



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

MB Series No 6 - April may June 2010

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

Monastic Voices

(Many thanks to Anna Silvas for allowing use of her translation of the Asketikon of St. Basil) :- “ Each of the arts is bestowed on us by God to supply for the infirmity of nature. We have, for example, agriculture, because what sprouts of itself from the earth is not sufficient to relieve our needs; and weaving, because we have urgent need of covering, both with regard to decency and the harm that comes from the weather; and the same with building. And so it is with the medical art too. Since our body is susceptible to conditions and vulnerable to various kinds of harm, some attacking it from without and some arising from within from foods, and it is distressed either by excess or deficiency, the medical art is permitted us by God who orders our whole life, as a pattern for the healing of the soul, that we may be advised to remove what is in excess or to make up what is lacking. In the same way that, if we were still in the paradise of delight, we would have no need of the cares and toils of agriculture, so too, if we had the immunity from disease bestowed at our creation before the Fall we would have no need of the medical art for our relief. But after we were exiled to this place and we heard the words: You shall eat your bread in the sweat of your brow (Gen. 3: 19), through long experience and painful toil upon the earth we devised the art of agriculture to relieve the ills which came of the curse, God himself having bestowed the understanding and apprehension of this art. So too, when we were ordained to return again to the earth from which we had been taken (cf. Gen. 3: 19) and were yoked to the painful flesh, destined to corruption because of sin, and for the same reason subjected to these diseases, we were also provided the help that is given the sick-in some measure at least-by the medical art. forth by the will of the Creator with a view to our benefit. So the nature that is in roots, flowers, leaves, fruits, or juices, or whatever is found in metals or in the sea that has properties beneficial to the body, is like the nature found in what we eat and drink. Yet whatever requires contrivance and fuss and involves much commotion and, as it were, turns our whole life into one long provision for the flesh (Rom. 13: 14), should be avoided by Christians. Rather, care should be taken to use the art, if there is need, in such away that we do not invest in it the whole cause of our health or sickness, but admit the use of its remedies as ordered to the glory of God and as a pattern for the care of souls. And when we are deprived of medical assistance, let us not put all hope of relief from our distresses in this art, but instead, know that he will not allow us to be tempted above what we are able to bear (I Cor. 10: 13). For just as in those days the Lord on one occasion made clay and anointed and gave orders to wash in Siloam (cf. John 9: 6-7) and on another was content with a simple command, saying, I will, be clean (Matt. 8: 3), while he left still others to struggle in their afflictions, that they might be better proved by their trials, so it is now with us..... But we receive with thanksgiving the grace of healing that is given us, whether it be by oil and wine as in the case of the one who fell among robbers (cf. Luke 10: 34), or by figs, as in the case of Hezekiah. And it will make no difference to us whether the cure from God comes to us invisibly or through some bodily means, " which often leads us to a keener perception of the Lord's grace..... God provides an example to others who will not endure any hardship at all. Such was Lazarus, who, though oppressed by so many wounds, is nowhere recorded to have asked anything of the rich man or to have complained of his plight. On this account he attained to rest in the bosom of Abraham, as one who during his life had accepted his misfortunes (cf. Luke 16: 20-5).

From The Oblate Master's Desk

The Infirm

"Or, what book of the holy Catholic Fathers does not loudly proclaim how we may go straight to our Creator? So, too, the conferences of the Fathers, and their institutes and lives, and the rule of our holy Father, Basil -- what are they but the monuments of the virtues of exemplary and obedient monks?" RB xxxciii. And so it is that with the monastic voice of this quarter when we look at infirmity we look first to our "holy Father, Basil" as a prelude to our Holy Father St. Benedict as we ourselves consider infirmity. RB xxxvi "For the Abbot must know that he has taken upon himself the care of infirm souls, not a despotism over the strong....": Of the Sick Brethren Before and above all things, care must be taken of the sick, that they be served in very truth as Christ is served; because He has said, "I was sick and you visited Me" (Mt 25:36). And "As long as you did it to one of these My least brethren, you did it to Me" (Mt 25:40). But let the sick themselves also consider that they are served for the honour of God, and let them not grieve their brethren who serve them by unnecessary demands. These must, however, be patiently borne with, because from such as these a more bountiful reward is gained. Let the Abbot's greatest concern; therefore, be that they suffer no neglect. Let a cell be set apart for the sick brethren, and a God-fearing, diligent, and careful attendant be appointed to serve them. Let the use of the bath be offered to the sick as often as it is useful, but let it be granted more rarely to the healthy and especially the young. Thus also let the use of meat be granted to the sick and to the very weak for their recovery. But when they have been restored let them all abstain from meat in the usual manner. But let the Abbot exercise the utmost care that the sick are not neglected by the Cellarer or the attendants, because whatever his disciples do amiss falls back on him."

Notice first that St Benedict says of the Abbot that he has taken upon himself the care of infirm souls—that's the whole lot of us bar none! So this Oblate Letter is for all of us! We remember how Jean Vanier, architect of "L'Arche" communities around the world, depicts everyone as being handicapped (infirm), whether physically, intellectually, emotionally, or spiritually, or usually a combination of all of these at the same time.

Fr. Hugh Benson, convert Anglican , religious novelist of the turn of last century, always pushed himself so hard that he constantly lived on the edge until , in his forties, in 1904 he went over the edge just as many of his young contemporaries were going " over the top "--- & over the edge. This is not from one of his novels (which are all masterpieces on infirmity) but an account by a friend of how he himself went beyond that edge:-His strength appeared good, but it was only too evident that the terrible strain on the heart from pneumonia was beginning to tell. Later on, in the evening, for the first time, I abandoned hope. He spoke continuously to me of his friends, and gave me his many messages. At one o'clock on Monday morning, having left him for a short time, I was hastily summoned by the nurse, at his request. Entering the sick room, I saw that the last call had come. He told me so himself, with the words, " God's will be done." He bade me summon his brother, who was in the adjoining apartment. The prayers for the dying were recited, and again he joined in the responses, clearly and distinctly. Once, when I paused, he

bade me in God's name to go on. He stopped the prayers twice or thrice to give some instructions to his brother. He asked once for guidance as to the right attitude towards death. Once, as I paused, he uttered the prayer, " Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, I give you my heart and my soul," and joined with us in its completion. Conscious almost to the last moment, seemingly without pain, he breathed forth his soul without struggle at 1.30 A.M. on Monday morning. With his eyes fixed on the priest he died; it was just as if he had gone to sleep. Who but a faithful priest could express for us the final solitude, which the true mystic is ever prepared for ;-"In such an hour ,Of visitation from the living God, Sound was there none, nor any sense of joy; Thought was not, with enjoyment it expired."?

----There is something very matter of fact about this account of this warrior of another kind going over the top of the bunker but an encompassing sense of faith, hope & the all-encompassing God in Whom we " live & move & have our being. This mystical silence of the presence of Christ in & around the sick so that they are a presence of Christ is central in the Rule. Christ's silent presence is nowhere moreso in the monastery than in the infirm & they are as it were acting in persona Christi because they are to remember that they are served out of reverence for Christ! They are another Tabernacle of his presence. Silence and the voice of the liturgy are the two entries into the heart & soul of the monk & of the whole monastic community.

There is a silence that is suffering and the Prologue reminds us that this kind of silence brings us closer to Christ. Both the sick & those who tend them are caught up into this.

Our Holy Father Pope Benedict in the book "The God of Jesus Christ" reminds us of the silence at the core of Job's suffering which discovers the hidden God in Silence, "But nor has he (GOD) been completely silent. It is true that his final word has not yet been spoken; in the Resurrection of Jesus, it has only begun. And this is always a word that demands not only man's understanding, but also his heart. This is how it begins with Job:

God intervenes in the debate, and he does not take the side of those who are defending him. He rejects as a blasphemy the apologia that makes him the cruel executioner of the petty-minded calculations of a quid pro quo righteousness. It is not the cries of Job that have offended God, but rather the precision of those who dare to present a terrible retributive mechanism as the face of God. And yet, nothing is explained to Job. He is only made aware of his littleness, of the poverty of the perspective from which he looks at the world. He learns to be still, to be silent, to hope. His heart is widened-and that is all. This humble act of falling silent as the first step of wisdom should concern us, too. It is a striking fact that the accusation against God hardly ever comes from the lips of those who suffer in this world. It is almost always pronounced by the well-fed onlookers, who themselves have never suffered. In this world, the hymn of God's praise ascends from the furnaces of those who suffer: the story of the three young men in the fiery furnace contains a deeper truth than all the learned treatises. The reply to Job is only a beginning, a groping anticipation of the answer that God gives with the action of his own Son in the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Here too, there is nothing that can be added and checked. God's answer is not an explanation but an action. The answer is a sharing in suffering-not as a mere feeling....”---“the hymn of God's praise ascends from the furnaces of those who suffer”. Surely this is a new concept of monasticism which puts the sick at the centre of the liturgical stage. We can never chant the canticles from Daniel the same way again.

I end with a piece from a book I will go on to recommend; the journal of a dying seminarian that is totally uplifting for the living & the dying & we are all both. I will go on to recommend “Tears Before Dawn”. It begins with this hope-charged, iconically symbolic account from the man's earlier youth that proves to be the framing interpretation of his life and of our dependence one on the other in our seeking God & praising God. We depend on each other as St. Benedict reminds us, the firm & the infirm & Christ aligns Himself with the latter—on the Cross. Archbishop Vincent Nicholls encouraged his seminarian to write & we thank him:- “In February 1999, 'The Famous Five' undertook a ridiculous challenge to climb 931 metres up Skiddaw, near Keswick, in the Cumbrian mountains (Lake District), at night! The idea was to arrive at the summit in time for sunrise, at which time we would sing God's praise and say Morning Prayer. As with most adventures things didn't go quite according to plan. The wind was exceptionally fierce and John, Katy, Roger, Thanh and myself made the mistake of challenging it. The story is recounted in the Oscotian 1999 edition, the title being 'Not Quite the Spiritual Journey We Had Expected'. At the top we had all linked arms in an attempt to plod together to the summit. Katy was flapping about like a kite between me and John as she was so light; we clung on to her tightly as a gust would have sent her up and away like leaves on a windy day. On the plateau we were totally unprotected from the raw power and severity of the wind at its strongest. We leant against it horizontal, in fact sliding on the stony surface of the mountain top. We had reached our limit; the roofless igloo-type shelters which existed somewhere on the plateau were too far away by a matter of a few yards, although in the dark and mist we could not see them. We lay on the floor of the plateau on top of the mountain, the wind eager to prise us up off the floor and away into the black abyss. I clung on to Katy. "You're not going anywhere," I shouted as the wind's efforts to blow her away frightened her. Katy's outer hood shot off her head like a bullet from a gun and I tried to protect her remaining woolly hat from completely exposing her to the biting wind. I began to pray the Hail Mary, not wanting to move in case I broke the inertia which was stopping us being swept away. Within a couple of minutes the darkness gave way to a glimmer of light. The sun had risen. John, Roger and Thanh had crawled a little way off the summit, and as the wind had given its worst, I tentatively wriggled off the summit of the mountain, clinging on to Katy. We regrouped and steadily made our way to the safety of the fence surrounding the base of the mountain top. As we sat in the shelter, behind a sub peak, I got out my Morning and Evening Prayer Book and we read: "I will praise you, Lord, you have rescued me..." Psalm 29. We laughed at how appropriate the psalm was and out of a certain degree of relief !Little did I know, at that time, how significant a part of my prayer that psalm would become.”

Books

“Tears at Night Joy at Dawn” Journal of a dying seminarian, by Andrew Robinson.£5.99. ISBN 0-9540335-2-3-- A joyful book that is uplifting & makes one relish the psalms.

“The Asketikon of St. Basil the Great.” By Anna Silvas ISBN 0-19-927351-0 Where better to follow up on St Benedict's advice in chapter 73 about following on a bit farther (with the help of your local library if necessary).

“The God of Jesus Christ”, Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict xvi).-Meditations on the Triune God. Spiritual food and accessible spirituality & theology. ISBN 978-1-58617-184-1. About \$9 or equivalent paperback.

“A Fine-Tuned Universe” by Alister E McGrath ISBN 978-0-664-23310-5 —The quest for God in Science & Theology. Do I give the show away if give the conclusion?!— “Natural Theology, it seems, is back in fashion.

This book offers a modest contribution to its further development. Yet there is much more that needs to be done to continue its rehabilitation & extend its horizons.”

Do visit or re-visit any of the works of (Robert) Hugh Benson convert son of an Archbishop of Canterbury. He straddles the historical novel & science fiction & several other genres. Why not start with “The Dawn of All”—science fiction, religion, psychological novel all in one; what it’s like to suffer a stroke—from the inside! £7.99

Like all his books—edifying. Amazing!

News, Prayer Intentions & Events

Our own monastic noviciate in formation & new vocations of young men to Pluscarden, St Mary’s Petersham & St. Scholastica’s and to Kristo Buase—We were pleased to have Br. Antony from KB with us & expect his return for farther juniorate studies. Two Vietnamese priests of our order are coming here soon for two years. Please pray for all of these. Received into the Church:-Henry Logan,(postulant Oblate, now novice Oblate). Lorn MacIntyre, husband of Mary MacIntyre,(Oblate).Deaths:- Canon Duncan Stone .RIP-Our oldest Oblate who was heading for his diamond Jubilee.(as a secular priest, before entry to the monastery, Fr. Martin was his assistant for three years, three happy years!).Kevin Vincent O’Brien died at the end of 2009, RIP.. Oblations:- Edmund Keith Andrew Young, Patricia Thérèse Fernandez. Noviciate:- Dr. Martin Flynn, Barbara Van Rooyen, Fiona Sellar. Postulants:-Rev Christopher Ketley, Robert James Clark. The sick include James Cairns, Gail Schmitz, Norah Napiontek, Beth Fraser & her husband Chris, Margaret Coll & Zina Neagle, & many others. Events: - Past: - Fr. Peter Gallagher S.J. made “Religion & Ethics” & the philosophy thereof accessible & enjoyable & opened up fruitful debate in the annual Pentecost Lectures.

Future:-Sunday 27th June is the scheduled date for the first Diocesan Pilgrimage. Mass will begin at 3pm, and priests will be available for confession from lunchtime onwards. There will also be silent adoration of the Blessed Sacrament in the Lady Chapel. This year there should be several exhibitions of art works by the monks Fr. Matthew Tylor, & Br Finbar Boyle—see information on website elsewhere. The New Shop which is almost there will have a balcony to show artworks!

Oblate Weekend July30th to August the 2nd 2010. If you are still stuck for accommodation do let me know. Not to be missed.

Every blessing, Love & prayers

Fr. Martin PAX

Oblate Weekend Friday July 30th to Monday August 2nd 2010

Pluscarden Abbey Oblates

This is a weekend mainly for our own Oblates. “Charity begins at home” & so this first official venture by way of a 2010 meeting — a synaxis—is mainly for Pluscarden Oblates; that spiritual family of this Abbey community with their Abbot, Abbot Hugh. Therefore of the official programme his is the first live(!) introductory talk on day two of the programme. The aim is twofold:- 1) For our Oblate brethren to renew their spiritual bond at its source here at the monastery (under God), also with one another, & still have considerable portions of time simply experiencing the monastery’s normal life & liturgy even over a brief weekend & 2) To receive some special input from brethren near & far, monks & oblates.Each element of the special input is independent & “free-standing”, the only stipulation having been that it be informative or edifying (or both!). Please God that may be so.

The Programme

Friday *note—non-resident attendees will need to make their own provision for Friday supper & for breakfast on Saturday, Sunday & Monday. There are buffet meals for lunch & supper on Saturday & Sunday for all.

Please fill in & send the chit for catering numbers.

Arrival of residents before Vespers

Vespers 6.00pm

Supper for residents 7.00pm (at St. Scholastica's as they decide)

Compline 8.00pm

Talk 8.30pm (marquee)

DVD- Virtual presence of the Abbot Visitor of the English Province of the Subiaco Congregation , Fr. Anselm Atkinson, Superior of St. Mary's Monastery, Petersham, Massachusetts, USA, & Monk of Pluscarden Abbey, giving a talk specially made for us for the beginning of our Oblate Weekend.

Repose 9.20pm.

Saturday 31st July, St Ignatius Loyola

Vigils 4.45am

Lauds circa 5.40am

Prime circa 6.45am

Terce 8.45am

Mass 9.00am

Coffee 10.00am (marquee)

Fr Abbot : Keynote Address 10.30am (marquee)

Sext 12.35pm

Lunch 12.45pm (marquee)

None 2.15pm

Talk from the Cellarer on "Monastic Work" 2.30pm (marquee)

Tea 3.45pm

Tea until Vespers Free

Vespers 6.00pm

Supper 6.45pm (marquee)

Compline 8.00pm

CD/DVD/Slides & talk from Fr Giles Conacher

Superior of Kristo Buase 8.30pm (marquee)

Repose circa 9.20pm

Sunday 1st August Eighteenth Sunday of the year

Vigils 4.45am

Lauds circa 6.00am

Prime 7.30am

Breakfast after Prime

Terce 9.05am

Mass 10.00am

Talk on the Liturgy of the Day Fr. Benedict Hardy, Emeritus Oblate Master,
11.30am (marquee)

Sext 12.35pm

Lunch 12.45pm (marquee)

Talk from Fr Stuart Chalmers Oblate & Doctor, on Conscience.
2.00pm (marquee)

None 3.35pm

Tea after None (marquee)

Confessions 4.00pm (parlours 2-4 St Benedict's)

Vespers 5.30pm

Supper 6.45pm (marquee)

Compline 8.00pm

DVD 8.30pm (marquee) Gabrielle Heitfeld-Panther, German Cistercian Oblate& friend of Pluscarden. Specially made for us.

Repose 9.30pm circa

Monday 2nd of August Feria

Vigils 4.45am

Lauds circa 5.40AM

Prime 7.00am circa (30"after end of Lauds)

Breakfast after Prime

Terce 8.45am

Mass 9.00am

Marking the formal conclusion of the Oblate weekend with sermon from the Oblate Master & renewal of Oblation during Mass.

For those who extend their Oblate spiritual retreat/weekend to three days by arriving sooner or departing later there may be a plenary indulgence for such a three day spiritual retreat, under the usual conditions.

Coffee & Farewells 10.00am