



## "Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

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## MONASTIC VOICES

Extract from "The Substance of the Rule of St Bennet" By Fr Augustine Baker OSB : "But now perhaps. you will ask me, in what place or places in the Rule is anie mention made of the said Union\* or the Tendence towards it. And it is a marvaile (saie you) that our Holie Father should make no mention of that, wch is supposed to be his chief Intention in and by his Rule. And you will further saie, that in divers places of the Rule there is mention made of the Kingdome of Heaven, that is in the future life, and of the Joies, that consist in the Union had there: But of Union of this life (saie you) you found no mention there, nor of Tendence towards it. I answer; that true it is indeed, that the Rule speaketh not distinctlie and in expresse tearmes of such an Union: No more doth St Basil, St Augustin, St Francis, nor anie other Founder of a Rule in their Rules mention the Union of this life, wch yet they well knewe both by Speculation and by Experience in their owne selves to be the proper Ende of all their Exercises in this life. And the reason why they did not distinctlie express it, was because it was not explicable in wordes, being a matter above senses and Imagination. And if they had gonne about to expresse it according to their apprehension of it, though it were well intelligible to themselves by reason of their Experience thereof in themselves, yet could they not have so expressed it, that other unexperienced could have understoodde the same. And we knowe that both our Holie Father (as St Gregorie reporteth of him in his life) and St Francis were not learned; And therefore were the lesse able to expresse the same. Neither was it verie necessarie they should expresse it, though they could have donne it, by reason, that we could not anie thing the sooner have attained to it by reason of such Expressement. Neverthelesse I shall bring furth unto you certain places in our Holie Fathers Rule, by wch it seemeth to me, that he maie be understoodde to signifie (though but in a generall maner) as well the Union of this life, as the Union of the future. (line two \* Union with God)

I. The first place are the wordes in the verie beginning of the Prologue, where he inviteth his Disciple to geve diligent care to his Instructions: To the ende (said he) thow maiest by the labour of Obedience, returne to him, from whome thou departedst by the Slouthfullnes of Disobedience. And now as the departure (Wch was by sinne) was in this life, so is the perfecte Returne to be in this life; the wch is onlie donne by a perfect Union, as the Departure had caused a perfect Separation. For if you will saie, that our Holie Father meant a Returne by anie Conversion, that putts one into the State of Grace, I answer, that one maie returne in such a maner abiding still in the world, and needs not for it the Extraordinarie Instructions and course of life, wch our Holie Father prescribeth. And therefore he intends a perfect and totall Returne, Wch must be by the foresaid Union.

2. Secondlie the Disciple had never as yet ben united to God according to the Essence of God; And therefore this Returne is not to be understoodde of a Returne, wherein God is seen enjoied according to his Essence, but of an Inferior kinde of Enjoieing for this life; though the Enjoieing, that is to followe in the future life be an Union Wth God, as he is in his essence.

Thirdlie; If this place of the Rule be meant of the fall of Adam and his Returne, and applied by our H. Father to be the case of his Disciple, I likewise saie thereuppon, that neither had Adam before his fall seen God, but either according to faith, or by certain created speciesses; And accordingly is his Returne to be understoodde to be meant by our H. Father for this life. And a Returne there must be in this life, ells no Returne in the future life. And according to the Perfection of the Returne in this life, will the Enjoieing be in the future life. Fourthlie the said Returne doth imple a Tendence, the wch Tendence is a meane for becomming returned. And the said

meane or Tendance is heere prescribed to be the Labour of Obedience, the wch doth implie aswell Praier made out of Obedience, as all other matters of Obedience. And by them is the Tendance to the said perfect Returne and Union.

II. The Second place in the Rule, wherein I take to be signified the foresaid Union of this life, is the Wordes of Perfect Charitie, to wch in the later end of the XII Degrees of Humilitie, it is said, that the Exercise of those XII Degrees (that are the Substance of the whole Rule) will bring a Soule unto. The said Perfect Charitie is there meant to be the Habit of Perfect Charitie, wch driveth awaie all Inordinat feare. And now the Perfect Union of this life is an Act proceeding from the said Habit of Perfect Charitie. And vaine is the Habit that produceth not Acts. And therefore in mencioning the Habit, our H Father meant as well the Acts (wch are Actuell Unions) as the Habit wch enableth the Soule for such an Union. But indeed the Perfection of this Habit of Charitie of our H Father heere in this place intimateth and telleth to be wrought in the Soule by the meane of a Passive Union, in wch God worketh and planteth the said Habit in the Soule welldisposed and prepared for it by the long Exercise in the precedent XII Degrees of Humilitie; 'whereuppon the Soule being now by meanes thereof well cleansed from vices and sinnes' (as it is there said) 'the Holie Ghost will vouchafe [sic] to worke' (by the meane of a Passive Union) in the Soule of such a one, that hath ben so faithfull a workeman, the foresaid Habit of Perfect Charitie, by wch she will at all times be able (far more readilie, and by manie degrees more intensivelie) to unite herself to God in an Active Union, that is her owne proper exercise, and is to be the Ordinarie and proper Exercise of her whole life. For the Passive is Extraordinarie and wholie at the will and pleasure of God. 'And the things wch heretofore she could not do but out of feare and Wth some Sadnes, heavines, and (as it were) unwillingnes, she will now (in vertue of the said Passive Union had) beginne to do them 'without labour, most easilie, and readilie', and as it were naturallie, not for feare of punishment, but for the Love of Christ. And indeed such is the effect and fruite of a Passive rather, then of an Active, wch is farre more slowe to cause such an effect, as Mystick writers saie: Who also do saie, that God will never faile to visit a Soule Wth a Passive Union, when that he finds her (in some reasonable measure) purged from the Habits of Sinnes and Vices. And for this reason, and the likenes, that is in such their saieng to our H. Father saieng in this place, I understande heere a Union by wch God wrought in the Soule the said Perfect Habit of Charitie, having founde her pure and cleane for it by the meane of her precedent Exercises in the XII Degrees of Humilitie. For such is the Sudden effect and fruite of a Passive Union, the Active requiring farre more time, yea yeares, to cause such an effect. But yet the Active is a necessarie meane to attaine to the said Passive, together with the Exercise of Humilitie and other vertues. And they so cleanse the Soule, that she is fitte, and in some sorte worthie to be visited Wth a Passive Union, whose effect is farre greater, as allreadie ye have heard. And as for the wordes heere in the later end of the XIIth Degree: 'Quod Dominus dignabitur demonstrare'; wch our Lorde will vouchafe to shewe. I understande by the worde Demonstrare to Shew, to be there meant Operari to worke, as if our H. Father had said: The wch Perfect Charitie and Spirit of Working out of Love to Christ and to Vertues, our Lorde will vouchafe to worke, and as it were create in the Soule, wch he finds so cleane and so well prepared for to be wrought in by him. And our H Father (as I conjecture) did forbear to use the worde Operari (wch had ben the more proper worde) to avoide a kinde of Tautologie, having allreadie used in the same Sentence the worde Operarius. And therefore he thought good to use the worde Demonstrare, wch serveth well enough in the matter. And the wordes: 'Mox perveniet ad Perfectam illam Charitatem,' etc: He shall furthwith attaine that perfect state of Charitie, wch etc, do signifie, that he meant a Passive Union, wch doth Suddenlie and furthwith worke in the Soule the Perfection of the said Habit of Charitie, wch the Active Union together wth all Exterior Exercises of Humilitie and other vertues, will not do but by long time. Also our H. Father heere saith, that this worke is wrought by the Holie Ghost; I meane the working of the said perfect Charitie in the Soule. And I conceive that the Worke of a Passive Union is speciallie attributed to the Holie Ghost, as the Author of Love. And that allso makes me the rather to esteeme the said place of the Rule to be meant of a Passive Union.

III. The Thirde place in the Rule, by wch I conceive the Union of this life to be meant, as well as the Union of the future is in those wordes of the 7Ith Chapr, where our H Father saith, that he would have his Disciples to be Obedient to one another, 'knoweng that by this waie of Obedience They are to goe to God'; wch is; to attaine to God, and enjoie him this life; and in the future life to attaine to him and enioie him according to the manner of that future life. In like maner do Divins understande those wordes of our Saviour in the Ghospell (Math. V.8) 'Happie are the Cleane of heart for they shall see God', to be meant as well of Contemplation in this life, as in the future. And the like about the wordes of 'receaving an hundred fold' rewarde (Math XIX.29.) they understande it aswell of the delights of Contemplation in this life, as of the delights in the future life. And so allso it is about divers other places of the New and Olde Testament.

IV. The Fourth place (wch is somewhat cleerer for my purpose then the precedent) is in the 72th Chapr in those wordes; That a 'good zeale Separates from Vices, and leades to God and to Eternall life.' There, by the worde God, is to be understoodde the Union had Wth him in this life; And by Eternall life is meant the Union had wth him in Heaven. The like Interpretation is to be made of that place and promise in the Ghospell of receaving an hundredfold and life Everlasting. For if you will have both of those wordes of the Rule (wch are God and Eternall life to be meant of the Union in heaven, then might one of them have ben spared, it being inough to have said onelie God or onelie Eternal life. And there is an Happines in this life, though not so Complete nor permanent, as that of the future. And the said happines of this life doth consist in such Perfect Union as can be had wth God in this life, by wch the Soule is not onelie United to God, in whome onlie is true happines, but allso thereby for the time freed from all calamities of this life and tasteth of God according to the highest maner, that is proper for this life. And in old and more holie, and more learned times, not the learnedest Doctors though withall verie holie and much Experienced in themselves, yet did they not goe about to expresse in particulers the qualities and natures of thes Unions, because they were not indeed explicable. And therefore it is no marvaile, that our H: Father hath not gonne about to speake more particularly thereof then he hath donne.”-----“The Substance of the Rule of St Bennet” by Fr. Augustine Baker OSB (Edition of Stanbrook Abbey 1981, pages 16-21, original spelling very slightly adapted)

Augustine Baker: 1575 – Born, Abergavenny, Wales; brought up as Protestant 1590 – Oxford; then law in London (Inner Temple) 1598 – Recorder of Abergavenny 1600 – Experienced escape from death on a bridge 1603 – Became Catholic 1605 – Became monk at St Justina, Padua (Italy) 1606 – Seriously ill after some months: returned to England before profession 1607 – Took vows London, with English monks of the Italian Congregation 1613 – Ordained priest at Rheims 1613-24 – Missioner in England, then collecting historical material which edited by Clement Reynier) formed Apostolatus Benedictinorum in Anglia (1626) 1624-33 – Cambrai (NE France) with the English Benedictine nuns 1633-38 – At Douai, St Gregory's 1638 – Returned to English Mission 1641 – Died in London (9 August). Buried in Holborn, London (St Andrew's)

‘Augustine Baker came to the turning-point of his life one night in 1600 when returning home from attending a remote court. He had to cross a narrow bridge over the swollen waters of the river Monnow. Preoccupied with the business he had been conducting, he allowed his horse to advance along the narrow section of the bridge reserved for pedestrians rather than horse traffic, and soon arrived at a point where he could neither go further nor turn back. In his quandary he emitted the prayer "If ever I get out of this danger, I will believe there is a God who hath more care of my life and safety than I have had of his service and worship": Somehow he escaped and the miracle led to his conversion. He had previously been so devoid of religion that at his brother's deathbed he was unable to recall the words of the Lord's Prayer. But now he immersed himself in books about the evidence for Christianity and this course of wide reading soon came to include books by Catholic authors whose arguments convinced him, and in May 1603 he was reconciled to the Church by a local priest, Father Michael Floyd. He died in Gray's Inn Lane on 9 August 1641, after four days of illness, of an infectious disorder closely resembling the plague, narrowly missing being a martyr for he was being hunted down. A Dr. Oliver truly observed that “Father Baker shone pre-eminently as a master of the Spiritual life; he was the hidden man of the heart absorbed in heavenly contemplation”

## **THE THIRTEENTH STEP..... From the Oblate Master's desk**

It has been said that William Shakespeare's dramatic world is a world of purely humanistic necessity whereas the Christian world is not that of the bare, cruel necessity familiar even from the days of Greek tragedy, but the Christian world is a world of compassionate providence. Necessity & providence are intertwined for the Christian.

The context of, “All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts, His acts being seven ages,” (‘As You Like It’ by William Shakespeare); the context of this is human life as a living out of bare necessity.

Yet some have made a case for Shakespeare's being in actual fact a crypto-Catholic from the veiled references to contentious dogmatic matters in some of his plays. I am aware of no case for saying that Shakespeare dallied with the religious life, except that from his deep knowledge of all matters people have made claims as to him being a seaman, a doctor, a lawyer or even deduced that he had a large nose from his subtle descriptions of smells! Following the same line of argument one could perhaps make a case from his sometimes apparent familiarity with religious life for the said dalliance. All his works are full of a meditative depth that could be called "religious" reflection on life, in the widest sense, & indeed he may have stopped short of the explicitly religious expression of reality meaningful to a 'religious', for fear of literally losing his head like some of his friends!

St. Benedict writing many centuries earlier shares with Shakespeare a concern for providence as expressed and interpreted by the necessity of all that is. Creation is God's word and faithfully cleaving to its necessities "wins a crown" as the second step in RB puts it. The "Seven Ages of Man" from 'As You Like It' express the poet's sense that each stage of human life given us, as we would say, by providence has modes of living appropriate to it and even determined by it. Man, free in his will, can be like Job blessing the Lord: "The Lord has given, The Lord has taken away" and often can only either freely embrace those necessities like Job, or chafe and "rage against the dying of the light" like another, a more recent poet. Therein there may seem to be the merest sliver of a difference but therein is, in fact, something no less than that; this apparent sliver of a difference between embracing a necessity on the one hand & chafing against it on the other, is that difference as small as the eye of the needle, through which sanctity emerges on the other side!

This providential interpretation of God's will and its physical symbolisation in the life of man and of the monk first came to my attention when preparing a Sunday sermon on the Rich man and Lazarus. I was struck how the image of the severely sick and poor man seems to be behind much that is in RB regarding some kinds of "infirmary" especially, for example, in regard to penitential corrections. Nearly always, as a corrective, the miscreant must lie prone before the members of the community, often in a doorway (like Lazarus), and beg the alms of the brethren's prayers. This is penitential and corrective for the miscreant, but if the miscreant then becomes Lazarus and thus in the place of Christ ("I was sick &...."), then the community judges itself by its response. Infirmary in soul or body is the unavoidable, necessary and providential test and challenge to charity for the whole community. Weakness of soul or of body in the individual can be the source of strength for all given only the community's response when considered as the rich man encountering Lazarus. There is a providential choice between either charity on the one hand or a mere stepping over, as of a dead body, on the other. The necessity and facticity and presence of the prone body is beyond dispute and a given of providence, with only the two possibilities of, either charity embracing in the heart of prayer this Lazarus, this Christ, or hardening one's heart against him & thus Christ. Only the brother or sister who takes the part of 'Dives' debars himself, or herself, from making their infirm 'Lazarus', the necessity lying in his, or her, path, that necessity that could win their crown & instead becomes their condemnation.

In a parallel way, if one accepted that the Rule as a whole shows that the willing acceptance of necessity by willing obedience is the monk's path to salvation in imitation of Christ, & if one accepted the contention of our 'Monastic voice' above—that of Fr. Augustine Baker, when he says in passing that Chapter 7 is the "substance of the Rule", then the primary aspect of chapter 7 of RB is the starkly obvious necessity in this chapter, namely, that the single stark image of necessity behind these twelve degrees is that of the apparent progression and apparent regression in birth, human development, dying and death. This generously embraced, as from the hand of God, is our humiliation & our exaltation in oneness with Christ. Put simply; the weakness of the infirm can be a source of strength for the community. Similarly "obedience unto death", that lies behind, & is everywhere implied in chapter 7 of RB, makes of every necessity lying between birth & death the providential stepping-stone to Christ when embraced in the heart. Thus, religious profession in its 12 degrees of living-out, becomes the exact parallel & fulfilment of the baptismal birth & death already at work in grace. If Lazarus lies (literally!) behind the medicinal treatment of the miscreant in RB then "He became obedient unto death" (Phil 2.8) seems to subtend not only the third step of humility explicitly, but all the steps. "The seven ages of man", in their necessity, seem to be implied and variously hinted at in RB chapter 7; from the weaned child on its mother's breast, through the babbling of infancy, through the climbing and striding of adulthood (of ready obedience), to the descent of head towards ground ("I am bowed down & humbled everywhere" – 12th degree), and finally (implied) entering 'humus', the ground. The free obedience that embraces these gradations of humility also completes the baptismal transformation. The old Adam or Eve being put to death we arise to the fulness of life with Christ & in Christ. The ladder of humility becomes a twelve-stepped font which once having descended, we ascend the other side to the mystagogy ("getting to know God" so to speak) of eternity, albeit as Fr. Augustine Baker would contend, continuing a very strong acquaintance begun in this life.

To use Fr. Augustine's understanding of it; the "Union" with God that may be attained even in this life, the 12 Degrees of humility that sum up all the little unions of obeying in all the preceding little necessities of the Rule; these lead to the death of disunion & the rising to the fulness of UNION that can begin in this life. This latter is Fr Baker's main and preoccupying point in "The Substance of The Rule" (extract above) and indeed in every

one of his works, & in his life as a whole which came within paces of martyrdom. Death embraced in life leads to LIFE embraced in death. And so we have a thirteenth rung, a thirteenth degree or step of humility. The thirteenth step is –Yes, you’ve guessed it–death, but equally it is birth & life. The necessity of death freely embraced in imitation of Christ’s humility is our thirteenth step & the step beyond the expanded heart of the 12th degree that produces, onwards & upwards, the top of the ladder into eternity. Thus this simple and undeveloped reflection simply puts before us the most important part of chapter 7 of RB and that is the Thirteenth step implied in every line of the degrees of the ladder of humility. Death is a given ( as is birth, growth & ageing ) and yet it becomes, for the monk and for the Christian, the necessity that wins the crown. All the other steps leading to it were merely providential preparations and practices for this final choice, freely embraced. Really, the whole way and every step of the way down and up is a choice between embracing with expanded heart or murmuring with ever-narrowing heart.

And yet take heart! Even a “narrowed heart” ( even literally!) willingly embraced, like all endured necessities & weaknesses, can become, again, yet another opportunity of blessing both for the sufferer & the community in grace-filled response. Willing obedience to the unavoidable necessities of life--like the seven ages of man--is the union of obedience with God’s will that leads to UNION with God. This also was St Paul’s paradox of God’s strength made perfect in our weakness, willingly, & medicinally, embraced. FINIS

## ***PRAYERS***

- Father John Windle, who was ordained priest on the 2nd of May.
- Andrew Davis being ordained Deacon 28th June 2009.
- Beth Fraser who began her noviciate on the 24th April 2009, & Edmund Young who began his noviciate on the 5th of June 2009.
- Nadeen Richards who made her oblation on the 4th May 2009 & for two her children Amy & Thomas, making their first Holy Communion, God willing, on Corpus Christi, 14th June 2009.
- Phyllis Spalding (prayers for health, too, please; housebound at present) made her Oblation in Invergordon before Fr. Reese (to whom thanks) on the 30th May 2009.
- Gillian Cockwill & several other new aspirants.
- Helen Grant with a cracked knee & hip after a fall..
- Patricia Cassidy 13th April 2009, RIP.
- His Honour Andrew Brooks (circuit judge) 1st March 2009 RIP.
- Also Neil Rice RIP.
- John Cairns, seriously ill.
- Norah Napiontek, Beth Fallows & all Oblates in nursing homes or hospitals
- Paul Mahoney our Benedictine Oblates webmaster recovering from fall.
- Br. Joseph who began his monastic noviciate on the 24th March 2009 & Br. Przemek Piatowski who began his postulancy on the 4th of April 2009.
- Fr. Giles on his leave from Kristo Buase, Ghana, until the 3rd September 2009.
- Br Dunstan being ordained priest on August 20th 2009.

## **BOOKS & MEDIA**

- Three Peaks Press ( 9, Croesonen Rd., Abergavenny, Monmouthshire, NP7 6AE ) can supply a number of modern publications of Fr. Augustine Baker’s works, & works about him & his works such as “ The Mysterious Man” ( excellent bibliography & starting point ) , essays edited by Woodward & Williams &, by Baker himself e.g. : ‘Secretum’ ( in his English!), ‘Discretion’, ‘Doubts & Calls’ & other books of his edited by John Clark. New & second hand copies of “Holy Wisdom” & “Sancta Sophia” culled from his works are widely available too.
- “Finding Happiness” by Abbot Christopher Jamison (of Worth Abbey)– “monastic steps for a fulfilling life”. An excellent résumé of the rationale of the monastic life & its relevance for all. £12. 99. [WWW.orionbooks.co.uk](http://WWW.orionbooks.co.uk) Weidenfeld Nicolson. London. It had its genesis in the TV series “ The Monastery”.
- A challenging book: “ Christian Martyrs for a Muslim People” ,by Martin McGee of our order, Paulist Press, New York,\$18.95cents or equivalent! “Hones” one’s eye to try & aim at the mark & not below!(& become or remain humble).

- Excellent website [www.benedictine-oblates.net](http://www.benedictine-oblates.net) Do make use of it.

## NEWS & FORTHCOMING EVENTS:

- 20th June a “Musick Fyne” concert.
- 28th June, the 1st Aberdeen Diocesan Pilgrimage. 23rd August, 2nd Aberdeen Diocesan pilgrimage.
- 1st-3rd September a Symposium on Scottish Sacred Music. Book early to avoid disappointment.
- Weekend for Pluscarden Oblates Friday 30th July, 2010 - Monday 2nd of August 2010. ( Please book with Br. Gabriel or Br. Thomas & let me ( Fr. Martin ) know ,too, as well, even if you don't get a room in time or even if you intend staying elsewhere for the duration anyway, thankyou )
- Day for Oblates( principally of Prinknash) Sunday 12th July 2009. ( please notify of intention of going by 21st June 2009-Master of Oblates, Prinknash Abbey ,Cranham, Gloucester, GL4 8EX
- Turvey Abbey. Weekend for Oblates of any Benedictine Community 23rd-25th October 2009 Esp. On Lectio Divina
- Monsignor Richard Moth & Mrs Margaret Coll will be representing us as delegates, please God, at the World Congress of Oblates, Rome 2nd October -10th October 2009 at Rome. The theme, ‘ The religious challenges of today – The Benedictine answer’.

## SUNDRY ITEMS

Our Lady of Pluscarden. A number of Oblates have expressed interest in reproductions for a “homeshrine”. Some have begun work or preliminary research.

Thank you for that & many suggestions gratefully received.