimes it may be taking something away. In general, a good rule of thumb is this: "Never add any new commitment without first deciding what you are willing to give up." God is not well served in exhaustion. Remember, too, that the purpose of this inventory is to assess the priority Christ has in our lives, not to squeeze more "efficiency" into our days. Many of us have found that when we do regularly set aside precious time for prayer, the whole day seems to have a more spacious feel.

Consider how you might be able to consecrate or intentionally offer to God those elements of your schedule which you cannot change. All the elements of Benedictine spirituality are linked, and sometimes our practice of *lectio divina* can have very beneficial effects during other "odd moments" of our routine. For example, we can take a word or phrase from our morning *Lectio Divina*, remembering it throughout the day and using it to offer and bless various encounters with faulty plumbing or irate customers! Or perhaps you might silently say the phrase from a psalm while you dress a child or are waiting in line at the bank. Possible you could use your coffee breaks for an invigorating walk around the block or a quiet five minutes in a mini-park. Maybe you can use your time commuting in the car to pray or "study" by listening to inspirational audio recordings. Talk with other oblates about what they are doing and consider a small shift in your own schedule in the direction of simplification.

Do not underestimate the value of simple and regular rest. Rabbi Abraham Herschel says that "Sabbath" is taking time out from the activity of creation to marvel at the mystery of creation. Many of us have found that when we do make time for regular "Sabbath rest" (in this sense), the quality of all our time is made better. This is true simplicity. The goal is to practice the presence of God in all time not just by "feeling holy." but by teaching ourselves to remember that God in Christ is always with us.

Material Things

The second aspect of life in which simplicity can be developed is that of material things. Earlier we noted that Sts. Benedict and Basil emphasized sufficiency, as distinguished from either deficiency or excess. And yet, how can we tell what is sufficient in a world which constantly encourages more and more acquisition? The fact is that many of us are fearful of not having enough, not only for today but for tomorrow as well. And living in the world, we have the responsibility not only for ourselves but also for others in our family. Of course, in some sense, we also bear responsibility for all our sisters and brothers in the human family.

Where can we start in simplification about material things? Perhaps there are two basic initial responses: prayer and generosity. First, when we begin seriously to wonder what we can do to simplify our lives, it is a good time to take that wonderment to prayer. If we ask sincerely, God will begin to show us ways appropriate to simplify our particular

lives. Again, all the aspects of Benedictine spirituality are connected and the practice of "contemplative availability" will help us to learn what it is to be securely at home and what it is that we no longer need as artificial "supports." Generally, the answers to our question about what to simplify are obvious, ones we already knew but found it hard to act upon. By and large, the dramatic and drastic action of renunciation is not the call to any Christian (though occasionally it is). Generally what is asked of us is the next best step, which, cumulatively over months and years, can amount to a radical simplification. Yet each step, even if psychologically costly, is usually a modest one. A great many very small steps can take us a long distance. Pray, reflect, and watch; then act according to what you know.

The second approach to the simplicity of things is generosity. What does generosity have to do with simplicity? Logically there doesn't seem to be any direct connection, but there are many Christians who testify to the relationship. When we give generously of our goods (money and possessions), we find that a remarkable spaciousness and freedom has opened up in our lives. Indeed, it seems likely that the reason St Benedict was so adamantly opposed to "private possessions" is because he sensed how very cramped the heart can become when what we have is more important to us than who we are. We are children of God. We are recipients of God's generosity, which we are asked to share. When we regularly give freely, sharing what we have, we soon realize how very much abundance we have been granted. Gratitude begins to fill us, and we realize everything we have is a gift from God for which we are simply stewards. This is the discovery of a "Eucharistic" reality." When we are thankful, we are nourished and strengthened beyond our imagining. The astonishing reality behind Jesus's insistence that we live like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field is that this is a world of great and sufficient abundance. There is no true scarcity, but to know that remarkable truth, we must be givers and not hoarders. When we give generously, we are ushered into that fullness of life which Jesus promises to those who love the Lord God.

So, prayer and generosity are good places to begin simplifying our lives regarding material things. In a practical way, we might also begin to reflect attentively on the physical objects which we handle every day. We might ask ourselves "Is this something I use or that I have for its status? Is this something of beauty that brings me pleasure and for which I feel gratitude or something I feel belongs to me by right because I have earned it? Why do I have this particular thing?" These are good questions that we might begin gradually to ask of all our possessions. Simplicity does not exclude beauty, but neither does it support extravagance or self-righteousness. No one else can tell us what our motives are, but in gentleness, we can honestly ask ourselves.

We might begin to try touching everything reverently and respectfully. Are there things around us which we cannot honor, and if so, why are they here? If we can honor them, why do we forget to do so? Benedict teaches us reverence for physical things, for even the pots and pans are as sacred as vessels of the altar (RB 31:10). The reverence is not for the thing itself, as if it contained the holy, but is rather for Christ present in the thing or person, thus revealing its own true value. When we treat material things and people with reverence, we encounter God and are refreshed and renewed.

So, the essence of simplicity is this: prefer Christ in everything. Learn to love the Lord God in the midst of all the activities and encounters each day offers. Learn to love the Lord God in your silences and your prayer and go out from there to greet God

everywhere in all the "disguises" of the world. An infinitely simple task, requiring for its accomplishment the attention and delight of every day of our lives.

CONTEMPLATIVE AVAILABILITY

Our oblate Constitutions state that the deepening union of our oblates with God in prayer naturally overflows in "contemplative availability" to family, parish, civic community, and, in a special way through acts of service to our monastic community. The formation program also mentions contemplative availability as an important aspect of an Oblate's life. Contemplative availability is a fundamental aspect of Benedictine spirituality. It seems appropriate to ponder it in this Handbook.

Attentiveness to Relationships

Contemplative availability is a very nice way of saying we are "being what we are" or being attentive to how God has created us for himself, for love, for each other. When we use the verb "avail," there is a connotation of benefit, of serving some purpose. To be available is to be present for a purpose, task, or service that benefits. Availability is a very positive word because it suggests not only that benefit is conferred, but that it is desirable. We want others to be available to us. And, inversely, it is good to nurture this quality in ourselves. Yet that is not always easy.

Let's look now at the word "contemplative." To be a contemplative is to be someone who lives in the temple; it is to be inside something that is whole. The temple, the tent, the sanctuary is a place of meeting. To live from within *is* to be a contemplative. To live from the divine presence is to be a contemplative. To be present to God in expectation, desire, and silence is to be a contemplative. A contemplative is present to the divine Presence in everything.

We are present to God in expectation. Expectation means that we expect God to speak to us. The Prologue of the Rule is very exciting. It is a dialogue between God and oneself, although it is written as a dialogue between God and Benedict and his dialogue with his disciples. "Listen, my son, to the teaching …." Listen. Benedict is dialoguing with us from within the temple. It is his dialogue with God that calls to us as well. And there is an expectation that communication will take place.

Contemplation also involves desire. A particularly attractive element of the early desert Fathers is that the disciples would come out and ask the abba for a word to live by. Sometimes that happens with us too. "Give me a word to live by today." We want a word from God to live by. It is not necessarily a voice that we want; it is a desire and an expectation for God.

This divine Presence has many localities. Most important from the contemplative side, the locus of the divine Presence is within the self. But that is not the only locus of the divine Presence, not the only place or home. If God is within me, God is within you, too. When we are in a very bad place emotionally, we seldom experience God as within us, so we look for one we respect, the abba or amma, to discover God within that other, and thus trust that maybe God will "come back" within us. Sometimes we need to start from the divine Presence within others in order to come back within ourselves. Other times it works the opposite way.

There is yet another locus of the divine in a general sense: God's divine Presence within all of his creation. One of the beauties and charms of St. Andrew's Abbey in

Valermo is that there is the barren desert as God created it and there is the cultivated desert as the many monks have cultivated it. But even when we transplant and combine God's creation, it is still God's creation. The ancient monks and contemplatives throughout the ages have seen God and heard God in creation. This is another place for us to contemplate.

When we contemplate, when we pray, it is as if we go to a small little point in life which opens out to a Reality that is enormous. When we go to prayer, and we start to contemplate God, it's like a little door or window that opens up to something beyond our imaginations. That's what prayer and contemplation are: it's like a hatch to open us up to a world wider than the narrowness of our preoccupations or our daily schedule or whatever. Very often in our workaday world, the reason we can't see the wider picture for the sake of the One is because we're not contemplating. We're not frequenting the place of the heart where God has chosen to dwell.

So, availability as a word, or contemplation as a word, or the two put together in a phrase all imply a relationship. Contemplative availability is fundamentally an attentiveness to one's relationships. If one is a contemplative, and if one is available, that implies several places where that happens. Contemplative availability obviously must be directed toward God, but it also must be directed toward oneself. Have you noticed when the "Martha-Mary" gets busy in yourself, that you are not really available to yourself? We cease to be present to ourselves, to be open to ourselves. It becomes a frenzy of good-doing. Have you noticed how you can get into a frenzy of service and not even any longer know who you are? That is the opposite of contemplative availability. Somehow we have to be busy in a quiet way if we are contemplatively available to ourselves. Benedict says in the Rule that when the bell rings for the divine office, we "go in haste calmly" (RB 43:1). That counsel suggests that we go fast slowly, and that is a way of being an available contemplative or contemplatively available to oneself and to God. This is relational in the sense that when we go within ourselves, we are more likely to be available to God.

Contemplative availability begins with God, extends to self, and then reaches on out to others. Who are the others? Often they are our families. And our co-workers. Ultimately others are valuable to us because we have been present to ourselves and to God. Others often model contemplative availability for us, in family, parish, faith witnesses, when we notice that the more they were present to God and themselves, the more they were able to give us. We begin availability to others with significant others, those who helped shape our natural life and spiritual life.

Finally, contemplative availability directs our inner selves toward the world. The first aspect of the world was discussed above (that of the created order or the creation around us). The second aspect of the world is the social order, or society, meaning not just our significant others, but also the wider community and world. In our formation program, there is an emphasis on service not just to parish or the monastery but to the world at large. If the world is to be Christianized and if the world is to have a consciousness of God, people like us have to be willing to bring God's presence that is within us to the world around us and society.

Life Rooted in Prayer

The call to service is always founded in prayer. To serve Christ is, first of all, to be nurtured by union with him in prayer and contemplation.

So for us as Benedictines, we perceive that what we do flows from who we are, and who we are does not flow necessarily from what we do. We live from within and act from within, and that informs what we are doing outside. That also implies for us a deep inner conversion that we are "changing our minds about what is less true to live from what is more true. So our service is founded in this contemplative availability to God.

Conversely, this union makes a difference in the quality of the oblate's availability to family, friends, and associates.

The monastery is just one place of contemplation where we are within the temple of our heart. Yet, whenever we go there, we are better. God communicates to us. Have you ever gone to prayer very angry or upset and once you pray with your heart found you were more surrendered to things as they have to be and more willing to say to the one with who you were upset (not necessarily in words, but in action), "I love you." That is what it is to go within, to be available to God. And the more available we are to God and to ourselves, the more we really are, "available to family, friends, and associates."

Finally, oblates are encouraged to consider that the nature of their presence in the circumstances of their daily lives emerges from their prayers.

Our vision of life, then, ultimately rests upon seeing that prayer is life. Prayer is our life. It is the center of our being. If we act from that center, we go in openly and come out seeing things in the right perspective. Then what we do makes a difference, because it has been informed by God, his word and his presence.

Hospitality and Contemplative Availability

Contemplative availability is related to hospitality. Hospitality is making a welcoming place for another. If we can afford to welcome another, that means we are secure within ourselves. If we can be hospitable, that means we are already at home. It means that it doesn't matter to us greatly how neat our inner home is because we are accepting enough of our messes to be able to be welcoming.

Ultimately we live at home, or we don't. We are either here or we are not. Yet there are many times in every life when we are not at home. We are so worried about what the others will think or so preoccupied with accomplishing what the others expect, that we are not at home. Whenever our lives are hectic, we have to make a special effort to be at home in ourselves, to be there when a guest arrives. It's very disconcerting to go visit someone and to discover that no one is at home. We often don't think of how important it is that we are living within ourselves. Of course, we are not living there by ourselves alone, but with God.

If God is not there, we are not going to be home very much. If God is not the one loving us, forgiving us, gently nudging us and speaking to us, laughing with us, and crying with us, we are not going to be home much. We're going to be busy looking for some false god outside of ourselves. The world of compulsions and addictions that we live in our society—work, chemicals, going good, all these things—offers ways of looking for false gods outside of ourselves because we haven't discovered that God dwells at home. If God is not inside, then we are busy searching for the false god outside. That's just a fact that we experience whether we live within the cloister or not. Living in

the cloister doesn't mean always living in one's heart. Living outside the cloister does not always mean not living in one's heart. The whole idea is to live, wherever you are, in your heart with God.

Silence and Contemplative Availability

Private prayer and contemplation are assumed by St. Benedict in the Rule. He doesn't give long treatises about prayer (or even *Lectio Divina*). He assumes that we pray personally and that we contemplate. He doesn't have a highly developed theology about it. He just sets aside time for *Lectio Divina* in daily life, and he admits that, during and after the Liturgy of the Hours, people can stay in a prolonged fashion in the oratory because the Spirit calls them to pray. And all he does is protect prayer by telling people to leave silently and stay silent.

Silence is another important aspect related to contemplative availability. We have to nurture silence. We have to seek it. What silence does for us at its best is to allow rest and restore balance. Think about how much silence helps you get a good night's sleep or enjoy intimate time with your spouse. There is too much noise in our society. So many of us feel compelled to have the television or the radio turned on—always. But silence restores our balance and gives us rest.

Silence also heals the wounds of sin. Silence does this for us not only with the sins others have committed against us but also with the sins we commit against others. It helps us go into the heart. In RB 6, St. Benedict speaks about silence; *RB 1980* translates *de taciturnitate* as "restraint of speech." Benedict's caution is that, in much speaking, we cannot avoid sin. If our tongue has sinned we need to go into silence to repent and to repair. The repair of our broken relationships happens with us first. And it happens within another first. When we go into the silence, we are responsive to the other and to God and we go and repair what has been broken. Benedict continues in RB 6,

> The prophet indicates that there are times when good words are to be left unsaid out of esteem for silence. For all the more reason, then, should evil speech be curbed so that punishment for sin may be avoided" (RB 6:2).

To refrain even from good speech is to nurture and cultivate a kind of openness to the divine which is larger than any words. There is a compulsion today for dialogue and communication. Much of that is good. But some people think that if we talk about it, it will be resolved. And often things are not resolved by talking about them. We may just become more and more adamant in our opinions. When St. Benedict speaks of calling the brethren together to counsel one another, he says that the brethren are to speak in a spirit of humility. Each is to present what he sees to be the truth and then be quiet. Then the whole truth emerges by what is decided by the superior or the common vote. Most of the time that works especially if we are "at Home."

Silence is the place of the origin of our dialogue with God. If we are too busy for silence, how can God speak? Paul of Tarsus was not silent until he was knocked off his horse. Then he was blinded and silenced. He had all the answers before that. He was the crusader for "righteousness" before that! And that is a model for us. Very often in our lives, the way we get silent is by God tripping us or by some event in our lives throwing us off our horses and knocking the wind out of us. Then suddenly we are silenced by God through life events. Only then do we start reflecting. Often it is good for us; when we don't make ourselves silent, some physical illness will make us silent. God slows us

down and all the prayer we didn't do, we will get to do while we are sick in bed! Only when we listen do we find balance. When we are silent, we discover we are at home.

Contemplative availability to God in prayer makes me value the things that really matter. Contemplative availability is very important because little by little in our narrow worlds, if we go to this window or hatch of prayer, we begin seeing the larger picture. We begin seeing things as God sees them. We begin to see God more often in others and to have more room in our hearts for them. Our hearts are enlarged.

In this sense, there is some difficulty with the term "contemplative." The way we often perceive the contemplative vocation is that a contemplative never sees anyone and is never even available to anyone. You can only see a contemplative if you can get into the church and look through the grill. That is not what St. Benedict would have considered a contemplative, if he had used the word (which he didn't). Rather, Benedictines are contemplatives only if we are also lovers and doers and workers. Benedict and Jesus would have us live "contemplatively" where we are.

This is the whole genius of St. Benedict. He does create a disciplined life style and a daily order which helps us to be available to ourselves, to God, and to each other, so that all that we do flows from that relationship with God in prayer. Yet it would not have occurred to Benedict to think of a contemplative as such. Rather his model might have been "servant of love," or "an obedient disciple"—an obedient, attentive, listening disciple. It is not that the word contemplative is bad. It is just that we need to be cautious not to try to become some sort of rarified form of Christian. It is most important to be a Christian who is living from within, from the center of one's being.

For St. Benedict, there could be no dichotomy between being active and being contemplative. Within the seasons of our lives and within the diversity of personalities that make up our families and communities, these are more or less active and more or less contemplative. But if any one of us is too much of a "Martha-Martha," God will give us the chance to be sitting at his feet while we have the flu! Hopefully, we can learn, without these big mistakes, to balance our lives, so we don't have to get the flu to induce us to pray. The point is that prayer is the inner source of our outer life. Prayer and action are like breathing in and breathing out. It is that natural. It is that real.

All of us are susceptible to all the illusions and struggles of the world around us. But when we go to prayer we are actually practicing, through Christ, the power of the resurrection, the hope of our resurrection, our glory, our conquering with Christ over the world within. In prayer, we have a remedy for illusion and fear and cynicism. In prayer, we become aware of God dwelling within, and we too can be at home. When we leave prayer we share that presence, and that makes a difference. The primary witness that a monk or an oblate can give is to knowing God, that is, to eternal life already possessed.

To be a Benedictine is to be a monk or an oblate in the sense that we already know God, and this is his victory over sin and death and the world-opposed-to-the-Kingdom. We have already begun possessing eternal life. It is not complete within us, but we have already begun possessing it. To be contemplatively available is to be a person of prayer, operating from within that communion with God, that at-home-ness in myself, so that one may be available to others.

ACCEPTING THE EMBRACE OF GOD: THE ANCIENT ART OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

By Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB

1. THE PROCESS OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

A VERY ANCIENT art, practiced at one time by all Christians, is the technique known as *Lectio Divina*—a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of union with God. This ancient practice has been kept alive in the Christian monastic tradition and is one of the precious treasures of Benedictine monastics and oblates. Together with the Liturgy and daily manual labor, time set aside in a special way for *Lectio Divina* enables us to discover in our daily life an underlying spiritual rhythm. Within this rhythm, we discover an increasing ability to offer more of ourselves and our relationships to the Father, and to accept the embrace that God is continuously extending to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

LECTIO—READING/LISTENING

THE ART of *Lectio Divina* begins with cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear "with the ear of our hearts" as St. Benedict encourages us in the Prologue to the Rule. When we read the Scriptures, we should try to imitate the prophet Elijah. We should allow ourselves to become women and men who are able to listen for the still, small voice of God (1 Kings 19:12); the "faint murmuring sound" which is God's word for us, God's voice touching our hearts. This gentle listening is an "attunement" to the presence of God in that special part of God's creation which is the Scriptures.

THE CRY of the prophets to ancient Israel was the joy-filled command to "Listen!" "Sh'ma Israel: Hear, O Israel!" In *Lectio Divina* we, too, heed that command and turn to the Scriptures, knowing that we must "hear"—listen—to the voice of God, which often speaks very softly. In order to hear someone speaking softly, we must learn to be silent. We must learn to love silence. If we are constantly speaking or if we are surrounded with noise, we cannot hear gentle sounds. The practice of *Lectio Divina*, therefore, requires that we first quiet down in order to hear God's word to us. This is the first step of *Lectio Divina*, appropriately called *lectio*—reading.

THE READING or listening which is the first step in *Lectio Divina* is very different from the speed reading which modern Christians apply to newspapers, books and even to the Bible. *Lectio* is reverential listening, listening in a spirit of silence and awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally—not loudly, but intimately. In *lectio* we read slowly, attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us this day.

MEDITATIO—MEDITATION

ONCE WE have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures which speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and "ruminate" on it. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing its cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God. Christians have always seen a scriptural invitation to *Lectio Divina* in the

example of the Virgin Mary "pondering in her heart" what she saw and heard of Christ (Luke 2:19). For us today these images are a reminder that we must take in the word—that is, memorize it—and while gently repeating it to ourselves, allow it to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, our desires. This is the second step or stage in *Lectio Divina*—meditatio. Through *meditatio* we allow God's word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

ORATIO—PRAYER

THE THIRD step in *Lectio Divina* is *oratio*—prayer: prayer understood both as dialogue with God, that is, as loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace; and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants. In this consecration-prayer, we allow the word that we have taken in and on which we are pondering to touch and change our deepest selves. Just as a priest consecrates the elements of bread and wine at the Eucharist, God invites us in *Lectio Divina* to hold up our most difficult and pain-filled experiences to Him, and to gently recite over them the healing word or phrase He has given us in our lectio and meditatio. In this oratio, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the word of God.

CONTEMPLATIO—CONTEMPLATION

FINALLY, WE simply rest in the presence of the One who has used His word as a means of inviting us to accept His transforming embrace. No one who has ever been in love needs to be reminded that there are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. It is the same in our relationship with God. Wordless, quiet rest in the presence of the One Who loves us has a name in the Christian tradition—contemplatio, contemplation. Once again we practice silence, letting go of our own words; this time simply enjoying the experience of being in the presence of God.

2. THE UNDERLYING RHYTHM OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

IF WE ARE TO PRACTICE *Lectio Divina* effectively, we must travel back in time to an understanding that today is in danger of being almost completely lost. In the Christian past the words *action* (or *practice*, from the Greek *praktikos)* and *contemplation* did not describe different kinds of Christians engaging (or not engaging) in different forms of prayer and apostolates. Practice and contemplation were understood as the two poles of our underlying, ongoing spiritual rhythm: a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual "activity" with regard to God and "receptivity."

PRACTICE—spiritual "activity"—referred in ancient times to our active cooperation with God's grace in rooting out vices and allowing the virtues to flourish. The direction of spiritual activity was not outward in the sense of an apostolate, but *inward*—down into the depths of the soul where the Spirit of God is constantly transforming us, refashioning us in God's image. The *active life* is thus coming to see who we truly are and allowing ourselves to be remade into what God intends us to become.

IN THE EARLY MONASTIC TRADITION *contemplation* was understood in two ways. First was *theoria physike,* the contemplation of God in creation—God in "the

many." Second was *theologia,* the contemplation of God in Himself without images or words—God as "The One." From this perspective, *Lectio Divina* serves as a training-ground for contemplating God in His creation.

IN CONTEMPLATION, we cease from interior spiritual *doing* and learn simply to *be*, that is to rest in the presence of our loving Father. Just as we constantly move back and forth in our exterior lives between speaking and listening, between questioning and reflecting, so in our spiritual lives we must learn to enjoy the refreshment of simply *being* in God's presence, an experience that naturally alternates (if we let it!) with our spiritual *practice*.

IN ANCIENT TIMES, contemplation was not regarded as a goal to be achieved through some method of prayer but was simply accepted with gratitude as God's recurring gift. At intervals, the Lord invites us to cease from speaking so that we can simply rest in his embrace. This is the pole of our inner spiritual rhythm called contemplation.

HOW DIFFERENT this ancient understanding is from our modern approach! Instead of recognizing that we all gently oscillate back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, between practice and contemplation, we today tend to set contemplation before ourselves as a goal—something we imagine we can achieve through some spiritual technique. We must be willing to sacrifice our "goal-oriented" approach if we are to practice *Lectio Divina* because the practice has no other goal than spending time with God through the medium of His word. The amount of time we spend in any aspect of *Lectio Divina*, whether it be rumination, consecration or contemplation depends on God's Spirit, not on us. *Lectio Divina* teaches us to savor and delight in all the different flavors of God's presence, whether they be active or receptive modes of experiencing Him.

IN *LECTIO DIVINA*, we offer ourselves to God; and we are people in motion. In ancient times this inner spiritual motion was described as a helix—an ascending spiral. Viewed in only two dimensions it appears as a circular motion back and forth; seen with the added dimension of time it becomes a helix, an ascending spiral by means of which we are drawn ever closer to God. The whole of our spiritual lives were viewed in this way, as a gentle oscillation between spiritual activity and receptivity by means of which God unites us ever closer to Himself. In just the same way the steps or stages of *Lectio Divina* represent an oscillation back and forth between these spiritual poles. In *Lectio Divina* we recognize our underlying spiritual rhythm and discover many different ways of experiencing God's presence—many different ways of praying.

3. THE PRACTICE OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

PRIVATE *LECTIO DIVINA*

CHOOSE a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily *Lectio Divina* one of the readings from the Eucharistic liturgy for the day; others prefer to slowly work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of "covering" a certain amount of text: the amount of text "covered" is in God's hands, not yours.

PLACE YOURSELF in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Some Christians focus for a few moments on their breathing; other have a beloved

"prayer word" or "prayer phrase" they gently recite in order to become interiorly silent. For some the practice known as "centering prayer" makes a good, brief introduction to *Lectio Divina*. Use whatever method is best for you and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.

THEN TURN to the text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." Do not expect lightening or ecstasies. In *Lectio Divina*, God is teaching us to listen to Him, to seek Him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, He softly, gently invites us ever more deeply into His presence.

NEXT TAKE the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of "distractions." Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself which, when they rise up during *Lectio Divina*, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.

THEN, SPEAK to God. Whether you use words or ideas or images or all three is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Give to Him what you have discovered in yourself during your experience of *meditatio*. Experience yourself as the priest that you are. Experience God using the word or phrase that He has given you as a means of blessing, of transforming the ideas and memories, which your pondering on His word has awakened. Give to God what you have found within your heart.

FINALLY, SIMPLY REST in God's embrace. And when He invites you to return to your pondering of His word or to your inner dialogue with Him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

SOMETIMES IN *LECTIO DIVINA* one will return several times to the printed text, either to savor the literary context of the word or phrase that God has given, or to seek a new word or phrase to ponder. At other times only a single word or phrase will fill the whole time set aside for *Lectio Divina*. It is not necessary to anxiously assess the quality of one's *Lectio Divina* as if one were "performing" or seeking some goal: *Lectio Divina* has no goal other than that of being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.

LECTIO DIVINA AS A GROUP EXERCISE

IN THE CHURCHES of the Third World where books are rare, a form of corporate *Lectio Divina* is becoming common in which a text from the Scriptures is pondered by Christians praying together in a group. The method of group *Lectio Divina* described here was introduced at St. Andrew's Abbey by oblates Doug and Norvene Vest: it is used as part of the Benedictine Spirituality for Laity workshop conducted at the Abbey each summer.

THIS FORM of *Lectio Divina* works best in a group of between four and eight people. A group leader coordinates the process and facilitates sharing. The same text from the Scriptures is read out three times, followed each time by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of her or his *lectio.*

THE FIRST reading (the text is actually read twice on this occasion) is for the purpose of hearing a word or passage that touches the heart. When the word or phrase is found, it is silently taken in, and gently recited and pondered during the silence which follows. After the silence each person shares which word or phrase has touched his or her heart.

THE SECOND reading (by a member of the opposite sex from the first reader) is for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" Christ in the text. Each ponders the word that has touched the heart and asks where the word or phrase touches his or her life that day. In other words, how is Christ the Word touching his own experience, his own life? How are the various members of the group seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text? Then, after the silence, each member of the group shares what he or she has "heard" or "seen."

THE THIRD and final reading is for the purpose of experiencing Christ "calling us forth" into *doing* or *being*. Members ask themselves what Christ in the text is calling them to *do* or to *become* today or this week. After the silence, each shares for the last time; and the exercise concludes with each person praying for the person on the right.

THOSE WHO regularly practice this method of praying and sharing the Scriptures regularly find it to be an excellent way of developing trust within a group; it also is an excellent way of consecrating projects and hopes to Christ before more formal group meetings. A summary of this method for group *Lectio Divina* is appended at the end of this article.

LECTIO DIVINA ON LIFE

IN THE ancient tradition *Lectio Divina* was understood as being one of the most important ways in which Christians experience God in creation. After all, the Scriptures are part of creation! If one is daily growing in the art of finding Christ in the pages of the Bible, one naturally begins to discover Him more clearly in aspects of the other things He has made. This includes, of course, our own personal history.

OUR OWN lives are fit matter for *Lectio Divina*. Very often our concerns, relationships, hopes, and aspirations naturally intertwine with our pondering on the Scriptures, as has been described above. But sometimes it is fitting to simply sit down and "read" the experiences of the last few days or weeks in our hearts, much as we might slowly read and savor the words of Scripture in *Lectio Divina.* We can attend "with the ear of our hearts" to our own memories, listening for God's gentle presence in the events of our lives. We thus allow ourselves the joy of experiencing Christ reaching out to us through our own memories. Our own personal story becomes "salvation history."

FOR THOSE who are new to the practice of *Lectio Divina* a group experience of *"lectio* on life" can provide a helpful introduction. An approach that has been used at workshops at St. Andrew's Priory is detailed at the end of this article. Like the experience of *Lectio Divina* shared in community, this group experience of *lectio* on life can foster relationships in community and enable personal experiences to be consecrated—offered to Christ—in a concrete way.

HOWEVER, UNLIKE scriptural *Lectio Divina* shared in community, this group *lectio* on life contains more silence than sharing. The role of group facilitators or leaders is important because they will be guiding the group through several periods of silence and reflection without the "interruption" of individual sharing until the end of the exercise.

Since the experiences we choose to "read" or "listen to" may be intensely personal, it is important in this group exercise to safeguard privacy by making sharing completely optional.

IN BRIEF, one begins with restful silence, then gently reviews the events of a given period of time. One seeks an event, a memory, which touches the heart just as a word or phrase in scriptural *Lectio Divina* does. One then recalls the setting, the circumstances; one seeks to discover how God seemed to be present or absent from the experience. One then offers the event to God and rests for a time in silence. A suggested method for group *Lectio Divina* on life is given in the Appendix to this article.

CONCLUSION

LECTIO DIVINA is an ancient spiritual art that is being rediscovered in our day. It is a way of allowing the Scriptures to become again what God intended that they should be—a means of uniting us to Himself. In *Lectio Divina*, we discover our own underlying spiritual rhythm. We experience God in a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, in the movement from practice into contemplation and back again into spiritual practice.

LECTIO DIVINA teaches us about the God who truly loves us. In *Lectio Divina*, we dare to believe that our loving Father continues to extend His embrace to us today. And His embrace is real. In His word we experience ourselves as personally loved by God; as the recipients of a word which He gives uniquely to each of us whenever we turn to Him in the Scriptures.

FINALLY, *Lectio Divina* teaches us about ourselves. In *Lectio Divina*, we discover that there is no place in our hearts, no interior corner or closet that cannot be opened and offered to God. God teaches us in *Lectio Divina* what it means to be members of His royal priesthood—a people called to consecrate all of our memories, our hopes and our dreams to Christ.

APPENDIX

TWO APPROACHES TO GROUP *LECTIO DIVINA*

Lectio Divina Shared in a Community

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (The Literal Sense)

1. *One person reads aloud (twice)* the passage of Scripture as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.
2. *Silence* for 1–2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Sharing aloud a word or phrase that has attracted each person. A simple statement of one or a few words. *No elaboration*.

How Christ the Word speaks to Me (The Allegorical Sense)

4. *Second reading* of same passage by another person.

5. Silence for 2–3 minutes. Reflect on the question, "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
6. Sharing aloud. Briefly answer, saying, "I hear, I see …."

What Christ the Word Invites Me to Do (The Moral Sense)

7. *Third reading* by still another person.
8. Silence for 2–3 minutes. Reflect on the statement, "I believe that God wants me to … today or this week."
9. Sharing aloud at somewhat greater length the results of each one's reflection. Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your right.
10. After full sharing, pray for the person to your right.

Note: Anyone may "pass" at any time. If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this aloud and conclude your silent prayer with *Amen*.

Lectio Divina on Life*:* Applying *Lectio Divina* to My Personal Salvation History

Purpose: to apply a method of prayerful reflection to a life/work incident (instead of to a scripture passage)

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word (The Literal Sense)

1. Each person quiets the body and mind: relax, sit comfortably and remain alert, close eyes, and attune to breathing.
2. Each person gently reviews events, situations, sights, encounters that have happened since the beginning of the retreat/or during the last month at work.

Gently Ruminating, Reflecting (Meditatio—Meditation)

3. Each person allows the self to focus on one such offering.
   a) Recollect the setting, sensory details, sequence of events, etc.
   b) Notice where the greatest energy seemed to be evoked. Was there a turning point or shift?
   c) In what ways did God seem to be present? To what extent was I aware then? Now?

Prayerful Consecration, Blessing (Oratio—Prayer)

4. Use a word or phrase from the Scriptures to consecrate inwardly—to offer up to God in prayer—the incident and interior reflections. Allow God to accept and bless them as your gift.

Accepting Christ's Embrace; Silent Presence to the Lord (Contemplatio— Contemplation)

5. Remain in silence for some period.

*Sharing our Lectio Experience with Each Other (Operatio—***Action** *and Works***)**

6. Leader calls the group back into "community."
7. All share briefly (or remain in continuing silence).

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ADOPTING A PERSONAL RULE OF LIFE

Introduction

Fifteen hundred years of experience by Benedictine monks attest to the importance of a rule for nurturing not only the monastic community as a kind of family unit but also the individuals who live in the community. A sound guide, well formulated and tested as the *Rule of St. Benedict* is, allows all in the community to feel the solidarity of group life while not losing the sense of individual significance which each person has been given as a child of God. Both of these basic human aspirations need to be felt deeply in the monastic life. The individual is not to be absorbed by the group so that his or her identity disappears nor is the individual assertively to stand outside of the group.

St. Benedict's guidance has succeeded rather well in maintaining this important balance between person and group. Several cogent reasons could be given for its effectiveness. Perhaps the simplest explanation is that the Rule provides a supportive structure while also offering some "built-in" flexibility. "In drawing up its regulation, we hope to set down nothing harsh, nothing burdensome" (RB Prol. 46). Or, a bit on the humorous side in RB 40:6, we read that "monks should not drink wine at all, but since the monks of our day cannot be convinced of this, let us at least agree to drink moderately …." The characteristics of structure and flexibility are often sought by young children, who otherwise become insecure when they are free to go and come as if their place in the family unit did not really matter. These features of structure and flexibility remain important in ongoing adult formation.

For several reasons then, the *Rule of St. Benedict* has proved to be a helpful and effective guide for monastics living in a community. Now it can be asked, "What can be offered as a guide for the many oblates who seek to live as Benedict urges, but who cannot live in a monastic setting?" Part of the response to this question is that Benedict's rule can be a helpful guide for all persons "preferring Christ" (RB 72) and all oblates should be familiar with this basic source. A second support developing a *personal rule of life*—itself calling upon the counsel which St. Benedict set forth many years ago.

Definitions and Pointers

Novices and oblates are encouraged to adopt personal rules of life. A personal rule of life, then, is considered to be a norm in the early and ongoing formation of oblates.

Prior to suggesting details which can more or less customize a guide or rule for one's own use—and of one's own choosing—it might be helpful to consider several views of what is meant by a rule. Three common usages of the word are:

- a guide or law prescribed for action or conduct (e.g., regulations prescribed by the founder of a religious order);
- some usually valid generalization (e.g., "Such statements should be the rule rather than the exceptions.");
- A smooth-edge *stripe for measuring* distance or straightness (alas, sometimes used in the past for physical discipline as well as for alignment of life in a fuller sense!).

The way in which the word "rule" is used in this handbook is mindful of each of these three views. Here is a concise description of a rule of life:

> A plan or pattern intended to organize the individual's use of time and energy to assure maximum spiritual nurture, preferably written specifically enough to retain what nurtures and to release what hinders such nurture. The rule utilizes a daily and longer-term schedule for the purpose of creating a setting, which provides a safeguard against frenetic activity and the dissipation of energies and assists concentration on the goal of prayerful union with God. To be truly helpful and to aid in spiritual development, a rule should be definite and firm to support the will and also have a calculated elasticity adaptable to the demands of charity and prudence.

St. Benedict provides many examples throughout his Rule for the community, as noted in this restatement of what has just been presented:

- A plan or pattern of life intended to organize the individual's use of time and energy to assure maximum spiritual nurture.
- RB Prol. 35: "… the Lord waits for us daily to translate into action, as we should, his holy teaching."
- RB 73:8: "Are you then hastening toward your heavenly home? Then with Christ's help, keep this little rule which we have written for beginners."
- Retaining what nurtures; releasing what hinders.
- RB Prol. 20: "See how the Lord in his love shows us the way of life."
- RB 4:73: "If you have a dispute with someone, make peace with him before the sun goes down."
- RB 47:1: "It is the abbot's care to announce … the hour for the Work of God … so that everything may be done at the proper time."
- RB 48: The Daily Manual Labor …"specified periods for manual labor as well as for prayerful reading," which provides a safeguard against frenetic activity and the dissipation of energies.
- RB 43:1–3: "On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with utmost speed, yet with gravity and without giving occasion for frivolity" and assists concentration on the goal of prayerful union with God.
- RB 72: "Let them prefer nothing whatever of Christ."
- RB 7:20: "… in the Prayer too we ask God that his will be done in us."
- To be truly helpful and an aid to spiritual development, a rule should be definite and firm to support the will and also have a calculated elasticity…
- RB 18:25 (on reading the psalter): "We read … that our holy Fathers energetic as they were, did all this in a single day. Let us hope that we, lukewarm, as we are, can achieve it in a whole week."

Obviously, the *Rule of St. Benedict* expresses characteristics that we shall seek to hold in our personal rules of life.

Many of us are more familiar with formal, public promises than with personalized written rules of life. For example, in make marriage vows, two persons promise to love, comfort, honor, and keep each other. A further example: at ordination, an ordinand vows to be diligent in prayer and study and in patterning life in accordance with the teachings of Christ. Each of these promises is most laudable—and necessary for living in the ways being sought and promised. But if a weakness is to be found in this form of promise, it

would be that they are not specific enough. What, for example, are some of each individual's dispositions which need to be dealt with in order to support what is vowed? Or what priority governs when many demands are being made upon a person?

In the direction of greater formality, there are rules, which are spelled out in much detail, yet are generalized for the sake of uniformity. If these are scrutinized, one could conclude that they seem to be written for some generalized person; they are too structured, some readers would note. These observations then bring us back to what was stated earlier: the need for guidelines which are definite and firm, but with some elasticity in the rule to which the person willingly makes a commitment.

One further important question needs to be raised before issues are noted for private consideration. The simple question to ask is this: what is a rule for oneself? A group of persons having experienced personal rules of life might offer the following:

- The choices of particulars are not forced upon a person but are those that have been personally searched and tested and found to be helpful—and, presumably, willingly accepted.
- The process of continued search helps one to value the life (one's own life!) which is important enough to be tended in a firm, loving way.
- A written rule can be ratified by the wise guidance of supportive others (novices work with their Oblate companion to develop and practice a personal rule of life).
- The process of "announcing one's intentions" in a specific way helps that person to persist.
- Disciplines, contrary to our youthful opinions, are usually liberating!

Questions for Pondering

Now, here are some questions for private, thoughtful consideration before reading on.

- How helpful am I to myself in maintaining physical health?
- In what ways am I striving to grow mentally?
- How well do I manage time?
- Do I regularly and intentionally break cycles of activity?
- What is my major commitment?
- What would a close friend or spouse see as my major commitment?
- Do I sense God's involvement in my major commitments, whatever they are?
- What are my major disciplines?
- What discipline(s) might be helpful to add?
- How am I most likely to sabotage regular spiritual disciplines?
- What else might I consider?

Deductive and Inductive Approaches to a Personal Rule

To facilitate movement of the reader toward an actual choice of elements which might be included in a written rule of life for one's own use, two general approaches are now described briefly. The first is the deductive model and the second the inductive. Some persons will prefer one while other persons will prefer the other.

At the risk of over-simplifying, we may say that in the deductive approach, an individual calls upon what others have learned and then seeks to adapt to a set of conclusions. For example, to prescribed forms of prayer morning and evening, reading of scripture according to a set schedule, confession on a monthly rhythm, annual retreat, etc.

The format would be firmly set and the individual would seek to respond (or even react against!).

The inductive approach is more self-initiating, in essence asking the question, "What have my past and present observations about my life informed me about how I should live from henceforth?" This question might be answered (and re-asked and re-answered) in several steps:

- Discovering what nurtures us in Christian formation
- Formalizing the elements (e.g., by writing a "contract" with oneself).
- Observing and living
- Monitoring (self and companion participating)
- Modifying and ratifying the modified elements.

In this process, a person deals with such matters as: "What nurtures me and best enables my responsiveness to God? What is toxic about my present way and schedule? How faithful am I to my gifts? Do I know my gifts? Do I regularly experience opportunity for their expression? What place does thanksgiving have in my life? For what in my life do I have real passion and intensity? Do I find myself growing more deeply in love with Christ?"

We are about to suggest a form to use for the inductive approach. At first, the offering will seem to be overwhelming, for it represents a format for a person who has utilized it or something similar for a number of years. The reader is urged to consider the full format, but to elect only a few areas in which a written entry would be made. Very likely the writing will consist of including what is already being observed in life with only one or two additions being made for a testing in one's ongoing life. The form now follows with some imagined examples and a few pertinent citations from the *Rule of St. Benedict*.

A Sample Format for a Personal Rule

You may use this approach for making a regular inventory of your spiritual disciplines. The entries should be as specific as you can make them!

FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS FOR PREPARATION

- Overall, do my choices provide both structure and flexibility?
- Are both personal prayer and service included?
- Have I included a helpful means for accountability?

Another note for the reader: In what follows just a few very simple examples are given. The Oblate Formation chapter should be consulted for specific suggestions about Prayer, Bible Study, Study, and Integration of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and Related Sources, Simplification of Life, Service of God and Humankind, Contemplative Availability, and Participation in Benedictine Community.

MY PERSONAL RULE OF LIFE

CARE OF SELF

> *Listen readily to hold reading and devote yourself often to prayer. Every day with tears and sighs confess your past sins to God in prayer and change from these evil ways in the future (RB 4:55–58)*

Personal Health: diet, exercise, rest therapy, etc.

EXAMPLE: Run 20–25 minutes/day, five days a week—add several other points needing particular attention.

> *Monks should diligently cultivate silence at all times, but especially at night. (RB 42:1).*

See RB 48: The Daily Manual Labor—cycle of prayer, study, and manual labor.

Prayer: contemplative and intercessory

EXAMPLE: maintain 20–30 minutes of quiet prior to breakfast daily.

> *The oratory ought to be what it is called and nothing else is to be done or stored there. After the Work of God, all should leave in complete silence and with reverence for God, so that a brother who may wish to pray alone will not be disturbed by the insensitivity of another. (RB 52:1–3).*

Study, Reflection, Meditation

Vocation and Avocation: work and hobbies

Friendship and Intimacy

Self-Examination and Confession
EXAMPLE: Make a formal confession quarterly.

> *The fifth step of humility is that a man does not conceal from his abbot any sinful thoughts entering his heart or any wrong committed in secret, but rather confesses them humbly (RB 7:44).*

Other

LIFE IN CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

- Participation in a liturgical life. There are many examples in the Rule.
  - *Leadership* in my primary worshiping community
  - *Volunteer work* in a non-leadership role
  - Review of the *Rule of St. Benedict*
    - Example: read the full Rule twice annually
    - "If once more he stands firm, let four months go by and then read this rule to him again" (RB 58:13).
- Participate in the Benedictine community
  - Example: attend monthly meetings of my oblate community, participate in a cell group, participate in group retreats, quiet days, study, service, and so on.
    - "Let us pass them by, then, and with the help of the Lord, proceed to draw up a plan for the strong kind, the cenobites" (RB 1:13).
    - "If a brother is sent on some errand and expects to return to the monastery that same day, he must not presume to eat outside, even if he receives a pressing invitation, unless perhaps the abbot has ordered it" (RB 55:1).

SIMPLIFICATION OF LIFE

- Example: always visualize my use of whatever I propose to purchase
  - "… no one may presume to give, receive or obtain anything as his own, nothing at all—not a book, writing tablets or stylus—in short, not a single item" (RB 33:2–3).
  - "Whenever new clothing is received, the old should be returned at once and stored in a wardrobe for the poor. To provide for laundering and nightwear, every monk will need two cowls and two tunics, but anything more must be taken away as superfluous" (RB 55:9–11).

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

- Work with a guide or friend
- Keep a journal (that is, practice self-direction)
- Other.

SERVICE AND MINISTRY IN THE SERVICE OF GOD AND HUMANKIND

- Examples: see the section on service and ministry
  - My use of resources: talents, finances, energy, etc.
    - "All things should be the common possession of all, as it is written so that no one presumes to call anything his own" (RB 33:6).
    - The porter of the monastery (RB 55).
  - My focus of ministry beyond the church
    - Example: work three hours per week at a "soup kitchen."
  - My focus of ministry within the worshiping community
  - My social service and political commitment
  - Contemplative availability: my life as a model for others
    - RB 7: Humility.
    - RB 72: The Good Zeal of Monks.
    - Other.

The form suggested above becomes a person rule of life when it is:

- Written
- Challenging, but not demanding (The rule of life is followed through esteem for self, not for "duty".)
- Intended to nurture one's whole self: body, mind, and spirit
- Responsive to needs for solitude and community
- Reviewed regularly (perhaps every six months)
- Shared with another who serves as a spiritual guide
- Modified as seems helpful
- Specific.

As our Holy Father Benedict has written, as recorded between the end of the Prologue and the beginning of RB 1: "It is called a rule because it regulates the lives of those who obey it." So with one's personal rule of life, it can be said, "… by observing it … we can show that we have some degree of virtue and the beginnings of monastic life" within or beyond the cloister (RB 73:1).

UT IN OMNIBUS GLORIFECETUR DEUS!