



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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

"Do not grant newcomers to the monastic life an easy entry, but, as the Apostle says, Test the spirits to see if they are from God (1 Jn 4:1). Therefore, if someone comes and keeps knocking at the door, and if at the end of four or five days he has shown himself patient in bearing his harsh treatment and difficulty of entry, and has persisted in his request, then he should be allowed to enter and stay in the guest quarters for a few days. After that, he should live in the novitiate, where the novices study, eat and sleep. A senior chosen for his skill in winning souls should be appointed to look after them with extremely careful attention. The concern must be whether the novice truly seeks God, and whether he shows eagerness for the Work of God, for obedience and for trials. The novice should be clearly told all the hardships and difficulties that will lead him to God. If he promises perseverance in his stability, then after two months have elapsed let this Rule be read straight through to him, and let him be told: 'This is the law under which you are choosing to serve. If you can keep it, come in. If not, feel free to leave.' If he still stands firm, he is to be taken back to the novitiate, and again thoroughly tested in all patience... If after due reflection he promises to observe everything and to obey every command given him, let him then be received into the community... When he is to be received, he comes before the whole community in the oratory and promises stability, conversion of life, and obedience

Holy Rule, Chapter 58: The Procedure for Receiving Brothers

MONASTIC VOICES

THE CONSECRATED LIFE, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to His Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus - the chaste, poor and obedient one - are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world, and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realisation in heaven. In every age there have been men and women who, obedient to the Father's call and to the prompting of the Spirit, have chosen this special way of following Christ, in order to devote themselves to him with an "undivided heart" (cf. 1 Cor 7:34). Like the Apostles, they have left everything behind in order to be with Christ and to put themselves, as He did, at the service of God and their brothers and sisters. The experience of His gracious love is so deep and so powerful that the person called senses the need to respond by unconditionally dedicating his life to God, consecrating to Him all things present and future, and placing them in His hands.

Its universal presence and the evangelical nature of its witness are clear evidence - if any were needed - that the consecrated life is not something marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church. Indeed it is at the very heart of the Church as a decisive element for her mission, since it manifests the inner nature of the Christian calling, and the striving of the whole Church as Bride towards union with her one Spouse.

From the first Christian centuries, monastic profession has been one particularly radical way of living out our baptismal participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection. Its present form in the West has been inspired above all by St. Benedict. Following him, great numbers of men and women have left behind

life in the world, sought God and dedicated themselves to Him, "preferring nothing to the love of Christ" (HR 4:21 & 72:11). Still today Benedictine monks strive to create a harmonious balance between the interior life and work. Following the Gospel teaching, they commit themselves to conversion of life, obedience and stability, to persevering meditation on God's word (*lectio divina*), to the celebration of the liturgy and to prayer. In the heart of the Church and the world, monasteries have been and continue to be eloquent signs of communion, welcoming abodes for those seeking God and the things of the spirit, schools of faith and true places of Christian culture.

Monasticism is the celebration of memory and expectation: memory of the wonders God has wrought and expectation of the final fulfilment of our hope. It is a constant reminder that the primacy of God gives full meaning and joy to human lives, because we are all made for God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in him (St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1:1). Monasticism reminds all those reborn in Christ that they are called to live out, with the strength of the Spirit's gift, the chastity appropriate to their state of life, obedience to God and the Church and a reasonable detachment from possessions: for all are called to holiness, which consists in the perfection of love. Monasteries bear witness that the Incarnate Son of God is the goal towards which all things tend, the splendour before which every other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart. They are in duty bound to offer a generous welcome and spiritual support to all those who, moved by a thirst for God and a desire to live the demands of faith, turn to them.

From *Vita Consecrata*, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II, dated 25 March 1996. Dear oblates and friends, In drawing up his Chapter on the procedure for receiving new brothers, St. Benedict consciously built on, or deliberately modified, the monastic tradition he inherited. Foremost among the authors he knew and respected are St. Pachomius (c. 290-346), St. Basil (c. 330-79), John Cassian (c. 360-435), St. Caesarius of Arles (c. 470-542) and the anonymous "Master" (6th century). I was tempted to quote some relevant snippets from these early Fathers in my "Monastic Voices" section. I chose instead a little selection from Pope John Paul, because in *Vita Consecrata* he speaks directly to modern people, and teaches exactly what we need to hear. Many things that the ancients simply assumed he spells out clearly for our benefit. Largely ignoring practical details, the Holy Father offers a rich theology of religious profession, and an inspiring explanation of its continuing relevance for all Christians.

This last point is one well understood by oblates. An essential feature of oblate spirituality is that awareness of how important monastic life is to the whole Church. St. Benedict himself mentions in Chapter 64 of his Rule that a religious community's fidelity to its vocation is the concern also of the local Bishops and other Christians. Taking up that point, and putting it entirely positively, we believe, with the Pope, that whenever a person dedicates his whole life to God through monastic profession, the whole Church is somehow built up. In addition, the monk's generous act can be, for his brethren, family, friends and other witnesses, a source of much consolation and encouragement.

If a new monastic profession is of interest and relevance to any Christian, all the more so is it to an oblate of the monastery concerned. For oblates have taken this further step, choosing to unite themselves formally with the monastery of their affiliation, and taking St. Benedict's Rule as a model and guide in their own life.

Turning to Chapter 58 of the Holy Rule, an oblate will find much that can be directly applied to his own life. Like a novice monk, each oblate has to approach his final oblation over a period of time, getting to know the Rule well, and taking care to ensure that his commitment is perfectly free, and made with full knowledge and deliberate consent. All of this is a little sign that Jesus Christ invites, but does not force His disciples to follow Him. It also reminds us that those who freely take up His call do not start out already perfect. They have to make progress in their Christian life: and this will only happen if they are truly humble, ready to be taught, and determined to persevere, come what may. The process of testing and formation outlined by St. Benedict comes to its conclusion with the promise of conversion of life. This is made by monks and oblates alike. It's a promise that implies a beginning much more than an end. Whoever makes it hands God, as it were, a blank cheque. It's a commitment that has to be renewed every day; that should naturally grow ever deeper with the passage of time; that accepts in advance whatever new demands will be made upon it.

St. Benedict sets out in his Chapter 58 some broad principles which he is determined a novice must fully grasp before being accepted, and which the professed monk must henceforth keep ever in mind. These also are readily applied to an oblate. They are often spoken of as the "Four Seals", or authenticating signs of a vocation (HR 58:7). Thus: does the novice, does the monk, does the oblate truly seek God, even as God truly seeks him (cf. HR Prologue 14, Ch. 27:8)? That has to remain the central purpose of our Benedictine life. It's the reason we

came to the monastery: we must never lose sight of it. Then: is he eager for the Work of God? Does he make prayer an absolute priority in his life? Does he long to grow in prayer, in friendship and intimacy with God? Is he eager for obedience? Obedience is the way of Christ, the reversal of Adam's disobedience: through it we return to God (Prol 2). Without it a monk "lies to God by his tonsure" (HR 1:7). For the oblate the question can be rephrased: is he conscientious in carrying out his daily duties? Is his desire for holiness actually borne out in his life? Finally, is he eager for trials? Can he endure the difficulties of life with cheerful patience? Can he live with other people, bearing patiently their weaknesses of body or behaviour (HR 72:5)? Can he accept distasteful tasks without complaint? As St. Benedict forcefully adds, we come to God through "dura et aspera" - hard and difficult things (HR 58:8). The trials of our life can be understood, if only we will, as coming ultimately from God's loving hand. Each one of them provides an opportunity to prove our love for Him, and to grow in holiness.

The Pluscarden community does not follow to the letter St. Benedict's prescriptions for receiving new brothers. This is because we are bound not just by the Holy Rule, but also by the current canon law of the Church, and the Constitutions of our Subiaco Congregation, duly approved by Church authority. So various elements are nowadays added to the process. The period of probation is much longer than St. Benedict envisaged, and includes now a period of "temporary vows", which follows the novitiate. Before any vows can be made, Fr. Abbot is bound to summon the professed members of the community for counsel (cf. HR 3). Their opinion as to the suitability of the candidate is expressed formally by secret ballot. Then the ceremony of solemn profession itself is much richer than the rather simple form outlined in the Rule. In many respects it resembles a baptismal liturgy. This is precisely because the vows are the monk's way of living out to the full the implications of his baptism.

I'd like to dwell on some features of our profession liturgy. I'm prompted to do so in particular, having witnessed two solemn professions since my last letter. The first was that of our Br. Matthew on April 21st, the second, on 1st of May, that of Petersham's Sr. Julian Penney. I could have wished for every one of our oblates and friends to be present at these ceremonies. Here the whole meaning and purpose of our way of life is wonderfully expressed and affirmed. Here public witness is borne to the goodness and attractiveness of our Benedictine vocation. Here also one is most strikingly reminded how much this way of life depends on prayer for its maintenance and increase. And here the veil that should normally cover that interior joy proper to a life consecrated to God is, for the moment, lifted publicly aside.

The liturgy of profession always takes place within the context of Holy Mass (cf. HR 59:2). For the monk concerned, it is the culmination of a period of intense preparation. Before the Chapter met to discuss his case, he made his formal petition to be received. Fr. Abbot: "What is your wish?" Junior monk: "I wish to serve God in your community until I die." The vote being favourable, the junior then went into retreat: something, for him, of an anticipated honeymoon. Freed from his usual duties, spoken to by nobody, he had a week entirely alone with God. Now at last his moment has arrived, and it is as St. Benedict described. The Junior has completed his period of testing: for us, at least four and a half years. He has passed through the various doors: of the gatehouse, of the guest quarters, of the novitiate, of the Church. Now here he is before the very Altar. After the Gospel and homily, an interrogation begins the Rite. At baptism the questions are about faith in the Trinity, and rejection of the devil. Here they are about the vows.

The vows according to which a person becomes a consecrated Religious are poverty, chastity and obedience. All these are implied in the Benedictine vow of "Conversion of Life". Or is that really the Benedictine vow? 20th century scholars discovered, with some consternation, that what St. Benedict actually wrote was not "conversio morum", but "conversatio morum". Copyists in the 8th century found that difficult to understand, assumed it must be a mistake, and changed it. The original is indeed a grammatical tangle which defies literal translation. Broadly it means "to live the monastic way of life with fidelity". But the Latin emendation was not so far off. The root word lying behind "conversatio" is "to change", or "be converted", so our English expression "conversion of life" remains valid, and we continue to use it. Linked to Conversion of Life are the other two Benedictine vows of Stability and Obedience. These also simply make explicit some key aspects of monastic life. Today any sort of lifelong commitment is profoundly counter-cultural: how much more so these vows! Yet they exist to enable true freedom: freedom from the passing things of this world that can weigh us down: freedom to devote ourselves to the one thing necessary, that is never to be taken away (cf. Lk 10:42).

Fr. Abbot: "Do you wish to bind yourself to this community by the vow of stability, so that, united in one brotherhood with us, you may make the search for God your primary concern, in persevering prayer and joyful penance, in work and fraternal service?" Junior monk: "I do".

The interrogation completed, in a most powerful gesture the candidate prostrates before the Altar. The professed monks form a corona around him, and kneeling pray for him in company with all the Saints and Angels of heaven, singing the Litany. Only then does he stand and read out his "profession chart": traditionally adorned with artistic decorations.

Having pronounced his vows, the new monk signs his chart on the Altar (HR 58:20). He then solemnly and deliberately takes it around, showing it to everyone present. Again he stands in the centre, and with uplifted arms sings, three times, on consecutively rising notes, the heart-rendingly beautiful "Suscipe me Domine": "Uphold (or 'Receive') me Lord and I shall live: and do not disappoint me in my hope." Each time the monks repeat the chant. This is always the most moving part of the ceremony: it requires steely self control indeed to restrain the odd tear! The Suscipe chant is sung also at the annual community renewal of vows, and on occasions of Silver and Golden Jubilee. At Cardinal Hume's funeral, the Ampleforth monks sang it repeatedly as his coffin was blessed and honoured.

Now comes an aspect of the ceremony about which St. Benedict speaks only vaguely, but which is of the utmost importance. This is the solemn blessing or consecration of the monk. It is an official and priestly act of the Church, so in the case of nuns it is usually done by the local Bishop. An Abbot in priest's orders is able to do it for his own monks. Through it the vows just made are formally accepted, and the new monk is set apart henceforth as a consecrated person. So once again, the newly professed prostrates, surrounded by his brethren (HR 58:23). Standing over him, his Abbot sings or says the long prayer of consecration. A variety of these is available: some very ancient; others new compositions. At the invocation of the Holy Spirit, the professed monks join in stretching out their hands over their brother, asking for him all the graces he will need to live well in accordance with what he has promised.

According to the Rule, when the prayer is finished the new monk is stripped of his clothes and dressed anew in the monastic garb. St. Benedict's emphasis here is on dispossession of personal property and full belonging to the community. Our ceremony emphasises rather the giving of outward signs of monastic consecration. So our new monk is clothed at this point in the cowl: a voluminous cross-shaped over-garment, in which it is virtually impossible to do anything but pray. He is also presented with the psalter he will use in Choir. Nuns usually add to this a presentation of a wedding ring and the veil worn by the professed. Then comes the welcoming kiss of peace by each of the brethren, and customary Benedictine reserve gives way to more spontaneously expressed affection. The liturgy of the Eucharist then proceeds, and the monk's self offering is specifically united with that of Christ; his search for God sealed in Holy Communion.

I offer in conclusion a set of intercessions we use here, asking you to pray these intentions with us, and for us. "May we put nothing before the love of Christ" ("Lord, hear us" - "Lord, graciously hear us"). "May we love our neighbours as ourselves. May we never forsake charity. May we not be proud. May we put our hope in God and desire everlasting life. May we love silence. May we be obedient. May we be stable in our aim and fervent in prayer. May we love and reverence our brethren. May we persevere in our profession until death." ("Lord, hear us" - "Lord, graciously hear us").