

‘Walking with St. Benedict’
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Day of Recollection for Benedictine Oblates
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Talk 1

Dear brothers and sisters,

Thank you for asking me to share with you today some reflections on the Oblate Way. There will be some here, I suspect, who have heard me speak before, so you will – perhaps – be used to my ‘random jottings’. I do hope that what I say today might prove helpful in some way. To this end:

The title for our time together today is “Walking with St. Benedict”. I have chosen this title out of recognition that each and every one of us is on a journey - the journey of life. This began at the very first moment of our existence – conception – and will end when, in his mercy and providence, God call us to Himself.

For us who are Oblates, we take this journey of life accompanied by St. Benedict. In our rucksack we carry, along with the Holy Scriptures, the Rule for Monks. We are called to do this. Oblation is not simply something of our own choosing – it is the Lord’s choice for us. When it all starts out, we might be attracted to the way of life of a particular monastic community – but even that attraction is planted in our hearts through the grace of the Holy Spirit, for all is gift.

In the Prologue, St. Benedict sees the potential monk, nun, oblate as one who seeks. He or she is someone who “yearns for life and desires to see good days.”¹ We might ask ourselves, then: what brought me to the monastery in the first place? Perhaps it was just curiosity – in which case you were seeking something that, perhaps, you did not even realise you were seeking at the time. Perhaps it was a bit more intentional? I had heard about the Rule and wished to see it lived? Oblation seemed a good plan – the next task was to find the community. Whatever it may have been – and the initial step will have been different for every one of us, it was an expression of this desire, this yearning for life.

However, it is not really us who are at work here. We may be yearning for something – not even knowing what it is for which we yearned – and into that space steps the Lord Himself. He “Seeks the workman in a multitude of people, calls out to him and lifts his voice again.”² This is a phrase in the Rule that attracts me a good deal. The Lord calls out – not just once either. There is insistence here. Perhaps this insistence is necessary because we are a bit deaf, or because the clamour of the marketplace, the world, is so loud. Perhaps I am beset

¹ RB. Prol:14.

² Loc.cit.

with distractions, too many things going on in my life, too much social media! Whatever it may be, the Lord will call again and again. Perhaps we might ask: Why me? What about all these other people in the marketplace? This choice is not mine to make: it is His. "You did not choose me, no I chose you."³ All is gift.

What journey does the Lord call us to make? First and foremost, it is the journey of constant listening. The first words of the Rule:

"Listen carefully, my son, to the master's instructions and attend to them with the ear of your heart."⁴

These words should resonate in our hearts and minds each and every day – each and every moment of our existence. If we fail to listen, how shall we know the way? Jesus tells us very clearly:

"I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, no one can come to the Father except through me."⁵

We cannot come to the Father, we cannot reach our destination, unless we follow the Way – unless we follow the person of Jesus. Listening is the first vital step and is needed for every step that we take thereafter.

If we reflect on the marketplace for a moment once more: the clamour of today's world requires ever more careful listening. The time the oblate spends with the community of the monastery facilitates this listening: it is a place of rest and peace where the silence needed for true listening can be found. This time restores the Oblate. It enables us to recalibrate and return into the clamour with batteries re-charged, rather like a modern car!

This brings me to daily prayer. A week each year or a few days snatched every few months is not enough. Walking with St. Benedict demands that we follow his example in prayer. Of the 73 chapters of the Rule (74 if you add in the prologue) 13 are given to the ordering of the Psalm Scheme and the Praying of the Divine Office. This is to say nothing of all the other references to prayer within the text!

Prayer is THE way of listening – and the Divine Office plays a very significant part in that listening. It is customary for the Oblate to pray part of the Divine Office each day. In this way, above all, we are united with our monastic brothers and sisters as they offer the Prayer of the Church for the world.

"Divina auxilium maneat semper nobiscum: et cum fratribus nostris absentibus,"

"May the Divine assistance remain always with us: and with our absent brethren."

³ Jn. 15:16.

⁴ RB. Prol:1.

⁵ Jn. 14:6.

I often mention these words in talks. Oblates are included in this prayer: our monastic brothers and sisters are included in ours.

The Divine Office can be a challenge for us. It can be difficult to find the time; there is the tendency to rush. I am tempted to say that the answer to the first is: tough! When asking a Carthusian Monk friend of mine about the difficulty of finding time for prayer, the answer I received was: "Get up earlier!" So I did. But, for all of us he has a point: prayer must be a priority for us as Oblates, just as nothing is more important for our monastic community:

"On hearing the signal for an hour of the divine office, the monk will immediately set aside what he has in hand and go with outmost speed..."⁶

The Divine Office is THE *opus Dei*. Just as the monastic community offers the gift of prayer for the world, so must the Oblate.

Our walk with St. Benedict is not just 'for the church' – whether that be the church of the monastery, our parish church, the church that is the "Secret Room" of the heart to which the Lord refers in the Gospel.⁷ Our prayer must, as it were, spill out into the whole of our lives. The listening that takes place in prayer, must show itself in the good works stated for us in the first 74 verses of Chapter 4 of the Rule.

St. Benedict situates them in the Decalogue – the Ten Commandments. All that follows grows from this rootstock given to us by God through Moses. I would like to bring out a particular phrase from Chapter 4:

"The ways of acting should be different to the world's way; the love of Christ must come before all else."⁸

There is nothing wrong with being different in our way of life to that of so much of the world around us. This is the call of every Christian. In that sense, the Oblate is no different. All must be grounded in the love of Christ – the love that He has for us, for me, for you and – therefore, the love we have for Him. It must be this way. St. Bernard reminds us of this in his little book *De diligendo Deo*. We can only love because we have first been loved.

Our experience of the love of Christ, our listening to Him at every moment and especially in prayer, informs our action. Our actions should not rely on ourselves. No, our action – our good works – should flow from our listening to Christ, our relationship with Him, our openness to the gift of His love, His choice of us. St. Benedict reminds us that even the things that may seem little to us – eating, drinking, speech – must be informed by this relationship.⁹ Such care in our lives is an expression of our placing our Hope in God alone.¹⁰

⁶ RB. 43:1.

⁷ Mt. 6:6.

⁸ RB. 4:20.

⁹ RB. 4:36-37.

¹⁰ RB. 4:41.

This may all seem rather difficult: using all the tools of good works at once! Surely, I'll drop one or two along the way! "Never lose hope in God's mercy."¹¹ Surely, Hope in God, which is the mark of the Christian, goes hand in hand with the recognition of our weakness and of our reliance on His mercy. Without that, the journey is impossible.

Walking with St. Benedict in the way of the Gospel requires also "Patient sharing in the sufferings of Christ."¹² Here we must be careful, for there can be a temptation in some to seek suffering, on the grounds that sufferings are good in themselves. Suffering is only good insofar as it is a sharing in the sufferings of Christ. We do not need to seek them out – sufferings come our way and we shall never be required to carry a burden that is too heavy for us (even if it may seem so at the time). "When I am weak, then am I strong."¹³ St. Paul reminds us. Our times of difficulty are moments of growth – moments when we realise we cannot manage on our own strength, but must rely on the One who is our strength. The Christian – the Oblate – must be at home at the foot of the Cross. There we stand with Mary and John; Mary, given to us in the person of John as Mother. The Cross of Death is the Tree of Life for us. When the road is at its steepest, the walk in the light of the Gospel, assisted by the wisdom that is God's gift to Benedict may be experienced as being very tough indeed. It is at these very moments that we come to rely solely on the love of the One who died for us. The vulnerability that comes through simple perseverance will open mind and heart to the love of God in a way far deeper than we might ever have imagined.

Finally, in this first little presentation, it should be remembered that our walk with St. Benedict becomes a run! The path may not be easy at first, St. Benedict reminds us. There will be struggles and difficulties along the way, but

"as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love."¹⁴

Listening, Prayer, The Tools of Good Works, sharing in the sufferings of Christ, openness to the gift of His Mercy – this, surely, is walking with St. Benedict.

You may say to me: is that not the Christian way? Yes, absolutely. What, then, is so special about the Oblate way? The answer lies in the simple fact that the Lord Himself calls us to this way, as the way He wishes us to become the people He calls us to be.

I would like to close with some questions to aid reflection:

What challenges do we face in the Oblate way of life?

What does the Oblate bring to the 'marketplace'?

What particular blessings have come my way as a consequence of Oblation?

Which "tools of good works" do I find it particularly difficult to use?

¹¹ RB. 4:74.

¹² RB. Prol:50.

¹³ 2 Cor. 12:10.

¹⁴ RB. Prol:49.