



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

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"Pray without ceasing" (1 Thessalonians 5:17).

"Pray all the time, asking for what you need, praying in the Spirit on every possible occasion" (Eph 6:18).
"Devote yourself frequently to prayer" (Holy Rule 4:56). "The twelfth step of humility is that ... at the Work of God, in the oratory, the monastery or the garden, on a journey or in the field, or anywhere else: whether he sits, walks or stands ... he constantly says in his heart what the publican in the Gospel said with downcast eyes: Lord, I am a sinner, not worthy to look up to heaven" (Holy Rule 7:62-65).

Monastic Voices

Abba Isidore said "When I was young, and was sitting in my cell, I did not measure out my time for prayer. Night and day were my time for prayer."

Some brothers put a question to Abba Agatho. "Which virtue, Father, is the most difficult?" He said to them, "Forgive me, but I think that there is nothing so difficult as praying to God. Whenever we wish to pray, our enemies the demons set to work to prevent us. They know that the only thing that really stops them is prayer to God. If we engage in any good work and persevere in it, we shall without doubt receive rest, but praying involves effort right until our final breath."

When some people asked Abba Macarius how to pray, he replied, "There is no need to make long discourses. It is enough to stretch out one's hands and say, 'Lord, as you will, and as you know, have mercy'".

There was a man who used to hunt the wild animals in the desert, and when he saw Abba Anthony at recreation with the brothers, he was scandalised. The old man said to him, "Put an arrow in your bow and bend it". He did what he was asked, and the old man said, "Bend it further". He did so, and again the old man said, "Bend it still further". The huntsman replied, "If I bend the bow too far it will break". Then the old man said, "It's the same with the work of God. If we test the brothers beyond endurance, they could well break. Now and then, we have to meet their needs." When the huntsman heard this, he felt ashamed. The brothers were also encouraged, and so went back to their own cells.

From The Sayings of the Desert Fathers. Fourth century Egypt.

"The whole aim of the monk consists in a continual and uninterrupted perseverance in prayer."

"Whoever is in the habit of praying only at the hour when the knees are bent prays very little. We have to be outside the hour of prayer what we want to be when we are praying. For the mind at the time of prayer is necessarily formed by what went on previously, and when it is praying it is either raised to the heavens or brought low to the earth by the thoughts on which it was dwelling before it prayed."

*From **John Cassian**. (c. 360-c. 435) **Conferences IX, 2 & X, 14***

"We are told that in Egypt there are brothers who offer up frequent prayers, but that these are very short, like arrows loosed off in rapid succession, for fear that the vigilant, alert attention, so necessary for one who prays, should be weakened or blunted if too long an interval is left between them. Thus our attention is not to be forced if it cannot be prolonged, while on the other hand it should not be quickly broken off if it is capable of being prolonged. Praying intensely means repeatedly and frequently stirring the heart, knocking at the door of him to whom we are praying. Indeed, this is more a matter of sighs than words, and consists of weeping rather than eloquence. So our tears come into his sight and our sighs do not pass unnoticed by the One who created all things by his Word, and who has no need of our words."

*From **St. Augustine of Hippo**. (354-430) **Letter 130 - To Proba, 19-20**.*

"God has a right to the totality of our life, the whole of the day and the whole of the night, and not just certain moments. God is our all. And the only fitting way of giving him honour is by giving him everything, which includes giving him all our time.... St. Benedict knew from experience that if we wish to arrive at continuous prayer, if we wish to achieve a radical redirecting towards God of all our thoughts and emotions, then we need to reserve specified times during the day when we do nothing else but pray. The whole of our conscious and unconscious life can only be totally directed towards God when there are specific times during which we allow God to be the sole object of our consciousness. This is also the reason why the times of prayer are spread out very evenly throughout the day. At specified times the monk returns to the source from which wells up the stream of his continuous prayer. He neglects it at his peril."

*From **Praying with Benedict** by Dom Korneel Vermeiren, Abbot of the Dutch Cistercian monastery of Konigshoeven.*

Dear oblates and friends,

St. Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians is generally reckoned by scholars to be the earliest of all the writings of the New Testament. Towards its end, Paul rounds off his preaching by leaving the Thessalonians with a series of brief exhortations. Among them, dropped in without any fuss or fanfare, is his simple command: "Pray without ceasing".

Many of the modern commentators airily wave this aside as a pious exaggeration, obviously not to be taken literally. After all, we can't possibly pray without ceasing, can we? So Paul can't really have meant that.

Against this view stands the witness of the Saints, who without question did achieve unceasing prayer. There is also the whole monastic tradition of the Church, in which Benedictine monks and oblates also stand. This bears witness to the desire of ordinary Christians, today no less than in the past, to take St. Paul's command very seriously indeed. And surely this makes good sense. If we have recognised God as the ever-present source of our being; if we have understood something of the depths of his love for us in Christ; if his Spirit truly fills our heart, then surely we will naturally want to abide in loving communion with him all the time: to pray, at least by intention, without ceasing.

Among the early desert Fathers, the text of 1 Thessalonians 5:17 was a ruling obsession. They renounced all things and lived in austere solitude in order to pursue this goal of ceaseless prayer. Yet the problem remained. How to keep up prayer when the mind is weary, or occupied? How can prayer go on without ceasing when we are forced to eat, or sleep?

One solution to this problem was proposed by a group known as the Messalians, or Euchites ("those who pray"). These very spiritual people thought that if you want to pray without ceasing, you can't do anything else. Work, they thought, was therefore beneath them: something only ordinary Christians need be involved in. But this directly contradicts both the example and teaching of St. Paul (1 Thess 2:9; 2 Thess 3:11). More than that: it is no part of the Gospel to seek an escape from the human condition; far less to divide the Church into first and second class Christians. The desert fathers might have been tempted by this solution, but they firmly rejected it as illusory.

A much better approach had been proposed already in the third century by Origen (c. 185-254). Although the works of this great Alexandrian theologian were later condemned as heretical, they continued to exercise

enormous influence on all orthodox spiritual writers, including the monks of the desert. Origen taught that the entire life of a Christian, taken as a whole, can be thought of as, and can truly be, a single great prayer. What we normally call prayer, then, would take its place as one important element in this: but equally important would be the acts of charity and virtue we perform for love of God and his Kingdom. So long as our life is truly a unity, then, and directed whole-heartedly towards God, we can indeed pray without ceasing. St. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) was to reach a similar conclusion. For him, desire is the key. Even at times when our conscious prayer flags or ceases, it is possible to retain an ardent desire for God in our hearts. This desire is itself a form of prayer. It will readily express itself in actual prayer whenever opportunity arises.

One of the most important writers in the whole monastic tradition is John Cassian (c. 360-c. 435), who transmitted the wisdom of the Egyptian desert to the Latin speaking West. In his Tenth Conference, Cassian gives a formula for the attainment of ceaseless prayer. He suggests constant repetition of the first verse of Psalm 69 (70): "O God, come to my aid, O Lord make haste to help me". But no less important for Cassian are the predispositions of the one who repeats this formula. The words will only be effective if the heart is pure: free especially from lust and anger; deeply rooted in humility, and absolutely detached from all that is not God. Clearly then, there is no easy way to come to constant prayer. True Christian prayer without ceasing is only possible for a Saint! Yet all of us are called precisely to become Saints!

And so we come to the Rule of St. Benedict (traditionally 480-550). At first sight, our own Holy Rule seems to have rather little to say about prayer. Not many people find the section dedicated explicitly to prayer, from chapters 8 to 20, very spiritually uplifting. A good deal of it is taken up with lists. It ends, perplexingly, with the command normally to keep prayer short (HR 20:4-5). So at first sight St. Benedict seems even to be the opposite of the desert Fathers. Their delightful freedom of spirit seems now to be converted into detailed regulations; their spontaneous individual prayer into the regimented discipline of the community.

But of course there is no contradiction at all between St. Benedict and the older monastic tradition. On the contrary. We could even say the Benedictine Rule is all about making the search for continuous prayer a practical reality. St. Benedict takes for granted the established teaching of the desert fathers, of St. Basil, John Cassian, and St. Augustine. What he offers in addition is a concrete, practical framework to help us integrate our prayer with our life. He wants his monks to be truly men burning with desire for God: men whose life is a true Christian unity. We gravely misunderstand him if we mistake his few words about the end, and his many words about the means, as some sort of loss of vision.

There are three practices in particular St. Benedict offers us, in common with the whole monastic tradition, as helps on our way towards ceaseless prayer. Each of them deserves a whole oblate letter: here I'll just briefly mention them.

First there is *lectio divina*. Normally speaking, to prevent the fire from going out, you have to put on fuel. We don't pray in a vacuum: our minds are filled with what we put in them. If we want to pray well, it is essential that in some form at least, we provide them with spiritual nourishment: ideally every single day. And *lectio divina* well done, especially when the text being read is God's own Word in holy Scripture, not only leads to prayer, but is itself a form of prayer.

Secondly there is silence. We have somehow to create space for God amid all the clutter of our busy lives. Prayer is a very delicate flame, easily snuffed out. Ceaseless prayer and ceaseless chatter are simply incompatible. In the monastery, then, we strive to create an environment, an atmosphere, in which it is easy and natural to pray all the time. An oblate will normally find silence much more difficult to come by. But there are often moments when we can choose silence if we will: it's good to be reminded that these can be precious opportunities if we will only take them up.

Finally, there is liturgical prayer, whether of the Mass or of the Divine Office. Nowadays we very easily set up a distinction, even an opposition, between personal prayer and liturgical prayer. St. Benedict assumes, by contrast, that the two forms of prayer will constantly interact. The liturgy gives expression, in a surpassingly excellent way, to the worship we want to give to God. On the other hand, the liturgy is itself a privileged form of *lectio divina*, offering constant inspiration and nourishment for our personal prayer and devotion.

In St. Benedict's day it was common monastic practice for the monks to prostrate in silence for a moment after each Psalm of the Office. In this way each made his own the prayer that had just been sung. It's probably this

custom in particular that Benedict refers to when he says prayer should be kept short. He does not mean by that we shouldn't pray much. He does mean our prayer should keep its onward momentum, and not get side-tracked into idle day dreaming!

We can glimpse something of St. Benedict's understanding of ceaseless prayer from his picture of the monk at the top (or is it the bottom?) of the Ladder of Humility in Chapter 7 of the Rule. Where does this ideal monk pray? Everywhere. When does he pray? All the time. How does he pray? With the utmost simplicity, and through every action of his life. And here also we see that the true goal of the monk is actually not ceaseless prayer after all, but what that prayer itself tends towards. What we really seek is the perfection of love. When our truly humble monk has reached this point, he still keeps the Rule. Indeed he loves it more and more. But now he has attained the state of perfect freedom, and of continuous, perfect joy. For that, no Rule can legislate: it is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit (HR 7:70).

Can an oblate who does not live in a monastery hope to attain the state of ceaseless prayer?

There is a story recorded of the first and greatest monk, St. Anthony of Egypt (c. 251-356). God revealed to him that he had an equal in holiness, and in purity of prayer. This person was not another monk at all, but a layman living in the midst of the bustling Metropolitan City. "Every day" Anthony heard, "this man sang the Sanctus with the angels".

St. Paul didn't write his command to pray ceaselessly only for monks. He addressed all the baptised. And of course he spoke from experience, for St. Paul himself never stepped out of prayer. Clearly, it is possible to be very very busy, to be weighed down with worries and sufferings, to engage constantly with other people, and still to pray without ceasing. Look at a man like Pope John Paul II. Surely for all the crushing weight of his duties and cares, he manifestly achieved this? Surely too, Dom Maurus, even in his confused old age, achieved it? What, then, about sleep? Each night our Compline hymn addresses this point. "Somno si dantur oculi, cor semper ad te vigilet" "If our eyes this night are given to sleep, at least let our hearts keep vigil before you".

The oblate may well yearn for the luxury permitted to the monks, of being given so many helps to pray all day every day. Pope St. Gregory the Great (c. 540-604) could never reconcile himself to the loss of that state of life he had known and loved so much for a few blissful years. Yet his path to holiness was through being Pope, not through being a monk. In a similar way, each oblate's path to holiness is through living as God's Providence has directed he or she should live. Where the connection with the monastery comes in is that the oblate definitely wants what the monks want, and looks to his monastic community as a reference point and guide. Belonging to this monastic family is a way of affirming that nothing whatever is dearer to me than Christ. The life and witness of the monks should help remind the oblate never to neglect prayer, whether personal or liturgical: to persevere, according to possibility, with *lectio divina*; to seek out times of silence, if only on rare occasions; at least to tend towards prayer without ceasing.

I'd like to end this letter by quoting a passage from that classic of 19th century Russian spirituality: *The Way of a Pilgrim*. The author of this delightful work was a layman, though one steeped in monastic literature. The formula of prayer he was taught was the "Jesus" prayer: Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner. Repeating this many thousands of times a day, he truly arrived at ceaseless prayer.

"After about three weeks I started to feel a pain in my heart and then a most pleasant warmth, consolation and calm. This so stirred me and made me all the more eager to practise the prayer with diligence that all my thoughts were occupied by it and I felt great joy. From this time on I began to feel various and periodical sensations in my heart and mind. At times it was as if something delightful was boiling in my heart; at other times there was such lightness, freedom and comfort in it that I was completely transformed and carried off into ecstasy. Sometimes I felt love for Jesus Christ and all of God's creation. Sometimes sweet tears of thanksgiving flowed on their own to the Lord for the mercy he showed me, a wretched sinner. Sometimes my hitherto foolish understanding became so clear that I easily understood and contemplated things I previously was unable even to think up. Sometimes the heart's warmth spilled over my entire being and I tenderly felt the omnipotent Godhead by me. I sensed within myself the greatest happiness from invoking the name of Jesus Christ, and I realised what he meant when he said, The Kingdom of God is within you. I grew so accustomed to this prayer of the heart that I practised it without ceasing. In the end I felt that the prayer arose and was uttered in my mind and heart by itself, without any effort on my part. Not only in a watchful state but also in my sleep the prayer carried

on in precisely the same way. Nothing interrupted it or stopped it for the briefest moment, no matter what I was doing. My soul thanked the Lord and my heart melted away in unceasing gladness."