

**COMING OF AGE AS AN OBLATE:**  
**A PERSONAL REFLECTION ON**  
**THE FOURTH WORLD CONGRESS OF BENEDICTINE OBLATES**  
**ROME: NOVEMBER 4TH TO 10TH 2017**

The Congress took place at Fraterna Domus, a large retreat complex in a beautiful rural setting in the Rome hills about 19 km from the city. The theme of the Congress was 'A Way Forward - the Benedictine Community in Movement'.

This was my first Congress and I must confess to being overwhelmed at the opening supper as I looked around the large dining hall to see so many oblates and monks and nuns from so many different countries. In fact, there were 197 participants from 35 countries represented in all and the Congress was conducted in six languages. It made me realise that we are an international oblate movement and whenever I say the prayer for 'absent brethren' it now has a wider meaning than I previously imagined!

I was also humbled as I came to appreciate the dedication of my fellow delegates. In the 'Oblates around the World' presentations, I was deeply moved by the work of oblates from the Philippines, who work as groups rather than as individuals extending the work of their monasteries by visiting prisoners and caring for their families, looking after the homeless and the dying in the streets and caring for survivors of the wave of natural disasters their country has recently endured. In a workshop, an oblate from Germany mentioned that he and his wife had looked after a refugee family from Syria in their own home for the last 18 months. Yes, we must pray for our 'absent brethren' and their work and engage in some form of social action ourselves.

Discovering the deeply committed work which oblates engage in to help others and the environment around the world, made me feel very small and just a beginner (despite 6 years of oblation) but then according to St Benedict, we all are beginners. It was as if I had been given my place in the choir of international oblates.

But I was also strengthened by worshipping with everyone in the liturgy. I felt very much at home in my place in that international choir and comforted. It was very moving to hear the 'Our Father' prayed in all the languages of the delegates simultaneously. Far from sounding as the tower of Babel must have done, the languages seemed to blend into one voice of supplication for all oblates and for the world.

I found the Congress to be an exciting and challenging experience and it has confirmed me in my oblate vocation. Through the presentations, workshops and conversations with so many other oblates, I have realised how deep and all-consuming oblation is and how far reaching. I retired from my school in the summer (after 34 years) and have been unsettled and a little shaky since. The Congress shook me up even further. I felt like a child being playfully turned upside down by my father or mother and then gently set on my feet again. Since returning

home and talking with other oblates (and now new friends) this seems to have been true for others too. The Oblate Movement was being shaken up and set gently on its feet again - to move on into the future.

Indeed, there was a sense that this was a historic congress, that the Oblate Movement was at a crossroads. As there are now fewer professed religious, oblates must also, together with them, accept the responsibility of continuing the Benedictine tradition and its spirituality, of carrying the Benedictine charism into the world and into the future. This observation was made several times by different speakers. As Sr. Joan Chittister (our keynote speaker) remarked 'the purpose of this charism we call Benedictinism is to share it, to give it away!' Or as our new Abbot Primate, Gregory Polan, put it in his welcoming address, 'Does being an oblate say something about the Gospel to all the people we meet?' He also posed another question 'How can we interest young people in the monastic life? And he answered it by saying we should encourage young people to see the Gospel in ourselves.

The Congress theme was explored through workshops, presentations and, equally important, conversations at meal times. There was a special Mass for the retiring Abbot Primate Notker Wolf, who has consistently promoted and encouraged the Oblate Movement and who established the Congresses. We also welcomed the new Abbot Primate Gregory Polan (from Conception Abbey in Missouri, USA), who, in his address, pledged continued support for the Oblate Movement. The keynote speaker was famous Benedictine author, Sr. Joan Chittister from Erie, Pennsylvania who gave an impassioned, challenging, and uplifting speech on 'Let the Call be Heard'. Thomas Brunnhuber from the UK Oblate team gave the opening address on 'Where We are Now' and Fr Edward Linton, from Sant'Anselmo and one of the international team that organised the Congress, gave the closing one which focused on the relationship between the oblate and their monastery, which was another key theme that had emerged.

We made a day pilgrimage into Rome for the Papal Audience in St Peter's Square, where Pope Francis gave a sermon about the Eucharist in preparation for the Year of the Eucharist and blessed all the Oblates. Then we visited the Trappist monastery of the Three Fountains, where, as legend has it, St. Paul was imprisoned and executed, and were invited to Sant'Anselmo, the Order's headquarters for vespers and supper, where we met Abbot Notker again.

As I mentioned earlier, the Congress theme was 'A Way Forward - the Benedictine Community in Movement.' Movement was a key feature of the Congress as it is in the Rule, that sense of spiritual dynamism, of running toward God, which St Benedict encourages in the Prologue.

Therefore, through exploring the current situation of Benedictine oblate communities around the world and the challenges which our broken world presents us, the Congress was trying to identify how our communities could move *forward* in the future and how we could move *outwards* into the broken world which we serve. The Congress came to be seen not as a stand

alone event but as a preparation for the next one in four years' time. We were attempting to map out lines for development in the interim through a vision statement to be discussed by oblates around the world in their own communities (and hopefully actioned in some way). In other words, we were trying to find the direction of the movement.

Moreover, the Congress Team stressed that this Congress was for *all* oblates and not just those who attended. To that end, the Congress presentations and documents will be made available in the New Year via a link on this website.

Delegates were also encouraged to go back to their communities to share the Congress with them, which I am attempting to do through this report. In addition, we have been asked to discuss the vision statement (which is outlined below) before next June. A more detailed vision statement will be made available before then.

The theme was addressed in four strands, which were explored over four days: 'Where Are We Now?'; 'Oblate Life Around the World' (where several oblate groups gave presentations as I mentioned); 'What is the Oblate's Responsibility in a broken world?' (focusing on Pope Francis' encyclical 'Laudato Si') and 'Where are We Going?' (which involved creating the Vision Statement for the future).

The Vision statement was discussed in workshops on the final day and was based on an analysis of the answers to the online survey which was sent out earlier in the year to all oblate groups. Inevitably the group workshops were also informed by presentations and discussions from earlier in the Congress. From the results of our workshops, the International Oblate Team identified five key elements for the Vision Statement, which we all voted on in the final session (and the votes were virtually unanimous). These elements were:

- 1) The Rule as Our Living Tradition.
- 2) Listening Through Prayer and Contemplation.
- 3) Oblate Formation to ensure the Future.
- 4) The Oblate as a good Steward of our common home (based on Pope Francis' encyclical 'Laudato Si').
- 5) Oblates networking via social media.

We were also given a very useful summary of 'Laudato Si', which will also be made available as part of the congress documents.

In his opening address, Thomas Brunnhuber identified that for the Benedictine community, movement comes from a *fixed point*: stability. The stillness of stability and order, scripture and the rule lead us into moving forward. The Rule provides the stability to create the movement and the direction of the movement. It is the movement of the body, mind and heart. The movement of the heart is governed by our spirituality. The movement of our mind by our knowledge. We are the agents of this movement and chose the direction. So, we must learn to surrender to the movement of the Spirit.

Surrendering to the Spirit was also a theme in Abbot Polan's address where he gave a wonderful definition of Prayer which sums up Thomas' thoughts: 'Prayer is when the mind and the heart dance together in the Holy Spirit'. He also talked in detail about the relationship

between the oblate and their monastery. We become people of faith through the Rule and this faith is kept alive and fresh through our relationship with God through the monastery and relationships with others. As an oblate, we create a loving relationship with God. The seed of spiritual intimacy with God is in all of us -we need to keep it alive away from the monastery. He spoke of a two-way street between the monastery and the oblate and a threefold communion with God. He sees the relationship between the monastery and the oblate as a friendship and quotes St Aelred who sees friendship as a sacrament of God's love, leading us closer to Him. We are moving in faith together towards God. The monastic community's best friends are their oblates.

Sr. Joan, in her keynote address, develops this two-way relationship between the monastery and the oblate further, also likening it to friendship and in particular the companionship models of spirituality in the Bible, such as Ruth and Naomi, Paul and Timothy, Elisha and Elijah. These companionships linked unlike life experiences (professed religious/oblate) through the binding of a common commitment (the Rule). True companions make possible the growth of each other: one enlightens, energises and empowers the other. But constantly she stresses that this shared charism is not just to be consumed but to be given to others. A charism must be constantly rediscovered and re-expressed, which is what was happening at the Congress. Oblates are meant to be companions of their monastery and carriers of the monastic tradition as well.

In his closing address, Fr Edward reiterated that oblates are the best friends of the monasteries, though is this friendship link always taken up in North America and Europe? How much do some monasteries value their oblates? This was a question that had been raised earlier. Fr Edward suggested that oblation is not the same thing as a friendship with a monastery but it is a deep relationship. This relationship shifts and changes and is in movement too. Monks, nuns and oblates have a pre-occupation with their personal relationship with their monastery. This preoccupation never ceases, shifts and changes and is always being re-evaluated. We should seek guidance from the Rule as we define this relationship for ourselves. We all have a unique vocation to carry out in a dignified manner, which we must find for ourselves. And we should not be afraid to stand up for the Gospel as an oblate.

In his sermon, Abbot Notker spoke of the coming of age of the Oblate Congress Movement as it is 16 years since the first one. I very much feel that through attending the Congress, I have personally come of age as an oblate.

The theme of movement in this report has been a recurring one as it was at the Congress. Several of us felt that, at its deepest level, there was a movement of the Holy Spirit among us. May we surrender to the movement of the Spirit wherever it leads us in the future.

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