

A Way Forward; The Benedictine Community is Motion

Opening Address of Abbot Primate, Gregory Polan, OSB

Questions for consideration:

- What does it mean to be an Oblate, to be thus connected to a monastic community?
- What is your experience of the relationship you find in relating to your monastic community?
- How is your relationship with God deepened, and how does that have an impact on your day to day life, your relationship with others?
- What expectations do you have of the monastic community of your oblation, and of its individual members?
- Do you think that the monastic community has expectations of you?

“These are important questions to consider, because if you want your contact with the community of your oblation to be something that enriches you personally, something that gives a spiritual direction to your life, something that has a positive impact on you and the life you lead and establishes ties that continue to grow over time—then you want to think seriously about this relationship.”

Key Statements:

“The theme of this Congress is ***A Way Forward: The Benedictine Community in Motion***. Such a title can leave no doubt that the way forward of which we speak is a spiritual path, taking us into deeper communion with God. You will walk this path in relationship with the monastery of your oblation, and with one another. In this session *I would like to reflect together with you on the relationship between you as an Oblate and the monastery to which you are connected.*”

“I believe that God has planted within the heart of each human being a need for spiritual intimacy with God. And it is almost inevitable that we come to this spiritual intimacy through the witness of another individual or community.”

“For so many Oblates, this contact with God is revealed and nurtured by the community to which they have joined themselves. It may be manifest in participation in prayer with the community, or in personal reflection in a place that is quiet and life-giving; it may arise in a relationship with a particular member of the monastic community who becomes a spiritual friend. Or it may be born in some act of service performed with members of the community, or simply from finding a space where you feel the inner freedom to give yourself the "gift of time" to listen to the divine voice that speaks to you through the Scriptures, or the liturgy, or the people and events in our lives.”

“We have to face the fact that you live as lay people in the world. You are people who have a relationship with God through a monastic community, but you also have families, neighbors, friends, co-workers and acquaintances to whom you relate every day. You have an impact on the lives of these people in any variety of ways—sometimes directly and sometimes indirectly. People see what you do, observe how you act, how you speak, what you say and what you don't say.”

“As Oblates, you create a living friendship with a monastic community; what makes it a living relationship is the fact that you receive from the community something of importance in your own life, and you then wish to give something back to this community or person from whom you have received this special, sacred, intimate, and truly living gift.

I like to think that our Oblates who have a relationship with a monastic community or one of its members create **a sacred triangle with God** at the top, and with the Oblate and their monastic community at the other two points. The relationship between the individual Oblate and the community is connected with this lower segment, and both have lines leading to God. Through the sacred friendship created between an Oblate and his or her monastic community, both the Oblate and the community are drawn to God. Truly, the relationship between the Oblate the monastic community is a two-way street, and I tell you this from experience.”

“When the mind and the heart “dance together,” they keep one another in step; they demonstrate the same beauty and unity that two people who dance express—or that two parts of a single person may express within—in a single movement of the Spirit. In fact, the Biblical use of the word *heart* (or *leb* in Hebrew) comprehends the mind and the heart working in concert to discern the ways of God, and then to follow them; it brings together the two processes which God has given us for discernment.”

“As you know so well, Oblates share in the prayer-life of the monastic community; you are a part of that rhythm of prayer which characterizes a monastic community. In time and with faith, we come to see ourselves as beloved sons and daughters of God.

Finding God's love in our lives can be a difficult path for some of us. Past hurts and disappointments, broken promises and dreams deferred, can all contribute to the challenge of experiencing God's love for us. Hopefully, this becomes simply another **“way forward,” a movement** toward God, when we are able to find within the monastic community where we have made our oblation a welcoming intimacy, a healing presence, an experience of loyal friendship.”

So often in our pilgrim journey through this life, we are trying to find the *will of God* for us. The text of Psalm 40 reads: “You delight not in sacrifice and offerings, but in an open ear. You delight not in burnt offering or victim. Then I said, ‘See, I have come.’ In the scroll of the book it stands written of me: ‘I delight to do your will, O my God; your instruction lies deep within me’” (vv. 7-9). These few verses offer two things for our reflection:

1. An “open ear” stands as an image which draws us into that divine-human dialogue, listening with “the ear of the heart.” Our rich monastic tradition of *lectio divina* helps us to listen to God's voice. Our contact with a monastic community draws us into that rhythm of listening with an open heart. God speaks to us; we just have to keep listening with an open heart— a heart ready to be surprised, to be taken aback, to be disappointed, to be consoled. And if our heart is open and ready, whatever comes to us will draw us toward “new life,” even when it challenges us to look again at our life, and to change direction if necessary. Our prayer is a response to God's initial word to us.

2. When we can say with the Psalmist, "Your instruction, O God, lies deep within me," we live with a remarkable freedom. In our daily living with the Scriptures, and especially with the Psalms, we hear the voice of God calling to us, inviting us, and re-creating us by the power of the Word. My brothers and sisters, this is "**our way forward**" towards God, towards reaping the rewards of a surrender to the Word of God as the way to follow Christ and live his Gospel. It's as simple, and as difficult, as that.

"The Oblates of a monastery have a special place in the hearts of the members of the community to which they belong. You are a gift to the monastic community. And this is not simply because of what you can do for them. You are a gift to them because of who you are—men and women of faith who join in the great search for true knowledge and an authentic experience of God in your lives. Your prayer for the members of your community, your presence and participation in their common life, reminds them that the teaching and example of Saint Benedict and Saint Scholastica continue to stand as a witness to the Gospel in our world today. You are an extension of the monastic community's witness, as you return to your homes, families, work places and neighborhoods, attesting to the values and hopes of the Gospel and *The Rule of Saint Benedict*. **The movement forward as Benedictine Communities in Motion** is through fidelity to what is God-centered and Christ-centered. Our welcome to you here in Rome must not be an accumulation of empty words. Rather let it stand as an invitation to you, our Oblates, to enter more fully into the Benedictine charisms of welcome, peace, prayer, and that movement through life that points us toward God in eternity. If we keep that vision before us, we will not be wanting in the things that matter in our earthly pilgrimage, because that vision involves us in **A Way Forward: The Benedictine Community in Motion** toward nothing less than eternal life."