



"Nothing Dearer Than Christ"

Oblate letter of the Pluscarden Benedictines

Elgin, Moray, Scotland IV30 8UA

DBH Series No 5, May 1998

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

"VACARE DEO" Monastic Voices

"Let us then take John of Lycopolis first, as the true foundation of our work, for he alone suffices and more than suffices to encourage pious and devout minds to attain the peak of virtue and to arouse them to attain the height of perfection. We saw him in the district of the Thebaid in the desert which adjoins the city of Lyco living on a rock on a steep mountain. The path up to him was difficult and the approach to the hermitage was blocked and barricaded, so that from his 40th to his 90th year - his age when we visited him - no-one had entered his hermitage.

To those who came to him he let himself be seen at the window and from there he either gave them a word of God for edification or, if encouragement were needed, his answer. He had sensibly permitted an external cell to be built for guests in which those who had travelled from a distance could rest for a while. He, however, remained alone within, giving himself in solitude to God alone ("solus soli Deo vacans"), never ceasing by day or night to pray and commune with God, striving with total purity of heart for the things of God and that which is beyond anything that can be thought. The more he separated himself from human cares and contacts, the nearer and closer was God to him."

(Rufinus: The Lives of the Desert Fathers; c. 375 A.D.)

"Presumably there was never a time in the world's history, in which life was lived at such a pace as in the present day. Restlessness, rapidity and worry run through all. There is no time for thought, no time for quiet. So too often there is little depth; the spiritual life is at best shallow, and it is to be feared practically non-existent. It is hardly necessary to point out how antagonistic is this spirit of feverish activity to religion and to God. It contrasts most strikingly with the wonderful repose of Almighty God...

We, as Christians, are obliged to be on our guard against this present day restlessness, this mere contentment with outward activities, and by the help of God's grace cultivate more of that inward peace which God alone can give. We must make up our minds to have more clear spaces in our day, we must learn to realise that what we are is far more important than what we do: that we must be what God intends us to be, if we would do what God desires us to do. Repose, recollection, contemplation are to many people synonyms for idleness; and yet they must enter into the composition of our lives if our work is to be real and lasting...

Prayer takes time, and requires our best efforts. Its results are not always manifest; God's answers to our prayers seem long delayed. In our impatience we substitute outward activity, the result of which will be evident to our own eyes and those of other people, in place of that hidden inward communion with God which is our real strength.

Christians do not owe to God a shadowy or elusive half-service, but in every state of life a positive, solid and complete devotion is demanded, because as God, our Creator is entitled to all that we are and have."

(Taken from Aelred Carlyle: Our Purpose & Method, 1905.)

Dear Oblates and friends,

Lent is an image of the whole of our life on this earth (cf. HR 49:1). It is a journey with a goal, made by a people on pilgrimage. Paschaltide, on the other hand, is an image of the life that awaits us in heaven: the homeland that is our journey's end, in which we shall have rest forever. Lent calls us to embark upon the purgative way: to take up the hard and difficult labour (cf. HR 58:8) we must endure if we would follow Christ. Paschaltide invites us to enter the unitive way: to accept Christ's gift to us of His own life, of His Spirit; a gift which will indeed be consummated in heaven, but which is already ours, even now. Lent reflects our need to share in Christ's Cross; Paschaltide reminds us that we have already been given a share in His Resurrection.

According to the Fathers, the six weeks of lent recall God's activity on the six Days of Creation. For us, then, lent is a time for courageous self-denial. But the seven weeks of Paschaltide recall the seventh Day of that first week, the sabbath Day of God's rest. Paschaltide must therefore be for us a time of rest. The Paschal season gives us 50 days of festal rejoicing in union with the Bridegroom. In his company no-one thinks of fasting (Lk 5:34). We are not then making our way towards something during Paschaltide. Rather, we have to acknowledge and rejoice in what we already bear within us. And this is nothing less than God. The three Pers-ons of the Trinity have made their home within the hearts of the baptized (Jn 14:16, 23). Our great task, then, is to contemplate, with the eyes of faith, this mystery we possess: this Heaven that we bear within us.

Paschaltide, as you know, plays a key part in the Rule's ordering of time (cf. e.g. HR 8:4; 41:1; 49:7). Ch. 15 briefly hints at the spirit of the Benedictine liturgy during Paschaltide, in which "Alleluia" is said, as it is in Heaven, "without intermission" (15:1). This spirit spills over also into the liturgy outside Paschaltide, except, of course, during lent.

All of us need to capture something of this spirit: the spirit of St. Benedict, the spirit of Paschal joy. St. Benedict, typically, is rather reticent about it. As so often, it seems he felt he did not need to elaborate on something so fundamental, so obvious to all. In order to discern his mind more clearly, then, we need to do some reading between the lines. One place we can do this very easily is in his chapter 48, on the Daily Manual Labour. It is here above all, I think, that St. Benedict touches on the theme proposed on page 1, that is so important for all of us, and so relevant especially in Paschaltide: that of tranquil openness to God.

The Latin phrase "vacare Deo" is hard to translate exactly in English. It has all the connotations of being vacant or empty, being at leisure, being free or unoccupied, being on holiday for God. It occurs in Psalm 45(46):10 "Vacate et videte quoniam ego sum Deus" - "Be still, and know that I am God". St. Paul uses it in 1 Cor 7:5, about married couples being "free for prayer". The idea is present also in the story of Mary the sister of Martha, who sat at the Lord's feet, and was commended for having wisely chosen the one thing necessary (Lk 10:42).

The Rule has the word "vacare" six times in chapter 48 with reference to reading: "let them devote themselves to, be free for, have leisure for their holy reading". Twice in the same chapter, the word is used also in its bad sense. St. Benedict detests idleness. He has no time for lazy monks. "Idleness is the enemy of the soul" he begins (48:1). So he recommends extra work, even on Sunday, to a brother who cannot sit still and read: "ut non vacet" - "that he may not be idle" (49:23). Supervision of the reading will be needed, in case anyone simply wastes the time allotted in idleness or chatter ("vacat otio aut fabulis", 49:18).

Nevertheless, is it astonishing how seriously St. Benedict here takes his monks' need for "holy leisure". It forms an integral part of the balanced life he draws up. He assumes the necessity, daily, for several hours of silent time, without pressure, without external activity, without discernible results. And he assigns for this time some of the best hours of the day, when minds will be fully awake, and able to give of their best.

St. Benedict is responding here not just to the demands of high Christian perfection, but to a basic human need. Aristotle rightly taught, centuries before Christ, that we work in order that we might have leisure. By this he

meant that work, outside of Auschwitz, is never an end in itself: it is never self-justifying. But leisure, holy leisure, in the sense of contemplative openness to ultimate reality, is.

It is difficult for modern people to give themselves up to this sort of leisure. On the one hand there is the frantically busy pace of life, of which our founding Abbot wrote (1905!), and to which none of us can be wholly immune. On the other hand there is the entertainments industry, which wants to fill, or kill, all available leisure time, with more frantic activity, or at least with noise. We all need something of the barricaded and steep mountain path of St. John of Lycopolis: if only for a moment, to keep everything else out, and to let God in. For most of us, this barricade must be simply our fixed determination, and habits of self discipline.

Yes, of course all of us have to be Martha for most of the time. We have to do good works (HR 4:2-73). We have to participate in the public worship of the Church. All of this is essential. But it is not enough. There has to be something more. There must be space for each of us to stop, to put aside all anxiety, and just love the Lord our God with our whole heart, whole soul and whole strength (HR 4:1).

An Oblate will rarely be able to give the time to prayer that St. Benedict requires for his monks. But by definition, an Oblate is someone who wants to choose, with Mary, the better part which will not be taken away. And an Oblate, no less than a monk, can draw inspiration from the Rule's insistence that we give first priority to this vacant time for God.

Oblates and monks alike, then, must be people of good works, but people of prayer first. We must all strive to find time, daily, to forget the constant pressure to achieve, and to turn all our attention instead to what alone really matters; to simply be with Him who is the author of all being. All of us need to find time to rest in Him apart from whom our hearts must always be restless. All of us need to do, here and now, essentially what we hope to spend all eternity doing in perfect bliss. And we need to realise that, for most of us, for most of the time, this will be difficult: perhaps the hardest ascetical practice of all.

The way St. Benedict assumes it can most easily be done is through divine reading. For him, an encounter with scripture is an encounter with God. According to St. Cyprian's famous dictum, when we pray, we speak to God, but when we read (scripture), God speaks to us. And so the monk is to read, not to acquire information, but to be transformed. He reads in order to let God touch him in an intimate and entirely personal way. This will then give meaning and purpose to all his other actions throughout the day. It is this that will maintain the desire for God that brought him to the monastery in the first place, this that will keep him content and fulfilled in his vocation, while ever yearning for the better life that is to come.

Let me finish by quoting St. Augustine's picture of heaven, given at the end of his City of God. "How great will be that felicity, where there will be no evil, where no good will be withheld, where there will be leisure ("vacabitur") for the praises of God, who will be all in all! ... That 7th day will be our Sabbath, whose end will not be an evening, but the Lord's Day, an 8th day, as it were, which is to last forever, a day consecrated by the resurrection of Christ. There we shall be still ("vacabimus") and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise. Behold what will be, in the end, without end! For what is our end but to reach that kingdom which has no end?"