

Oblates and the *Rule* of Saint Benedict

Oblates promise to live according to the values expressed in the *Rule* of Saint Benedict, which was written in the spirit of the Gospel and which has been handed down through centuries of committed Christian life, along with traditions that developed with it. By their commitment to the *Rule*, Oblates benefit from a time-tried spiritual tradition that has led countless other Benedictines and Oblates to holiness.

Just as a candidate for the monastery is tested to see whether he "truly seeks God" (RB 58), so also those who become Oblates are committed above all else to seek God in Jesus Christ. As a document focused on Christ and intended to lead disciples ever closer to Christ, the *Rule* challenges every Benedictine and Oblate to a continual refocusing on Christ amidst the routines of ordinary life as well as on special occasions.

"Prayer and work" (*ora et labora*) has become a motto of Benedictine life. The *Rule* summons a monk to live a life balanced in prayer, work, and other elements of an *horarium* (schedule) chosen specifically to help the monk put on the heart and mind of Christ. In a society which encourages people to become ensnared in relentless work or in pleasure-filled indulgence, the Oblate finds support for a life totally dedicated to God in a *Rule* which calls for balance among prayer, work, community activities, creative leisure, and reading that nourishes one's spirit.

The experience of the ages has shown that such balance best keeps a person from being caught up in anything other than God Himself. A Benedictine monk takes vows of obedience, stability, and *conversatio morum*, or ongoing conversion of life according to the monastic way (RB 58:17). The Oblate also promises to live by these three primary values. By obedience Oblates learn to listen to God's call always and everywhere, with the help of meditative reading of Scripture, especially the Gospels.

Oblates also listen to God's voice by frequent meditation on passages of the *Rule* and by efforts to apply the fruits of their meditation to everyday life.

By stability Oblates learn to practice perseverance in carrying out the obligations of their daily lives, especially amidst trials. Striving for an awareness of Christ's redeeming presence in every situation, they become grateful for the seemingly small blessings of each day and struggle against murmuring in difficult times. Stability means being rooted in Christ, no matter what happens, and joining one's sufferings to the passion of Christ so that they become redemptive.

Benedictine *Conversatio morum*

By *conversatio morum* Oblates make use of all means at their disposal to welcome God's grace to purify and transform them. Just as the monk's corresponding vow commits him "to grow in perfect charity through a monastic manner of life," so the Oblate promises to surrender more and more of his or her life to Christ amidst daily vicissitudes; thus every moment becomes an opportunity for firmer rejection of self-will and deeper abiding in the love of Christ.

Other values in the *Rule* include silence, humility, peace, "glorifying God in all things," and community. Living in a noisy and unfocused world, Oblates nurture both external and internal silence as a necessary condition for hearing the call of God and responding to Him. Humility involves both an honest admission of one's own limitations, weaknesses, and sinfulness and also a reverent mindfulness of God's greatness, expressed most fully in the all-forgiving love of Jesus Christ.

"Pax," the peace of Christ which is meant to pervade every aspect of Christian life, has become a Benedictine motto; thus Oblates seek to dwell with peace in their hearts, to work for healing and reconciliation within family and community, and to join with other peacemakers to bring about a world of peace and justice.

"Glorifying God" (RB 57:9) means bringing out God's goodness, in Christ, in every person and situation; it means nurturing hope-filled attitudes; it means avoiding murmuring, gossip, and all that destroys or tears down what should rather be healed and redeemed. Since the whole *Rule* is written in the context of community, Oblates necessarily live in a spirit of community; even if living alone, they strive to nurture loving communion with others who seek God in Christ and ultimately with all people. Oblates show high respect for family life and community life as essential vehicles for transmitting life in Christ.

Benedictine spirituality also summons monks and Oblates to reverence, devotion to the Eucharist, praying of the Liturgy of the Hours, hospitality, special concern for the poor and underprivileged, stewardship for God's creation, and prophetic witness. Oblates develop an attentiveness to the Word of God wherever and however it may speak to them, but especially in the practice of *lectio divina*, a slow, gentle savoring of the words of the Bible.

Oblates also treasure the living presence of Christ in liturgy, particularly in the Holy Eucharist. They seek to sanctify all the hours of the day by praying some part of the Liturgy of Hours, or "Divine Office," in union with the monks of the Archabbey; this prayer of the Church is meant to extend the effects of the Eucharist to all moments. Just as they come to find Christ in the Eucharist and in Scripture, Oblates likewise learn to welcome Christ in the stranger, as well as in all guests, as an act of faith.

This hospitality will overflow to a heartfelt concern for all those in whom Christ suffers — the poor and oppressed of one's neighborhood and the world. The *Rule* challenges Benedictines to regard all material things "as sacred vessels of the altar" (RB 31:12), and so Oblates nurture an informed care for the environment as a gift of God to be shared by all people. Finally, just as the monks of Saint Benedict's time witnessed to Christian values that were often contrary to the norms of their society, so also today's monks and Oblates have a prophetic vocation to proclaim the primacy of God and the sacredness of all life in a world that is often deluded by self-centered, materialistic concerns.

Saint Benedict's Wisdom

Although the *Holy Rule* gives no biographical details of its author's life, the document offers numerous hints about the saint's character. It shows Benedict, like the monks of good zeal whom he wished to form (RB 72), to be passionate for God and for the things of God. From his experience of living in communities of monks, he learned that the little daily choices that one makes in ordinary life ultimately determine the basic orientation of one's whole life. For a Christian, and so too for every monk, the choice must be made for Christ again and again. In the *Rule* Benedict challenges his monks to make a fundamental choice to listen to the voice of Christ and to recognize that "the love of Christ must come before all else" (RB 4:21). The vow of stability and the detailed organization of life in community are meant to help the monk make the choice for Christ, day by day and moment after moment. The monk is instructed to see in these time-tested structures ample opportunities to choose for God and reject self-centered impulses.

Benedict was well aware of the pervasiveness of those self-centered tendencies, and his radical zeal for God is balanced by his loving concern for the individual monk with all his weaknesses. The saint knew that the brothers suffered from a variety of deficiencies and that all had need of forgiveness and mutual support on the journey to God. He also possessed keen insight into the great differences that existed among individual monks; some were obedient, docile, patient, and perceptive, while others were undisciplined, negligent, stubborn, slow to learn, and even disdainful and arrogant. The more wayward the monk, however, the greater his need for the loving attention of the Good Shepherd to seek him out and heal him (RB 27:8). It is the abbot who must fill the role of Christ in showing the utmost concern for straying sheep. Using every skill that a wise physician would apply to heal a sick person, the abbot must avoid harshness and see himself as an instrument of Christ's healing love in his commitment to nurture the development of souls in the community. The *Rule* also shows that Saint Benedict was thoroughly grounded in the tradition of the Church.

Much of the Rule consists of quotations from or allusions to Sacred Scripture. The monks are urged to meditate extensively on Scripture as well as to read from the orthodox fathers of the early Church (RB 73:2-4). In writing the *Rule*, Benedict himself relied heavily on the already well-developed monastic tradition of the two previous centuries. He incorporated large sections of the *Rule* of the Master and also borrowed teachings from other great monastic authors, such as Basil, Augustine, Cassian, and Caesarius of Arles. However, Benedict also did something new. He blended the wisdom of the past in such a way as to respond to the conditions of sixth-century Italy, and he gave the Rule enough flexibility to be adapted to the social and cultural circumstances of the Church for many centuries to come. Benedict's *Rule* includes both spiritual teaching (mostly in RB 1-7, 72-73 and the Prologue) and practical regulations for the ordering of daily life in the monastery (mostly RB 8-71).

He knew that both sound doctrine and disciplined practice were essential to authentic monastic life. For Benedict and the other ancient monastic leaders, monasticism was simply the Christian life lived in an especially intensive way in community as a response to God's persistent

invitations. Thus he called his document a "little rule for beginners." On the other hand, because of the passionate faith, the gentle compassion, and the invaluable practical wisdom embodied in the *Rule*, Benedict's way of monastic life became a tradition in itself which spread throughout the world and which has shaped Western civilization for the past 14 centuries. <http://www.svaoblates.org/therule2>

The *Rule* in History

During the life of Saint Benedict circumstances in Italy were turbulent because of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the repeated invasions by foreign tribes. The turbulence continued after Benedict's death. In fact, his monastery at Monte Cassino was destroyed by the Lombards about 581 A.D. and remained abandoned until it was refounded in 720. However, the *Rule* itself began to spread from Italy through much of continental Europe and the British Isles. During the first several centuries of its existence, the *Rule* was frequently adopted in combination with other monastic rules. In almost every case, the *Rule of Benedict* eventually became the only norm of these monasteries, apparently because it compensated for the deficiencies of the other rules and rendered them unnecessary. For example, in England the *Rule* at first encountered a flourishing Celtic monasticism but then gradually replaced it.

By the eighth century England was sending missionaries abroad, and Benedictines like Saint Boniface and Saint Willibrord brought both Christianity and the *Rule* to Germany and other parts of the Frankish Empire. Charlemagne (768-814) established the Benedictine way even more firmly in Europe by decreeing that the *Rule* of Saint Benedict was to be the standard for all monasteries of his empire. During the often unsettled conditions of the Middle Ages, Benedictine monasteries became centers where the arts and sciences flourished, good liturgy was nurtured, scholarship was prized and ancient literature was preserved.

Especially during the tenth through the twelfth centuries, monastic houses multiplied and thrived as oases of learning and spiritual life. Although some Benedictine communities succumbed to laxity and the abuses of the times, there were reforms such as those at Cluny and Citeaux that gave new vigor to monastic life under the *Rule*. Beginning in the twelfth century, new religious orders emerged to respond to the changing needs of Church and society so that monks and nuns of Saint Benedict were no longer the exclusive representatives of religious life. During the Protestant Reformation hundreds of European monasteries were forced to close their doors, while some in Catholic areas were renewed in the spirit of Catholic reforms. Then, during the late 1700s and early 1800s, all but a handful of Benedictine houses were swept away by the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars. In the 1820s, however, enlightened Catholic rulers sought to reestablish the monasteries, which they realized had contributed so extensively to the faith and culture of Christian Europe. By 1900 Benedictine monastic life was once again well established in Europe, although not without the threats and restrictions of anti-Catholic governments.

Among the Catholic rulers of the 1820s was King Ludwig I of Bavaria. In 1830 he reestablished the ancient Abbey of Saint Michael in Metten, Bavaria. One of its monks, Father

Boniface Wimmer, formerly a diocesan priest, discerned a call to initiate monastic life in the United States, with the purpose of serving the German immigrant population. After much contention with authorities, Father Boniface received permission to leave for America, and on the trip across the Atlantic he brought with him 18 candidates for monastic life. In October, 1846, these men arrived in the area of Latrobe, Pennsylvania, and founded the first Benedictine monastery in North America; they soon also established the college and seminary that came to be associated with the abbey. Before his death in 1887, Abbot Boniface had made numerous foundations throughout the United States, many of which became independent monasteries. Since 1855, Saint Vincent has been the motherhouse of the American-Cassinense Congregation, which is largely the heritage of Boniface Wimmer's vision and tireless efforts. As of 1995, the congregation consists of 21 independent abbeys in Canada, Mexico, and the United States, as well as a number of dependent priories located as far away as Brazil, Taiwan, and Japan. Vowed to monastic life in the houses of this congregation are over 1200 monks, who continue to adhere to the wisdom of a Rule written for a very different age and culture over 1450 years ago.

Oblates and the *Rule*

As men and women committed to live their ordinary lives by the principles of the *Holy Rule*, Oblates learn the value of seeking God in all things and at every moment. Just as Benedictine monks take vows of obedience, stability, and conversion according to a monastic manner of life, Oblates make promises to observe the spirit of these three primary values as well as the other Christian values that underlie the details of the Rule. In particular, Oblates are called to cherish silence, to extend hospitality, and to nurture reverence for all people and all creation. They come to accept the stark reality of evil and human weaknesses, both their own and those of others, and yet continually rise to welcome the healing love of Christ, Who is ever present to challenge us beyond our failings.

Oblates grow to appreciate the necessity of ample time for prayer as a primary and time-tested means of fostering life in response to God's grace; in particular, Oblates enter into the traditions of the Liturgy of the Hours and of the holy reading of Scripture (*lectio divina*). In these ways Oblates try to govern their whole lives by God's Word, with which they become permeated by the discipline of prayer. Perhaps the commitment of Oblates can best be summed up by Saint Benedict's urgent appeal to "listen," which is the first word of the Holy Rule. Realizing that God is speaking to us through every event and every person that they encounter, Oblates and monks share the goal of making every moment of their lives a prayerful offering to God.

To enter into such a life of continual surrender to God, Oblates must come to understand that the *Rule* is not so much a set of "rules" as a book of Christian wisdom, a time-tested interweaving of values and norms for living an intensely Christian life in community with others. Oblates come to see the Rule as a practical guide of life that disposes them more and more to heed the call to sanctity in the ordinary things of life. "Preferring nothing to Christ" becomes their motto in all circumstances, so that together with the monks of the Archabbey, they allow God to expand their hearts in Christ's love, however painful that process may be.

In this age of confusion and instability, the *Rule* provides Christians with a much-needed norm and a concrete way for discipleship. In this age of individualism, affiliation with the Archabbey as an Oblate provides fellowship, mutual support, and loving communion with monks and other Oblates in our common striving for the everlasting life for which God has so lovingly destined us all.

Oblates and Saint Benedict

Information about the life of Saint Benedict comes from Book II of the *Dialogues by Pope Saint Gregory the Great* (590-604). Benedict was born about the year 480 A.D. in Nursia, a small town north of Rome, Italy.

Although he was sent to Rome for higher education, the youth soon abandoned his studies because of the atmosphere of moral corruption in the big city. He went to live as a hermit for several years at a place called Subiaco, where in time he acquired a reputation for holiness and miracles.

Attracting many followers, he established monastic communities at Subiaco and then moved on to Monte Cassino about 529 A.D. It was at Monte Cassino that Benedict wrote the *Rule*, which combined fidelity to the best traditions of Christian monasticism with a spirit of moderation and of remarkable concern for the individual monk. During the following centuries, the monastic way of life outlined in the *Rule* spread throughout Europe, and Benedictine monasteries became centers of prayer, culture, and education.

The Rule (Chapter 59) mentions that monasteries could accept young boys, who were "offered" to them by their parents for their religious training and education. These boys lived in the community, shared its daily round of religious activities, and became known as "Oblates." In the course of time, adult lay people asked to be associated with the prayer and work of the monks, even while they remained with their homes, families, and secular occupations. Over the centuries such informal arrangements became more formalized, and these "secular Oblates" were officially received in a ceremony as they offered themselves to God and promised to regulate their lives according to the spirit of the *Rule* of Saint Benedict. These Oblates prayed in union with the monks as best they could and applied the teachings of the *Rule* to their lives in the world. Today thousands of Oblates throughout the world pray and work in spiritual union with Benedictine men and women of various communities, and they both receive and share spiritual strength and inspiration as a result of their affiliation as Oblates.

The Life of Saint Benedict

The basic facts about Saint Benedict's life come to us from Book Two of the *Dialogues of Saint Gregory the Great*, who reigned as Pope from 590 to 604 A.D., a half-century after the death of Benedict.

The monastic founder was born into a well-to-do family at Nursia, Italy, about the year 480. Although he was sent to Rome for higher education, he left after only a short time because he was disturbed by the vices of his fellow students and by the self-indulgent atmosphere of the

big city. Abandoning both his studies and his inheritance, Benedict chose to live as a hermit in a cave at Subiaco.

During this time of solitude and growth in prayer, a monk named Romanus quietly supplied him with necessities. After some three years, monks from a near-by monastery at Vicovaro, hearing of Benedict's reputation for holiness, asked him to be their abbot. Those monks, however, soon found his regulations too much for them; so they tried to serve him poisoned table wine. Their plot failed when Abbot Benedict blessed the goblet, which thereupon broke so that the poison flowed out.

Realizing the futility of trying to govern such an unruly community, he returned to his hermitage in Subiaco. As the fame of Benedict's sanctity spread, more and more people began coming to his cave for spiritual advice. In time a group of sincere disciples gathered around him, and he ultimately banded them into twelve monasteries, each with twelve monks and an abbot. Once again there was an attempt to kill Benedict, this time by a local priest who brought the abbot a loaf of poisoned bread. On this occasion Benedict sensed something amiss and had his pet raven carry the loaf away.

About the year 529, Benedict left the monasteries at Subiaco in charge of others and set off with several companions for Monte Cassino, located on a mountain 80 miles south of Rome. Taking possession of an abandoned fortress on top of the mountain, he proceeded to destroy the pagan shrines established there and replaced them with two Christian chapels.

It was at Monte Cassino that Benedict lived the rest of his life, wrote his *Rule* for Monks (abbreviated RB), and acquired a reputation as an outstanding man of God who could work wonders. He advised secular leaders, calmed invaders, showed care for the poor, sent out monks to preach, and made a new foundation at Terracina, the first of a long series of monasteries that would eventually grow out of Monte Cassino.

Toward the end of his life, the abbot had a noteworthy encounter with his sister Scholastica, who headed a group of nuns near Cassino. Benedict had to abandon plans to return to his monastery for the night when his sister's prayers brought about a heavy rain storm. As a result, the pair were able to engage in a long spiritual conversation that apparently prepared them for death. Shortly after the encounter, Benedict had a vision of Scholastica's entry into heaven. Then as his own death approached, he looked out of his window to see the whole world gathered in a single beam of light, whereby, as St. Gregory comments, Benedict's spirit was enlarged to embrace all things in Christ. After foreseeing his own death, Abbot Benedict died at Monte Cassino about the year 547.