



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

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"Let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" (HR 43:3).

Monastic Voices

DOM Anselm Grün OSB (A.I.M.-periodical, 2008) "Spiritual aspects of monastic work"

‘According to St Benedict monks should live by the work of their own hands. However, in earlier times monasteries had founders who secured an economic foundation for their communities. Nevertheless it is important to St. Benedict that a monastery is able to live from its own resources. St. Benedict's opinion is mainly motivated by spiritual reasons, not merely economic ones.

The first reason is inner freedom. A community can become dependent on benefactors, not only financially but also spiritually. The result is that it may not have the courage to choose its own path or to express its own convictions for fear of upsetting the benefactors. Today we hear often how some benefactors stop giving when they disagree with the theological opinions of some monks in a community. Essential to spirituality is freedom. Without freedom a monastery is unable to raise a prophetic voice for its time. The second reason is that the monks realize their own limits when they have to make a living for themselves. They experience that life is also toil. In this way they share in the fate of the many who have to struggle for their daily bread. When working the monk experiences an inner solidarity with all those who have to work. The third reason refers to the spiritual path of the individual: work challenges the monks and keeps them lively. Work is a kind of therapy. But at the same time it is a challenge to face up to life. For the early monks work tested the spiritual life. Work reveals whether the monk is a narcissist, concerned only for himself, or whether he is ready to accept the demands of work and to free himself of himself to be open to God. A fourth reason for St Benedict's position is that the monks should serve people by their work. Work is not only for the profit made. Work in itself should serve people. Every soundly-made product serves people. And spiritual work in pastoral care or education is already in itself a service. Work is never an end in itself but always already a service for others. In monastic history it has been shown that there was an intimate link between spirituality and economic prosperity. Monasteries which lost their spiritual vigour often also sank into poverty. They did not take seriously the reality of this world and indulged their own delusions. At the same time, monasteries which were too rich were often spiritually impoverished. Obviously a healthy tension between spirituality and profitability is needed to flourish.

Monasteries should work hard to earn their livelihood. When they make profits they should share them with others. Then they will flourish. According to St. Benedict appropriate economic activity is a sign of sound spirituality. A hallmark of spirituality is creativity. The spiritual use of money is reflected in the imagination the monks develop to earn money. However St. Benedict warns that the evil of avarice could sneak into economic activities. Money and money-making can develop its own dynamic and dominate the monk's heart. An inner freedom from money and financial success is a prerequisite for spiritual economic management. Greed also disrupts co-operation. It leads to the divisive tendency of comparing oneself to others and of being focused on defining one's own boundaries against the other. Another characteristic of spirituality is the spirit of cooperation and healthy interaction within a community. The way a community lives together, whether they put into practice the love and the respect St. Benedict asks of its members, is reflected in good co-operation. Healthy communication is needed, as are respect for the dignity and talent of the individual and mutual listening. When work is well organized within a monastery, then it will always contribute to a good atmosphere, because work is a crucial sphere for community living. It requires good and clear communication, transparency and the readiness

to work with each other, and not against one another, as a team. Real community requires always a community of property because possession has the tendency to separate and to isolate one from others.”

FROM THE OBLATE MASTER'S DESK

The Cellarer and Work

Br. Michael, our cellarer reminded us this Summer when speaking on this theme, that the Rule seems to say more what the Cellarer should not do than what he should do! Nevertheless the Cellarer imitates the Lord in taking into account our many and varied infirmities, like our Lord Himself having mercy on our incapacity. In many ways he is the charitable eyes and arms of the Abbot and of the whole community giving them their bread at the proper time.

According to the Scriptures and according to St Aelred of Rievaulx in the “Mirror of Charity” work is orientated towards the Sabbath & the heart of the Sabbath is God is charity is Love. He says of God's work and rest “In my opinion six is the perfect number because, when added together, its factors total the number itself: one plus two plus three equals six; six ones make six, twice three is six, three twos are six, the number having no other factors. It is fitting, then, that there were six days of creation, because, like the number six, God's creation was all-perfect and contained nothing superfluous. The number seven (the “perfect” six overflows into seven!) is kept for God's rest at the conclusion of His handiwork, and we have already seen how God's resting and His love are one and the same. And Our Lord tells us that the Father loves the Son and discloses to Him all that He does, and that it is because He keeps His Father's commandments that He lives on in His love. The Father for His part points to His beloved Son in whom He is well pleased. Now the delight that the Father and Son take in each other is nothing else than their mutual love embrace in which each rests in the other. This is the thing that belongs to them both; or rather it is in this they are one. And the delight and joy which they take in each other is called the Holy Spirit, because He is common to the Father and Son by proceeding from both of them, being consubstantial with them. Yet Holy Writ often speaks of the Spirit as being sevenfold, although He is indeed only one Spirit and is one with Father and Son. The reason for this description is that from His fullness there flows a sevenfold grace. For instance, the prophet saw a stone bearing seven eyes, and Saint John's vision showed him seven spirits before the throne of God. And in conclusion I may say that this should suffice to show the excellence of charity, in which the creator and ruler of all things celebrates an everlasting Sabbath.”

Contemplatives are called to be people of the Sabbath anticipating the goal of work in general by resting in its Goal Who is God. Martha works a six day week without ever reaching Mary's single day that encompasses all days.

Today, in the “West” (of setting suns) we live in a time when secularisation is having its day. This is symbolised and cashed in by attempting to abolish the Sabbath. We can say “attempting” because what God does not ratify is not founded in reality. To attempt to abolish the Sabbath is to attempt to make all work futile. That cannot be because God's work stands; look around. It is for us to participate in His work. He is Creator.

In the Rule and in the Benedictine monastery the work par excellence is the *Opus Dei*, the work of God, that is the Divine Office seven times a day and once at night. All that happens in the monastery is for that alone. This is the work in an absolute sense, not the work in scriptorium or sewing-room, nor in kitchen or garden nor even pastoral work or “spiritual work”. It is not in order to enable something else. It rests in its goal, the glory of God which is the goal of creation and the substance of eternity in which time and creation subsist. Even night is punctuated with its eternal goal of praise as sign of our Lord's Resurrection and victory over death and nothingness. The abyss of God's eternal rest and glory eternally overflows nothing's little mirage. And so night brings the tally of praise to eight, the number of the Resurrection, the number of the recreation, the number of the New Creation.

The money-changers were driven out of the Temple not because theirs was an activity, a work that should never take place. No. It should take place and must take place but in the market-place. That is the place for it. The money-changing was a market-place activity which was orientated towards the Temple tax and its worship and the purchase of offerings. The market was being sacralised, not the Temple secularised. The Rule admonishes the cellarer to treat all the tools and objects entrusted to him in the monastery as if they were sacred objects and vessels. The monastery is a place of sacralisation not secularisation. The monastery is to be a Sabbath of the world's days. The monastery and its work is to be a sign realised of what the world is in general though only for those with eyes to see. The monastery is never a market-place nor must it seem such. The world at large is God's Temple and must always be seen and experienced as such to be rooted in reality. The world is transcendent and translucent, a window and not a mirror. “Work reveals whether the monk is a narcissist, concerned only for himself, or whether he is ready to accept the demands of work and to free himself of himself to be open to God.” Secularism falsely attempts to make the world a narcissistic reflection rather than the arena

of transcendent encounter and sacred demands that it is and which the monastery is meant to model. A few weeks ago at Bellahouston Park, Glasgow, Pope Benedict the 16th reminded us of the sacred world we inhabit: "Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, 'the Kingdom of God is very near to you!' (Lk 10:9). With these words of the Gospel we have just heard, I greet all of you with great affection in the Lord. Truly the Lord's Kingdom is already in our midst!" Farther he reminded monks and religious: "Similarly, let me encourage you, the monks, nuns and religious of Scotland to be a light on a hilltop, living an authentic Christian life of prayer and action that witness in a luminous way to the power of the Gospel." The "power of the Gospel" is a power that opens the eyes of the blind to see God in the world when read with purity of heart. The Oblate, whose hand, like that of the infant Oblate of the Rule has been wrapped in the altar-cloth of the monastery, is set apart like his or her brethren within the enclosure, to live with eyes opened to the world as God's world, a sacralised, sanctified world where every market-place and workshop of commerce has its Sabbath and goal in the transcendence of God. The Oblate is to refresh his gaze to look beyond the feverishness of activity with fresh eyes and refreshing the gaze of others to find the genuine meaning and goal of all in God and not futility. Hands set apart are never idle but always busy but never in the futile. The Divine Office Morning and Evening and a little chapter of the Rule guide hand and eye to see our lives and actions in a context of meaning objectively founded in God in union with our monastic brethren. Not all of us find the Divine Office, even the discipline of Morning and Evening prayer easy. Work truly so is never easy even and especially the work of God, Opus Dei. Especially was this true for our Lady's Tumbler in this mediaeval tale: "Here in the crypt will I tumble for your delight. Lady, lead me truly in your way, and for the love of God hold me not in utter despite." Then he smote upon his breast, he sighed and wept most tenderly, since he knew no better prayer than tears. Then he turned him about, and leaped once again. "Lady," said he, "as God is my Saviour, never have I turned this somersault before. Never has tumbler done such a feat, and, certes, it is not bad. Lady, what delight is his who may harbour with you in your glorious manor. For God's love, Lady, grant me such fair hostelry, since I am yours, and am nothing of my own." Once again he did the vault of Metz; again he danced and tumbled. Then when the chants rose louder from the choir, he, too, forced the note, and put forward all his skill. So long as the priest was about that Mass, so long his flesh endured to dance, and leap and spring, till at the last, nigh fainting, he could stand no longer upon his feet, but fell for weariness on the ground. From head to heel sweat stood upon him, drop by drop, as blood falls from meat turning upon the hearth. "Lady," said he, "I can no more, but truly will I seek you again." Fire consumed him utterly. He took his habit once more, and when he was wrapped close therein, he rose to his feet, and bending low before the statue, went his way. "Farewell," said he, "gentlest Friend. For God's love take it not to heart, for so I may I will soon return. Not one Hour shall pass but that I will serve you with right good will, so I may come, and so my service is pleasing in your sight." Thus he went from the crypt, yet gazing on his Lady. "Lady," said he, "my heart is sore that I cannot read your Hours. How would I love them for love of you, most gentle Lady! Into your care I commend my soul and my body." In a certain sense the case is the same for goods, for property, as it is for work. We give what we are able. We work at what we are able. For the monk this is under obedience to the Abbot and in a parallel way this is for the Oblate under the call of God. In each case the monk must give, must work at, what is asked. For the Oblate, as for all, the call of what is to be given or work rendered is from God and in obedience to God. St Gregory the Great in a Homily chosen for St. Andrew's day on Ss. Peter and Andrew leaving their nets gives us the clue as to the measure of our giving of our goods and in a parallel way of our work and talents which are often symbolised by goods rendered. "Therefore let none of us who see other people giving up great possessions say to ourselves: I should like to imitate people like these who have such contempt for the world, but I have nothing to give up. You give up much if you give up the desire to possess. The Lord looks at your heart, not your fortune; he considers the love that prompts your offering, not its amount. If we are going to weigh material goods, our holy traders gave their nets and boats to purchase the eternal life of the angels. The real value of that is beyond price, but for you its price is just what you possess. For Zacchaeus it was worth half his fortune, since he kept the other half to restore fourfold whatever he had unjustly extorted. For Peter and Andrew it was worth the value of their nets and boat; for the widow it cost two small coins; another may buy it with a cup of cold water. As I said, the kingdom of God costs whatever you have." As with goods so with the work they symbolise.

Prayer Intentions and Events

We pray in thanksgiving for a fruitful community retreat given on the first letter of St John by Bishop Richard Moth, Oblate of our monastery. We thank God and fervently pray for former Oblate, Sister Margaret Ross OSB who made her Solemn Profession to the monastic life at Cecilia's, Ryde, Isle of Wight, England on the Feast of

St. Martin, Armistice day. We claim her as one of ours still and she will always have a claim upon our prayers! May she remember us still! Please continue your very fruitful prayers for new, young vocations to our monastery (as well as others!) and for the perseverance of all the monks. New Oblates are Mgr. Eugene Columba Harkness & Hester du Plessis. New novices, Johan(Joy) Baillie, Valentine Harry, Rev. Christopher Ketley, Philip Hammond. Please pray also that postulant and novice Oblates may persevere, especially through the difficulties of learning to say and pray Morning and Evening prayer of the Divine Office (the Roman Office in English) or some equivalent agreed with the Oblate Master. WE commend to the Lord, Ralph Brien, who had just been given an award for his part in the D-day landings and who has just died, RIP. Please pray also for Allie Brien, his Wife (also an Oblate) and for her family. Also Bob Barr's Wife Ruth who has just died & for all her bereaved family including his Daughter who is recovering from illness as well as others of the same family in remission. Deacon Willim Joss's Wife Margaret is very ill & Dr. David Paterson's Wife Angela is undergoing painful treatment. He has just turned eighty!(& gives lectures at Worth Abbey!) Zina Neagle needs our prayers & please pray for all the sick, especially James Cairns, Poppy Sinclair, Beth Fraser & her husband Chris, Norah Napiontek, Irene Coultard, and so many others suffering infirmity of body or soul, or in the weakness of old age, especially our monastic Brother Adrian. About 1/3 of our Oblates are old or infirm since most become Oblates in middle life and we all share a tendency to get older!---- 25th anniversaries 2011-Br. Finbar, Fr. Benedict, Fr. Mark!----We give thanks for the phenomenal success of our Holy Father Pope Benedict's State visit and its continuing fruitfulness. We see that age and its infirmities are not such for the Holy Spirit Who as St Paul constantly reminds us, delights in using the infirm!

Books & Literature & Media:

In this instance we let you off with the above famous Mediaeval, short story refashioned in the French by Anatole France and translated into "period" English by Eugene Mason, available in any good translated collection of the development of the World or French short story, "Our Lady's Tumbler". Anon. Divine Office too expensive, too difficult?! Reminder:"Universalis" on Internet £15 App. For whole office-can iPod for walking or driving round!!Many of our Oblates do this—where there's a will..(textaloud)

Cultural events

"Artist's for Mary's Meals"—<http://www.nettaewing.com/contact-us/> --and help the poor.

Local Oblate groups: are now operating in Thurso, Aberdeen, Dundee, Dunfermline, and Glasgow; most recently the Aberdeen one revived by Brian Milne(01224 485 781), 1st meeting 2nd Feb. 2011, 7.30-9.00, then 1st Wed. of each month at Donview House Sheltered Complex common room, Seaton Crescent, Aberdeen. Other groups, Fr. Martin can forward your enquiry. (The Capital has a low profile?) Next year's Oblate Letters may be 4 sides of A5 on 2 A4 sides, folded. (Fr. Abbot adage "less is more") Occasional bumper issue, God willing!

Thank you, all of you, without exception, who by your prayers & help, tangible & intangible, have been in loving solidarity as one Family. This cameo of Caroline Coate's painting reminds us Who we have to thank again & again in our Poustinia!

May the peace and blessing of almighty God, the +Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit come down upon each of you now and forever. Amen.

With much love in Christ to each of you this Christmas. Happy Christmas!
Fr. Martin