

Walking with St. Benedict
Talks by BISHOP RICHARD MOTH OF ARUNDEL AND BRIGHTON
(Oblate of Pluscarden Abbey)

Day of Recollection for Benedictine Oblates
19th May 2021

Talk 2

Many of us, in professional life, find ourselves with the requirement for CPD – continuing professional development. In the world of the priest, we tend to call this “On-going Formation.” Such a term is suitable to the Christian life, for Formation is something more than task-related, as might apply in one’s professional life. Rather, formation speaks of the whole of life; it speaks of our formation to be ever more closely conformed to the person of Jesus. Con-formed: formed with – formed to is, perhaps, even better. Our whole life is about being formed so closely to the person of Jesus that it becomes difficult to see the join! As the priest prays during the Offertory of the Mass: “that we might come to share in the divinity of Christ, who humbled Himself to share in our humanity.”¹

The journey of formation should be one of particular deliberateness for the Oblate, I suggest, since we are called to be formed in the way of the Rule. The Rule is a tremendous help to us – it also carries an intensity borne of obedience – the first step in humility² on which stands the ladder of humility.³

This theme would be the subject for another presentation – even another whole day – and questions on this theme may emerge from discussions.

I would, however, like to offer a few thoughts on the struggles of the journey up this ladder of humility! For this purpose I propose to make reference to the *Ratio fundamentalis institutionis sacerdotalis*. This is the Document issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in Rome that is the guiding document for priestly formation. Why that document? I hear you ask! It has some very useful things to say on the difficulties of vocational life over time – and the Oblate life is a vocation lived out over time, usually over many years.

The first principle is that Formation in the Christian Life is continual for the whole of life. It begins with Baptism and continues throughout life’s journey. We are always being formed by the Gospel – or should be! What the *Ratio* says of the priest, applies to all:

“a process of gradual and continuous configuration to him, in his being and acting, which constantly challenges the person to inner growth.”⁴

¹ Roman Missal, Prayers of the Offertory.

² RB. 5:1.

³ RB. 7.

⁴ *Ratio Fundamentalis*, n.80. (hereafter RF).

This journey of configuration is rarely – if ever – completed in this life, for it is the way of sanctity. In this context, I thank God for the gift of purgatory, for without it I don't think I'd stand much of a chance!!!

The *Ratio* helps us in the sense that it recognises stages on our journey:

To begin with, there is an initial period of the living of the vocation. Experience is yet to be gained, but there is much enthusiasm. This period of enthusiasm demands accompaniment and the need for reflection. Burdens should not be too great in this initial phase, since the individual may not yet be ready for anything too heavy. Working alongside others is ideal.⁵

Perhaps we see something of this in our Oblate life. The whole experience is new. We are filled with bags of enthusiasm. We cannot get hold of too many commentaries, reading is easy, prayer is filled with joy. The psalms are exciting. When we are at the monastery, getting up early is no problem. We might be tempted to try and live an almost monastic diurnal at home! We can be like a piece of blotting paper, absorbing everything we can get our hands on, wanting to learn more and more about our monastic family, enthralled by the minutiae of the way of life – even the menu in the refectory, no matter how curious it may be!! More importantly, we feel very close to the Lord. These are the Lord's gifts to the one whom He calls and who is in the early stages of the journey. These gentle meadows at the lower stages of the mountain are times of palpable blessing – and there seems to be time to stop and sniff the flowers along the way!!

This does not last, however.

The Ratio helps us here too⁶ and I shall adapt the text a little for our purposes here:

“After some years of oblate life, new challenges for the life of the [oblate] can easily emerge:

The experience of one's own weakness.

The risk of thinking of oneself as someone special.

The challenge of contemporary culture.

The allure of power and riches.

The challenge of Oblate promises.

Total dedication to one's Oblation: tiredness, physical weakness, frail health, conflicts, disappointments, burden of routine, fatigue induced by change, socio-cultural elements can dampen zeal and generosity.”

This is quite a list.

Perhaps one has been an oblate for a few years and one realises that the initial zeal and enthusiasm is beginning to wane. It is at these moments that oneself emerges through the cracks, as it were – and this is not such a good thing to see! When faced with one's own weaknesses, the temptation to give up begins to take hold. The initial joy has gone, routine

⁵ RF. 83.

⁶ RF. 84.

begins to impose itself, with the lack of enthusiasm this can sometimes bring. Little failures come about and one can feel bad about oneself. What has happened to the happy times!

This stage is necessary, for it is the moment when we are reminded that we are not in control. The moment of weakness is a moment of strength, for it can be a moment of conversion. This is a time when a wise guide – the Spiritual Director – is so needed. Guidance at this moment will enable us to realise that others have been here before us, that this step is usual and that the mercy of God⁷ – on whom St. Benedict calls us to rely – will always see us through.

Then we have the risk of ‘being special.’ I am an Oblate, after all. I have made promises in the presence of the Oblate Master – or even Abbot. I am ‘one of the chosen few.’ This is dangerous and if we are truly to grow in our Oblate vocation, we must be knocked off the pedestal. Indeed, the whole Benedictine journey is a journey in humility, aimed at one thing – reality. Much has been written on this theme of humility. There are many commentaries, some dedicated to this part of the Rule alone.⁸ This is a call for us to focus our gaze on what is truly essential: that we give ourselves, rather than take from others. Does not the word “Oblate” mean “Gift” – a gift that is expressed in the service of prayer and in the service of our brothers and sisters. The Oblate must look beyond himself or herself, otherwise conformity to Christ will simply not be possible.

The challenge of contemporary culture and the allure and power of riches are especially difficult for us. Pope Francis has warned against living the ‘virtual life.’ These present times of the pandemic have not helped, for we have been confined to Zoom – indeed we are in this place now! This is but one example, but the materialism, utilitarianism and instant nature of the modern world can draw us away from the Gospel. We are attracted by wealth, taken in by what is deemed useful and trapped by instant gratification. The way of the Gospel is slower. It is about the whole of life – and when the journey draws us into the desert and the path leaves those pleasant meadows, we hanker for the easy!! Where is the comfort? Why does it have to be so difficult, when the world around me seems to be having a rather nice time of it? “To those who are given much, much is expected.”⁹ Jesus calls us to share in His way – not ours. In this sense, the way of the Christian, the Oblate, is prophetic – yet prayer-time seems boring, the initial joy of getting up early to pray the psalms, the reading that used to be so easy.... Surely, the way of the world is easier and does it really do any harm? Again, the wisdom of a guide will usually be needed if we are not to fall into the temptations that surround us and remain constant in our perseverance.

The challenge of our Oblate Promises can also impinge on us as time goes by. Perhaps we feel we have failed in our commitment: we feel our prayer is weak, perhaps we have not been as assiduous in visiting the monastery as we really should, that our witness to the Gospel has faltered. The Rule will always challenge us, just as the Gospel will always challenge us. This is as it should be. We should never allow ourselves to be deaf to this challenge. This listening to which Benedict calls us should never cease. The pressures that are upon us can lead us to look too much to our own perceived needs – and not to what is essential. We compensate for the struggles of our commitment to Gospel and Rule and this will take us away from the Lord. Benedict warns us of these things in Chapter 1 of the Rule. The Sarabaites and, even more so the Gyrovags are, effectively, those who ‘pick and choose’ in the following of Gospel

⁷ RB.4:74.

⁸ CASEY, M., *Truthful Living*, Petersham, St. Bede’s Publication, 1999.

⁹ Lk. 12:48.

and Rule. St. Benedict has little time for them – and so with us, gentle perseverance is needed in our following of Christ.

“tiredness, physical weakness, frail health, conflicts, disappointments, burden of routine, fatigue induced by change, socio-cultural elements can dampen zeal and generosity.”

How often do we feel these elements in our lives! We become tired, infirmity comes our way from time to time – and perhaps remains with us. Age slows us down. The disappointments of life bring about a certain lassitude and pessimism – even cynicism, which is antipathetic to the Gospel. The world around us is constantly changing, producing a particular stress that contributes to our weariness.

Then there is the burden of routine! Going back to a theme from this morning, this is where, in fact, we can begin to run with Benedict! That initial excitement has gone, but only when we work through and with the struggles do we come to realise that the way of simple perseverance is a wonderful blessing for us. I suggest that this routine of perseverance in the Way of the Gospel in the light of the Rule is a gift, for it expresses what is meant by *conversatio morum*¹⁰ for the Oblate. As oblates, we may not live in the monastic community, but we are called to take the path of *conversation morum* in a tangible and fruitful way.

Ultimately, Oblation – as with The Vows of the Monk – is about a way of being, not a way of doing. Only when these earlier experiences have been lived – initial enthusiasm and zeal (spent in the comfortable pastures of the foothills), the struggles and acedia that come with time (experienced on the steep and difficult path of suffering) – do we reach the place where we are conscious that we are living our lives in the love that exists in the Blessed Trinity (the high pastures, if you will). At that point, it is no longer so much about effort, doing, busyness, but about being, reflection, space. What is done takes place out of an in an atmosphere of prayer and in the comforting presence of our loving Father that transcends our human experience.

While I am certainly not there yet – still struggling along the way – and perhaps few of us are, this is the goals to which the Lord call us, the “loftier summits” that “under God’s protection [we] shall reach.”¹¹

¹⁰ RB. 58:17.

¹¹ RB. 73:9.