



## "Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

MB Series No 4 - October 2009

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

## ***October November December 2009***

Monastic Voices:-

From Homily number Five on Leviticus by Origen.

[Origen, though not a monk, is one of those who was instrumental in enriching the Christian & therefore monastic understanding of Holy Scripture, the inspired Word of God.]

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons saying, 'This is the law [of sacrifice] for sin. In the place where the whole burnt offerings are killed, they will kill it because it is [a sacrifice] for sin before the Lord; these are very holy things. The priest who will offer it will eat it. It will be eaten in a holy place, in the court of the Tent of Witness. Everyone who touches its flesh will be sanctified. And if any of its blood is spilled upon his clothing, whatever is spilled on will be washed in a holy place, and the earthen vessel, in which it was boiled, will be broken; but if it was boiled in a copper vessel, it will be scoured and washed with water. Every male from the priests will eat it; it is most holy to God. And every sin offering, from which some of their blood was brought into the Tent of Witness for absolution in a holy place, will not be eaten but will be consumed by fire.'" Unless we take all these words in a sense other than the literal text shows, as we already said often, when they are read in the Church, they will present more an obstacle and ruin of the Christian religion than an exhortation and edification. But if it is discussed and found in what sense these things were said, and if they are turned worthily to God who is said to write these things, indeed he who hears these things will become a Jew, but not one "who is one in appearance" but "who in secret is a Jew," according to that distinction of a Jew which the Apostle makes, saying, "For not he who is a Jew in appearance, nor one in whom circumcision is manifest in the flesh, but he who is in secret a Jew by the circumcision of the heart, who is one by the spirit, not by the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God." Not understanding that difference between visible and invisible Jews, impious heretics flee, not only from these Scriptures but from God himself who gave the Law and the Holy Scriptures to men. They also fabricated for themselves another God besides that one "who created heaven and earth," when, in any case, the truth of the faith holds that there is one and the same God of the Law and the Gospels, Creator "of the visible and the invisible." For the visible holds the highest relationship with the invisible, as the Apostle says, "The invisible is perceived from the creation of the world through the things that were made." Therefore, just as "the visible and invisible," earth and heaven, soul and flesh, body and spirit have mutually this kinship and this world is a result of their union, so also we must believe that Holy Scripture results from the visible and the invisible just as from a body the letter, which is certainly something seen, and the soul, the understanding of which is understood within, and of the Spirit, according to that which some also hold in "heaven" as the Apostle said, "They serve as models and shadows of the celestial things."

This passage above is a footnote to the following passage from the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

'Read the Scripture within "the living Tradition of the whole Church". According to a saying of the Fathers, Sacred Scripture is written principally in the Church's heart rather than in documents and records, for the Church carries in her Tradition the living memorial of God's Word, and it is the Holy Spirit who gives her the spiritual interpretation of the Scripture ("according to the spiritual meaning which the Spirit grants to the

Church"). 114 Be attentive to the analogy of faith. By "analogy of faith" we mean the coherence of the truths of faith among themselves and within the whole plan of Revelation. The senses of Scripture 115 According to an ancient tradition, one can distinguish between two senses of Scripture: the literal and the spiritual, the latter being subdivided into the allegorical, moral and anagogical senses. The profound concordance of the four senses guarantees all its richness to the living reading of Scripture in the Church. 116 The literal sense is the meaning conveyed by the words of Scripture and discovered by exegesis, following the rules of sound interpretation: "All other senses of Sacred Scripture are based on the literal." 117 The spiritual sense. Thanks to the unity of God's plan, not only the text of Scripture but also the realities and events about which it speaks can be signs.<sup>1)</sup> . The allegorical sense. We can acquire a more profound understanding of events by recognizing their significance in Christ; thus the crossing of the Red Sea is a sign or type of Christ's victory and also of Christian Baptism. <sup>2)</sup> . The moral sense. The events reported in Scripture ought to lead us to act justly. As St. Paul says, they were written "for our instruction". <sup>3)</sup> . The anagogical sense (Greek: *anagoge*, "leading"). We can view realities and events in terms of their eternal significance, leading us toward our true homeland: thus (E.G.) the Church on earth is a sign of the heavenly Jerusalem.

All MONASTIC VOICES make use of these complementary layers of Scriptural meaning, as indeed does the whole Church.

From the Oblate Master's Desk:

The Sensus Plenior or Fuller Meaning ---- not only of Scripture but.... of the Rule too! Saint Benedict sets out in his Rule that entrance to the monastery must not be granted too easily, indeed the new entrant must be shown the "hard & difficult things"— "*dura et aspera*" at the outset. Experience shows that this process does not begin only at the monastery gate. The process begins prior to that( because God is the agent—but that is leaping ahead!)

Another tale from the archives of monastic memory...

We are reminded of a secular priest who after years of deliberation & consideration finally summoned the courage to formally apply to enter the monastery, indeed so long had his deliberation been that it was hard for either the monastery or his own bishop to take seriously his request. Therefore his request had been in the most formal, public and categorical terms to rule out all possibility that it might be considered merely tentative. It was a request for a serious trial in the monastery. That being so, two years had passed since the request was made & permission given in principle, but not in practice. Things had been put on "hold" for two years. Perhaps we can imagine how the priest felt when all his confrères were perhaps ceasing to look upon him as precisely that and most of the monks perhaps unacquainted with the reason for the hiatus assumed a final hesitation! He felt it keenly. For many months he had used a canonisation, prayer-card for Louis & Zélie Martin, daily, for their intercession that finally he might be permitted to try his vocation in the monastery, but so far without any outcome. There came a day when he thought that he must seek in prayer the answer to this strange quandary. He had in conscience come to the point of applying to the monastery & had been given formal permission, in principle, but not in practice, & so the predicament continued without resolution! How to seek the resolution in prayer? The answer came as an inspiration. He must do what Saint Thérèse had done when unsure of her way forward in vocation. He must pray & then take the Scriptures & open them as she had done ( more than once!) and the Lord would give the solution & the way forward. But no; a refinement came to his inspiration. Instead of the Scriptures he would use the Rule of St Benedict. He would pray & then open the Rule of St. Benedict in order to be guided to the way forward. So this is what he did. He prayed for a time and then took the Rule of Saint Benedict and then opening it with eyes closed and placing his forefinger on a part of a page he then opened his eyes. His eyes fell upon the end of chapter 43 entitled 'Tardiness at the Work of God or at Table.' There he read, "Moreover, if anyone is offered something by a superior and refuses it, then, if later he wants what he refused or anything else, he should receive nothing at all until he has made appropriate amends." This came as a great letdown! Clearly a part of the Rule about the apportionment of food & how one should comport oneself in its regard & not about entry to the monastery. Rather disheartened than anything else he was about to have a second attempt in the same manner when the thought struck him. " Wait a minute! Is that not the very case with me—not literally with food offered on a platter but with offers & opportunities offered & refused much earlier in his life. He remembered that much earlier in his life he had been in the position of already being an entrant to the monastery & spurned the opportunity not once but twice. He felt at once a thrill of encouragement of prayer answered and directly and to the point. The Rule gave his answer. He had spurned what the superior

had offered & now was not being offered anything again until he had “made appropriate amends” (God being the superior in this case!). He was firmly on track & within the dispensations of God’s Providence. Knowing this he was able to hold himself in confident patience until the day came when he was given permission after “dura et aspera”, the hard & difficult things, of these more than two years, yes he held himself in patience until given permission to come to the monastery & try his vocation. This little tale gives a prime example for we Oblates of how to apply the Rule to our daily lives. Here is a Rule that is apparently specifically tailor-made to apply to the needs of monks (& them only) in the details of their eating arrangements & their dispositions to be obedient in such little matters, in all meekness, to the expressed wishes of a superior made evident in an apparent casual offer.

But more is involved here than meets the eye. There is hidden selfishness in treating God’s Providence, for which the superior is the minister, with such cavalier rejection. Here is the application of this chapter of the Rule that the young priest learnt from prayerful opening of the Rule “pin in hand” so to speak! He learnt that a refusal of God’s offers in life in matters however big or small is a refusal of God’s grace—which God has to treat accordingly, in all fairness & love & mercy, to school us in His Service. “To him who has shall be given & to him who has not shall be taken away even that which he thought he had”! In this we see how all Oblates can apply even the most “obscure” or specialized, monastic chapter of the Rule to our everyday lives in the world if we pray about it & reflect upon it in the light of our life situation. In this the Rule exactly in its 73 chapters mirrors the “Rule” of the 73 books of the Scriptures just as the last chapter 73 of the Rule says. The Holy Spirit makes clear the relevant meaning of every part of the Rule in its fuller meaning –“Sensus Plenior” – just as is true of the Scriptures as we saw in the earlier part of this letter. In these layers of complementary meaning the Rule mirrors Scriptures themselves, just as we might suspect or even hope. Experience proves this to be the case, hence our practice of reading a set part of the Rule for that day just as we do in the Lectionary for Scripture. Something parallel & similar is true of the psalms. Hence the saying in chapter 73, “What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old & New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life?” (chapter 73 RB). As for the Rule, so for the Scriptures & so for the psalms, thanks be to God! How exciting!

Books & Media:-Only two will be briefly mentioned in this letter 1) “What is the Point of Being A Christian?” by Timothy Radcliffe of the Order of Preachers. Burns & Oates published 2005. Paperback. ISBN 13:978-0-8601-2369-9.

Full of stimulating “food for the journey” & spiritual insights that are programmatic. (“Why go to Church?” 2008 equally recommendable –all his books stimulating.) 2) “The Last Superstition” by Edward Feser –‘A refutation of the new atheism’ St Augustine Press, Indiana 2008 ISBN -10;1-58731-451-7 find in [www.staugustine.net](http://www.staugustine.net) The book is just what it says & is written by someone who is actually competent in philosophy unlike.....opponents!

Prayers & News starting with the most recent: Prayers for the Repose of the soul of Helen Grant, Oblate, who died on the 18th of November 2009, after a lifetime of illness, borne with cheerfulness & courage. Her presence at the entrance to the monastery will be missed. Like Fr. Camillus, she too, for many, was the face of Pluscarden & the first to be met here & the last to bid farewell. We give thanks & commend her to God.

We give thanks & pray for Br. Simon who has now begun his noviciate.

We pray for the Right Reverend Richard Moth who is now Bishop of the Forces ;for God’s blessing upon his episcopal pastorate. Thanksgiving for an memorable episcopal consecration at Westminster Cathedral. Thanksgiving for a memorable Music Symposium ( see website) & for a memorable Oblate Congress in Rome ( see report below).

Thanksgiving for 80th birthday of Abbot Aldhelm, Oblate Master of Prinknash Abbey.  
Prayers for:- New postulant Oblates:- Barbara Van Rooyen & Rev. Alasdair Nicoll.

New novice Oblates

Mgr Eugene Harkness, Edmund Young, Gillian Cockwill, & Bridget.....

New Oblates:- Dr Geoffrey Thérèse Dobson, Poppy Thérèse Sinclair, Mary Scholastica Macintyre, James John the Evangelist Cairns, Robert Bernard of Tiron Cantafio, Jacqueline John the Evangelist Heath-Anderson.-----Prayerful congratulations.

The sick including Canon Duncan Stone ( our oldest Oblate at ninety-two?) John Cairns, Ann McAllister, Alan James, Phyllis Spalding, Beth Fraser, Margaret Coll, Mary Buist, Peter Aitken, and..... many, many others & many struggling with almost insuperable-seeming difficulties & challenging situations.  
Other items & Forthcoming Events & Announcements.

## WORLD CONGRESS OF BENEDICTINE OBLATES 2009 by Margaret Coll, Oblate of Pluscarden Abbey, Scotland

I only heard of the World Benedictine Oblates Congress in Rome about 6 weeks before the start date and was delighted to be asked to attend by my Abbey. It was a memorable experience. Organisation: No one could fault Zina Neagle, our National Coordinator, on the organisation even when there had to be unexpected changes in speakers, timings etc of the various events. The UK and Ireland group had a 15minute meeting every day at which any changes were announced and minor problems attended to. The Salesianum was extremely suitable for the Congress. 162 rooms, beautiful grounds. In the auditorium the headphones and translations were first class. Food was typically Italian and plenty of it. I think a few waistlines expanded! We started at 7am and finished at 11pm each day so it was pretty hectic but every minute was well spent. In the early morning about a dozen peacocks wandered the grounds. There were oblates from 35 countries in attendance and I took the opportunity to meet at least one oblate from each country. Sometimes sign language was all that was possible but I found that successful. I did cope in a limited fashion with Italian and Polish....and I really mean limited! English was the most common language and the most used. I had a couple of walks during breaks with the 2 Vietnamese oblates. Amazingly, they had started through the visit of a New Zealand oblate and have approximately 17oblates. Their contact with the Abbey in Viet Nam is very limited because of the political situation . If they were attached to the Abbey and caused any trouble under the Communist regime, the Abbey could be closed. So both the oblates and the monks kept their distance. But the group met once a month and had prayers etc together. Because of the poverty and harsh regime they worked very unobtrusively to support their countrymen. They made a deep impression on me. And we talked of Cardinal Thuan to whose works I had been introduced at Pluscarden. I was a bit taken aback when they questioned me about my marriage...was my late husband a good man etc and then they told me how they used Holy Rule to solve any problems there were in marriages and how it worked. Liturgy:This was beautifully celebrated throughout each day and in a different language. After the first talk by Fr. Lawrence Freeman OSB, there were meditations held twice a day attended by an increasing number of people.

I asked about teaching this to children as I have 92 children here in Aberdeen, who say prayers but need to be helped to deepen their prayer life and was pleased to learn that there is also a programme for children which I hope to introduce in the parish here. The fact that different languages were used and we did have copies in each language, people were not too happy with the diversity and I think they will use Latin in future years. We were praying in other languages without understanding! Personally I liked the diversity! Talks:These were excellent. The following are not in any particular order as I lost my notebook and am commenting from memory...difficult when you are my age!

### 1. Mgr Andrew Tanya-anan on inter religious dialogue:

This was very interesting and he warned of getting into a debate on differences of theological opinions. Much better to just accept these differences and leave it to theologians to work out an answer. We should work and pray together and give a Christian witness together to the world.

### 2.Panel Discussion on ‘ religious challenges of today’:

Most of the interventions were by French and USA delegates and mostly directed to the Muslim representative. Personally I was disappointed at the lack of forgiveness regarding the Trappist monks in Algiers and terrorist attacks. They did not seem to recognise the difference between Sunni and Shi-ite Muslims. There are several different groups of Muslims!

Mother Maire Hicke OSB:’ Personal Relations and Communion‘:This was a thoroughly enjoyable talk of Mother’s experiences at Graz about 10 years ago and the value of praying together with other Christians. The witness that that, in itself, gives. There was also talk of forming a confederation of oblates. To my mind, this is only a good idea if the unity and diversity of the oblates worldwide are kept ie Unity of Spirit and diversity of ways to live the Rule. I would hate to see a set of statutes set down from on high which would interfere with the diversity of practice. Still, that is in the future.

#### Testimonies from Various Oblates:

Normally I do not like public testimonies and thought I would give this a miss. I am glad that I changed my mind! They were very moving. The African oblate spoke of the final profession of a monk where the candidate stretched out on the floor and was completely covered with palm leaves. Palms are a symbol of death in Nigeria and were used to show they were dead to their old life and alive in Christ. What a fantastic symbol for adult Baptism! I will look at the palm trees in my parish church with new eyes. The Vietnamese oblate spoke of the difficulties of living a Benedictine life under a Communist regime. They held monthly meetings which lasted for one day and supported each other. Life was extremely hard and they were very poor. They were not allowed medals so they made their own Benedictine ones and sold them in the Salesianum to raise money.

**Tours:** We visited Subiaco, Monte Cassino and the Abbey of St. Anselmo. These were relaxing breaks in an otherwise intensive programme. For everyone it was a very moving experience. We renewed our oblations at Monte Cassino and will forward the documents to our individual abbeys. We had a silent procession up the Aventine Hill which was very moving and I was conscious of a sense of stillness in a very noisy Roman suburb. This was followed by a beautiful meal in the grounds of the Abbey...no austerity in the food!.. and an excellent concert by the Abbot Primate [flute], two monks who 'talked' to each other via the piano and a Benedictine Sister who played the violin. The piano duets were, for me, a reflection in themselves on the journey through life or the love story between the soul and Christ.

**Summary :-** I learned a great deal and in some cases, realised that, in my own multicultural parish, we were really putting the Rule into practice but still had a long way to go; that the native parishioners in any parish must stop seeing themselves as the 'centre' of the church and that our way was not the only right way of doing things. The Parable of the Good Samaritan really needs to be put into practice. A great deal was learned in the conversations held during breaks. One suggestion which came up very often was that oblates need more spiritual direction from their Abbeys. Some felt that they were not moving at all. Some had no set meetings with their Abbeys and one suggestion was that one day each month could possibly be set aside for any oblate who could make the journey.

October 2009

-

Watch this space regarding virtual, inter-Oblate meetings:

a path forward for the remote or the elderly or infirm in attending meetings through the airwaves, meeting together virtually! This is now a present reality! One of our Oblates is sampling this for us.

**A DISTANCE LEARNING COURSE--'MONASTIC SPIRITUALITY IN EVERYDAY CHRISTIAN LIVING'**

A formation course in Monastic Spirituality. Certificate & Honours Award from MONOS,. All information:- MONOS, St Joseph's, Oaks in Charnwood, Abbey Road, Coalville, Leicestershire, LE67 4UA, England. E ; [info@monos.org.uk](mailto:info@monos.org.uk) W: [www.monos.org.uk](http://www.monos.org.uk) Tel: +44(0)1509 506656

Oblate Weekend Friday, July 30 2010 to Monday th ,August 2nd 2010. Thankyou for your enthusiastic uptake on this.

1) The two guesthouses of the monastery are now fully booked up.

2) For those staying at B&B or hotels (as a result) I am trying to enclose a list of those available in Elgin

3) For those who " have no money " ( have no money ). I have especially thought of you & booked the Pluscarden Village hall & the Milton Duff Village hall-- one for men & one for women. Simply bring inflatable mattress or camp-bed & sleeping-bag. It is the height of summer after all! Long nights & sun splitting the trees! Both have good kitchens & toilets & are quite suitable. There could be one for "Spartan" Men & one for "Spartan" women.\*\*\*\*\* Please let me know right away if you are taking up this option to the expense of hotel or B&B.\*\*\*\*\* I cannot keep a hold of the two halls indefinitely if there are no takers. It's quite an exciting & very monastic summer option!. I will be creating a list of those staying at the halls so please send in your name right away.

**CHRISTMAS:-** Thankyou, thankyou, so many of you who have formally renewed your Oblations either here at

the Abbey ( twenty were here on the 21st November) or through your written renewals & other communications. Thankyou ,too , so many who have made gifts & contributions. If I have not thanked you personally please accept this big “Thankyou!” now. Thankyou ,too, for all your Christmas greetings received & also on their way. Thankyou, Thankyou, all of you for your prayers & support throughout this year, my first as Oblate Master.

Advent & Christmas are intimately linked as indeed are Christmas & Easter! Christmas is for the Old ( how often I’ve heard “ It’s just for the young!!”) who have entered their Winter—the present of the joy of New Life & Hope. Easter is for the young whose full spiritual life is yet to come to full birth– they have yet to “ go out , go out full of tears” to receive their sheaves through the reaper of the Cross.” Our end is in our beginning”–“The Word was made flesh & dwelt amongst us.”

May God Bless you.  
Yours in Christ, Our Lady & S.P.N.B.,

Fr. Martin O.S.B.  
Oblate Master

PAX