



### "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).

"The lifestyle of a monk should always have about it a Lenten character. However, since few have the strength for this, we urge all together during these days of lent to keep their manner of life most pure, and to wash away during this holy season the negligences of other times. This we can do in a fitting manner by refraining from all vices, and by devoting ourselves to prayer with tears, to reading and compunction of heart, and to the labour of abstinence. Therefore during these days we should add something to the usual measure of our service in the form of private prayers and abstinence from food and drink. In this way each one will have something above the assigned measure to offer God of his own free will with the joy of the Holy Spirit (1 Thess 1:6). In other words, let each one deny his body some food, drink, sleep, chatter, and idle jesting; and let him look forward to holy Easter with the joy of spiritual desire (cf. Lk 22:15). However: everyone should propose to his Abbot what he intends to do, so that it can be done with his prayer and approval. For whatever is done without the permission of the spiritual father will be counted as presumption and vainglory, not deserving a reward. Therefore everything should be done with the Abbot's approval."

## Monastic Voices

"Although there is no time which is not filled with divine gifts, and although access to the mercy of God is always provided for us through his grace, yet now, in the time of the sacred and great Fast, all ought to bend their whole attention, with particular earnestness, to making progress in their spiritual life, and to living out their faith with the utmost boldness. For that Day on which we were redeemed is approaching again. It urges us to take very seriously all the duties of our religion: for the mystery of the Lord's passion, supreme above all other mysteries, should only be celebrated by those who have been purified in body and soul. You might think that such great mysteries would require unceasing devotion and continual reverence, so that we would abide always in God's sight in as worthy a state as that we hope to attain on the very Day of the Paschal feast. But few have the strength for this. Very austere observance inevitably tends to be weakened through the frailty of the flesh; the cares of this life necessarily creep into the various actions of our day; and so even the most religious hearts become tarnished through contact with the dust of this world. And so by divine institution, and for our great health, healing and benefit, a communal discipline lasting Forty Days has been provided. It exists in order to help restore us to our baptismal purity. In this time, then, we strive to redeem the faults of other times through various devout acts, and as it were to burn off their impurities by means of chaste fasting. Since none of us, dearly beloved, is so perfect and so holy that he cannot become more perfect and more holy, let us all at this time, driven by holy desire, and building on what we have already achieved, run toward new heights of virtue. To the measure of our habitual good deeds, then, let us add something that really ought to have been there all the time.

What is the chief purpose of our fast? Certainly not mere abstinence from food. It is useless to deprive the body of nourishment, if we do not at the same time restrain our mind from evil thoughts and our tongue from slander. Our discipline regarding food is intended to help us restrain all our disordered desires. So lent is a time also for putting aside grievances, overlooking insults, and forgetting injuries. And in these holy days above all, we strive to deserve the mercy of God by our works of mercy. When the hungry are fed, the naked clothed, the sick cared

for, then God is using our hands to bring His own help, and our kindness to convey His own gifts to those who need them.

Those who fast from their vices during lent are led by their self restraint, which is the mother of all virtues, to experience joys beyond the power of language to express. There is in store for God's people an abundance of spiritual feasting and chaste delights which they rightly and laudably seek out and desire. For by the taste of the heart we can savour the sweetness of God's mercy and goodness, and we can drink deep of those heavenly joys which no satiety can ever diminish. Carried away, then, by admiration of eternal things, we find that mere temporal goods no longer hold any attraction for us. Kindled by the fire of God's love, we find the Holy Spirit at a stroke driving out the darkness from our hearts, and burning away our sin: just as the light changes night into day, and the sun replaces cold with warmth. The fervent practice of religious people should never therefore be gloomy. Let there then be no hint of murmuring and complaint, among those to whom the consolations of heavenly joys are never lacking. On the other hand, let all during these days be particularly wary of our enemy the devil. In his hatred for all spiritual undertakings, he tries to twist good deeds into occasions of pride. He can lay snares for a devout person even in his very acts of devotion, if ambition, self exaltation and desire for praise are allowed to enter in." From the Lenten homilies of Pope Saint Leo the Great, given in Rome between the years 441 and 458 A.D.

Dear oblates and friends,

The principal source and inspiration behind Chapter 49 of the Holy Rule is the collection of lenten homilies of Pope St. Leo the Great. These homilies were addressed to all Christians. It is remarkable that St. Benedict has chosen to draw from them, rather than from the specifically monastic tradition. But in doing so he has offered us a condensed sample of Benedictine wisdom at its best. Here we find all his usual hallmarks: moderation, humanity, common sense; clear practical guidance on how to become a better disciple of Jesus Christ. St. Benedict challenges all, but does not exclude the weak. He appeals to the individual, but upholds a strong community observance. He exhorts forcefully, yet remains gentle and serene. He uses few words, but his little Chapter is full of principles of the greatest significance. Written for monks nearly fifteen centuries ago, it retains for any Christian today its immediate freshness and relevance. It can profitably be pondered and applied by any of us, whether modern monks or modern oblates.

For St. Benedict, St. Leo and all the Church Fathers, Lenten observance is the standard for normal Christian living. Lent symbolises what is the reality of our lives here on earth. We are all sinners, wandering, as it were, in the wilderness, making our laborious way towards the Promised Land. Our redemption from the land of bondage, understood as enslavement to the law of sin and death, is only through the cross of Christ. Jesus came to offer us a share in His own unimagined fullness of life: but He asks us first to share in His suffering and death (cf. e.g. Lk 9:23). So while we are on this pilgrim journey we are not to be too comfortable, too much at home. All things here will pass away: only heaven is eternal. We need therefore to be detached from the things that weigh us down. We know that the world, the flesh and the devil have the capacity to lead us astray, even preventing our entry into eternal joy. So we need to show by symbolic action that we really do prefer nothing whatever to Christ (HR 72:11); that we do indeed love Him above all things, and truly live according to His Spirit.

St. Leo, typically, ascribes the origin of lent to Christ Himself. By His 40 days' fast in the wilderness, Jesus set an example and provided a model which His disciples would naturally want to follow. More than that: when the Church celebrates the mysteries of Christ's human life in her ritual and worship, she makes them present, enters into them, participates in their fruit. Leo loves to explore how the actions and words of Jesus were designed for our good. So he views lent entirely positively. It is a penitential season, to be sure, but "for our health, healing and benefit".

In following St. Leo here, St. Benedict implicitly rejects the approach to lent taken by the Rule of the Master. The anonymous "Master", whose Rule was the principal source for Benedict's own earlier chapters, was an ardent advocate of penance and fasting: but he had a very weak understanding of human nature. Lent seems to be for him an endurance test. Those who cannot keep up with the heroic feats of the strong are worthy only of contempt. The idea of lent as an opportunity for each monk to make spiritual progress in his own way is entirely lacking. The Master's ideal Abbot is a hard man who must watch his monks with particular vigilance in lent to prevent any backsliding. St. Benedict's Abbot also is required to maintain the regular discipline. But he is above all the "spiritual father" of the community, whose main task is to inspire and encourage his brethren, helping them to be ever more open to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Underneath these differences of approach lies I think a different understanding of Christ's Kingdom. For the Master, Heaven is all in the future. Suffering and

hardship now, he seems to say: rewards and rejoicing later. But this is poor theology. Christ's Kingdom, we know, is already present, already experienced, already possessed: though not yet perfectly. It is given us whenever and in so far as we live the Beatitudes (Mt 5:3-12).

So St. Benedict speaks of spiritual joy precisely here, in his chapter on lent. Normally quite reserved in such matters, he mentions joy also when describing the fourth step of humility, which is about patient endurance amid trials (HR 7:39). His mention of cheerfulness comes in the Chapter on obedience, in the context of temptations to grumble (HR 5:16). So, as one commentator justly remarks: a Benedictine lent is marked by less mirth, but more joy; less fraternal chatter, but more fraternal charity!

I must say that this has always been my own experience. Looked at externally, a monastic lent can indeed seem a little grim: one is often enough cold, tired and hungry! But things seem to come together in lent: to be as they should be. Here what one came to the monastery to find seems most readily available. The silence of the house is deeper; there is more time for prayer and spiritual reading; the lenten liturgy is particularly rich and evocative. There is too a wonderful sense of progress, as each passing day leads us ever closer to the climax which is Holy Week and Easter, the centre of our year and of our faith. If this is the time for individual effort, it is also the time one particularly feels the strength of the fraternal battle line (HR 1:4). Everyone is pulling together in the same direction; everyone is engaged in the same struggle to improve somehow the quality of his spiritual life. St. Leo, with the whole tradition, warns that we are most likely to meet the devil in lent, and that the encounter will not be pleasant. I don't want in any way to under-value the seriousness of this warning. Nevertheless, for me lent has always been above all a happy time.

A Pluscarden lent begins with a spiritual conference by Fr. Abbot on Ash Wednesday. The brethren then hand in their written resolutions for his approval. We use a set formula, with resolutions coming under three heads: prayer, mortification, regular observance. In accordance with Chapter 48 of the Holy Rule, each monk then receives a book from the library. Possibly in St. Benedict's time, this would have been a book, or section, from the Bible. Today it could be anything the Abbot considers appropriate or suitable or challenging in some way for each individual. Quite often it will be a book one would be rather unlikely to read without such prompting. Sometimes this results in a marvellous discovery. Sometimes it becomes a penitential slog, as one struggles to get through a text one finds quite boring!

Then lent gets under way, and it's impossible in the monastery not to be constantly aware of it. In Church, the organ is silent, and the liturgical colours are purple. The liturgy is woven through with lenten hymns, prayers, chants, readings, responsories. The normally ubiquitous cry "Alleluia!" is never heard. In the refectory, quite apart from each one's own private resolution, there is a noticeable change of fare. On Wednesdays and Fridays, in particular, in place of what is normally the main meal, a light lunch of bread and soup is served. On four days of the week there is no recreation. Each day the community makes the Stations of the Cross in common. None of this could be called severe asceticism in any sense. And indeed it is not supposed to be difficult or burdensome: only some concrete and commonly achievable addition to the measure of our service (HR 49:5,6).

Underneath all this is the communal effort to wash away negligences, and temper vices. "Negligence" is St. Benedict's pet hate. It is the insidious spirit of slackness: laziness of mind and body; the gradual downward slide into worldly ways and attitudes. Through negligence, our spiritual desire becomes gradually blunted, until it almost disappears. Against it Benedict sets prayer with tears, reading and compunction of heart. We find these appearing in the Rule also among the tools of good works (HR 4:55-57); and as marks of monastic prayer (HR 20:3, 52:4). They are closely linked with each other. Compunction of heart will normally arise from reading and prayer: and the experience of compunction will motivate us to be faithful to our prayer and reading. "Compunction" is one of the key terms of monastic literature. Negatively it refers to a profound realisation of the gravity and consequence of my sin. Positively, it means that surge of desire and love for God, for Christ, for heavenly things that fills us with sweet joy, and stirs us to conversion. In inviting us to compunction, St. Benedict is inviting us not to rest content with saying prayers, but to enter into deep prayer: the prayer of silence and love; that unimpeded encounter with God which can change our lives.

What St. Benedict understands by lenten fasting is set out in his Chapter 41. In lent, his monks are to eat only once a day, and that towards evening. We can assume that this single meal would have been of wholesome quality and ample quantity; though doubtless lacking not only meat and alcohol but also all dairy products. It would really have been a single meal though. Benedict knew nothing of breakfast, or mid-morning coffee or afternoon tea. This all sounds terribly austere to us. Certainly no Benedictine monastery in the world today puts it literally into practice. But I suspect St. Benedict's contemporaries would have thought it exceedingly

moderate, and scarcely beyond what was expected of every Christian. Certainly St. Leo assumes that all his hearers will practise real fasting during lent.

One famous commentator on the Rule has personally practised the Benedictine fast daily over many years, and written a book about it. Dom Adalbert de Vogüé is a French monk who lives as a solitary in the grounds of his monastery. His book, *To love fasting* (ET 1989), describes how his experience of the single daily evening meal has been wholly positive. Having little sympathy with the penitential spirit of other eras, he nevertheless truly loves fasting (cf. HR 4:13). Once started, he quickly found the practice became a matter of habit and routine; not difficult at all. And from the beginning he found this fast wonderfully conducive to prayer, to clarity of mind and physical well-being. It gives him, he insists, a sense of liberation, even sometimes euphoria. He suggests that modern monks who don't practise it are losing out!

How does all of this apply to oblates? Oblates, like monks, follow the guidance of the Holy Rule, yet normally outside the helpful and consoling framework of monastic life. Living in our present secular climate, they are also besieged on every side by calls to indulge, rather than mortify, their passions, and to forget, rather than remember, that Christ died for our sins. All the more reason, then, to make positive, ideally written resolutions regarding lenten observance. These will not be extreme, or unrealistic, or in any way damaging to health or duty. But they will add somewhat to the measure of our usual service, and be little daily reminders that this is lent, and a privileged time for living out our faith. Many oblates who are sick or elderly already have a heavy burden of daily suffering to bear. If physical mortifications seem inappropriate for them, it will perhaps still be possible to make special efforts at reading and prayer: at saying the Divine Office, getting to a weekday Mass, using the sacrament of penance, creating some extra space in which God can touch our heart. All of us surely are also aware of some little habitual failing associated with our temperament or character. We don't imagine this can be cured by a simple act of will, but we chip away at it, particularly during these days: rejoicing whenever we score tiny victories, unseen perhaps by any except the angels. Oblates also will take seriously the obligation, insisted on especially by St. Leo, to reach out to those less fortunate than themselves, in whatever ways seem appropriate. Here they are better placed than monks, who are restricted by personal poverty and their rule of enclosure.

I should end, as lent does, with Easter. The whole point of lent is that it is not an end in itself, but a preparation for a feast. Just as lent prepares for Easter, so our life prepares us for heaven, and we must long for that with all spiritual desire (HR 4:46). According to SS. Leo and Benedict, the joy of Easter already invades lent. Even so, the reality of heaven already invades our own daily lives, lighting them up with the grace and joy of Christ's own risen, eternal life.