



Br. Martin Erspamer, OSB

Obedience

A virtue that brings you closer to God

“He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them” (*Luke 2:51*). This Gospel passage holds an amusing image in my head. Jesus is gone for three days and nights and, upon being found and corrected by his mother, the following scene is Jesus going home with Mary and Joseph. Imagining this in modern time, I can hear Mary saying, “Get in the car.”

Obedience is often equated with children, but the *Rule* reminds us that it is required of everyone who wishes to do the will of God and not slide into individualism and selfishness. Genesis begins with God speaking and the cosmos listening, hearing, and in obedience becoming what God willed.

Genesis then moves to Adam and Eve, who failed to obey. They listened, they heard, but

their obedience was not to God, but to their own self-serving desires and to the attraction of false freedom.

This issue of the *Benedictine Oblate Quarterly* focuses on and explores the challenge of St. Benedict to understand the “labor of obedience.”

“Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from one who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice. The labor of obedience will bring you back to God from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience” (*Rule, Prologue*).

Kathleen Polansky, oblate
New Salisbury, IN



A POINT TO PONDER FROM *The Rule*

“Listen carefully, my child, to my instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart. This is advice from one who loves you; welcome it and faithfully put it into practice.

The labor of obedience will bring you back to God from whom you had drifted through the sloth of disobedience. This message of mine is for you, then, if you are ready to give up your own will, once and for all, and armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for Jesus, the Christ.”

Prologue 1-3

“In this very first paragraph of the *Rule*, Benedict is setting out the importance of not allowing ourselves to become our own guides, our own gods. Obedience, Benedict says – the willingness to listen for the voice of God in life – is what will wrench us out of the limitations of our own landscape.” (Sr. Joan Chittister, OSB, *Rule of Benedict: A Spirituality for the 21st Century*)

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Obedience: Just getting it done doesn't quite do it



Archabbot Kurt Stasiak, OSB

The Abbot: “I am so frustrated with Brother Marinara. Three times now, I’ve asked him to take this new assignment. He says he knows he could do it, but he simply doesn’t want to.”

Another monk: “Why don’t you just tell him to do it under obedience?”

The Abbot: “How sad it would be, were it to come to that!”

To the monks, obedience is much more than following instructions. Simply put, one is obedient when one does what one is told to do. But just as simply put, one becomes obedient only when one does that “in the Benedictine way.”

I offer two characteristics that determine the “Benedictine way” of obedience. Benedictine obedience is speedy. When monks receive a command, Benedict wants them to obey it “as promptly as if the command came from God himself” (*Rule 5:4*).

A prompt response shows that the monk is making progress, not just in obedience, but also in humility: he turns toward the words of his master and turns

away from his own desires. Benedictine obedience has speed to it, as witnessed so well by the disciples who, when called by Jesus, do not wait to mend, clean, and then hang their fishing nets, but simply drop them at once and follow him.

Benedictine obedience is spirited. For Benedict, doing what one is told – even promptly – is not necessarily fulfilling that command. “If a disciple obeys grudgingly, ... his action will not be accepted with favor by God, who sees that he is grumbling in his heart” (*Rule 5:17-18*).

Here Benedict simply states what any boss, parent or teacher knows: that a command obeyed with a pouting spirit may get the job done; but it will add to the dis-ease that weakens the Body of Christ rather than strengthens it.

For the monk, obedience is more than just doing the right thing. It is doing the right thing right away (“unhesitating obedience”: *Rule 5:1*) and with the right attitude (“God loves a cheerful giver”: *Rule 5:16; 2 Corinthians 9:7*).

This is sometimes difficult, to be sure, and so all the more reason to follow Benedict’s advice, that “What is not possible to us by nature, let us ask the Lord to supply by the help of his grace” (*Prologue, 41*).

*Archabbot Kurt Stasiak, OSB
Saint Meinrad Archabbey*

We must listen before we can obey



Janis Dopp

Obedience is one of the virtues that the shelter-in-place orders have helped to cultivate in us. We are definitely used to going our own way – where we want and when we want. Being

told to stay in one place for any length of time is so countercultural that almost everybody, at some point, has struggled to be obedient.

It might have seemed novel at the outset, but that got old soon enough, and we were left to come up with creative ways to expend that pent-up energy we all had!

As one of the monks pointed out to me, it was an opportunity for the oblates to actually live a cloistered life for a time. In fact, the entire world had become a monastery of sorts.

I remember being fascinated to discover that the word “obedience” comes from the Latin *obedire* which means “to hear.” So, being obedient is about “hearing” – and that means really trying to understand what is being said and why it is being said.

Obedience implies my acquiescence to an idea with understanding. Understanding gives way to a much more productive state of mind. I am obedient because I have heard and accepted a way of doing something that will be for the benefit of all.

Currently, we have heard that we should conscientiously wear face masks in public. While we may not want to do this particularly, we understand that it is for the greater good. While I may not appear to be

ill, I may still be a carrier of the virus. I obediently wear the mask for the sake of the community.

The *Rule of St. Benedict 71:1* says, “Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all.” Cultivating this virtue is a way of giving a blessing to others. It is not burdensome. Instead, it is an opportunity for each of us to participate in blessing the world on a daily basis. Isn’t that why we are here?

*Janis Dopp
Oblate Director*

We are called to take our place as prophets



Fr. Joseph Cox, OSB

One of the promises that our oblates make is “Obedience to the Will of God.” This is a promise to grow in discernment of God’s will

through prayer, spiritual direction and faithfulness to your religious tradition. Obedience is not to be a burden, but the response of a willing heart in service to God.

Obedience requires listening. Before people can obey God, they need to know what God asks of them. One important way to do this is to listen to as well as read God’s word as found in sacred Scripture. This occurs when oblates are attentive at the Liturgy of the Word at Eucharist. Oblates are also exposed to the Word of God every day when they practice *lectio*. This is the prayerful reading and reflection on Scripture. Many oblates use the Gospel reading for daily Mass as their material for *lectio*.

Benedictine oblates, monks and nuns listen and read Scripture to find out what the Lord wants us to know. But it is not just knowing. It is also doing. Jesus is the prime example for us.

In chapter 10 of the Gospel of St. Matthew, there is a section called the “mission narrative” in which Jesus calls the 12 disciples together and prepares to send them out. He gives them authority to drive out unclean spirits and to cure every disease and illness.

He tells them their destination and what to take along. He warns them they will face opposition and danger. Jesus teaches the 12 concerning their mission, and He tells them that there are risks, but God is faithful and they are not to be afraid, even when they are persecuted.

Like the prophets of the Old Testament, preaching the Word of God can be dangerous. But they are to have the courage of their faith because God is with them. Matthew is teaching how to be a follower of Jesus. He was writing to a community of Greek-speaking Jewish Christians located probably in Syria in the last quarter of the first century. They were being called to go out among the people and be disciples of the way of Jesus. This would not be easy.

The Gospel clearly describes what happened to Jesus, and it was likely that his followers would meet persecution and ridicule. Matthew writes to the believers in the faith

community and gives them instructions in terms Jesus used when speaking to his own disciples. Jesus prepared his disciples for their upcoming mission. They would have been aware of opposition to Jesus and the potential for violence. The disciples were probably very much afraid.

Jesus fully embodied his tradition of prophetic compassion and courage, dying for his love of the outcast and the stranger, and confronting the status quo when it worked against the good of the people. As a prophet, Jesus lived at the margins and interacted with other marginal people. Jesus’ compassion took many forms. He was ready to heal and forgive and to invite people to freedom from their enslavements.

There is a line of great prophets in the Old Testament, to Jesus, to the disciples he trained for mission and sent out, down to us. There is a chain of mission, of continuity, of discipleship. It is a line of thinking about being followers of Jesus as prophets that does not end with Him but carries forth to us today.

A prophet is someone who identifies and gives voice to the sins of one’s culture. It is to wake up to the truth

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that things are not right. Pretending that things are fine is no longer an option. The prophetic voice interrupts business as usual. It calls attention to and says no to the powers of dehumanization, wherever they may be. This vision can apply to the ways we live as a society and as citizens of the world. Prophets shake the world out of its indifference.

Actually, all of us, through obedience to our Baptism, are called to be prophets. We may say, “Who, me?!” Yes! The chain of mission, a continuity of discipleship, comes from our Baptism. Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and the Vatican II document, *Lumen Gentium*, tell us that all baptized people have the mission of being prophet. This is done by proclamation of Christ by word and testimony of life. It is by what we say and what we do. It is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of life.

Everyone who has been baptized has the dignity of being prophet, priest

and king, in Christ. Through Baptism, we have been incorporated into Christ and are now members of his body. Not just some, but all Christians, by Baptism, are made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God. Each in our own way is made a sharer in the priestly, prophetic and kingly functions of Christ. So, it is up to us to live our calling and mission in the Church and in the world.

Obedience to being a prophet can be dangerous. It stirs things up. The tendency to be timid and protect ourselves realizes that prophetic activity is dangerous. We see examples of such in Jeremiah, Jesus, his disciples, the early Christians, right down to today. When we stand on the side of justice and against dehumanizing others, prophets can be anywhere from derided to killed.

Scripture and the Church tell us that, through obedience to our Baptism, we are called to be prophets. How? That depends on each of our circumstances. Obedience calls us to speak up when

we encounter injustice and to defend the defenseless, to be in solidarity with minorities and those at the edges of society.

In obedience, we testify that our heart needs to change and then call others to a change of heart. We obey when we follow the example of the Lord Jesus Christ, who had a special love and concern for the outcasts, tax collectors, prostitutes, foreigners, lepers and those whom society shunned. He spoke up for those who had no power or status and still does today through you and me, even when we know that it may bring ridicule or misunderstanding.

We obey the Lord by doing what is asked of us. We can know this best by listening to and reading God’s word in Scripture. Of course, we reflect on it and meditate on it, but we are called to put it into action. This how we live out our Baptism.

*Fr. Joseph Cox, OSB
Oblate Chaplain*

Notes for Novices: Finding fidelity in uncertain times



*Br. Stanley Rother
Wagner, OSB*

The abbot, two confreres and I were having a conversation over lunch a few years ago about various themes from our lives before we came to the monastery. I

remarked – rather blithely, I recall – that “I hate it when people tell me what to do.” Fr. Abbot Kurt replied, “And you want to be a monk?”

Having the grace of hindsight and countless moments to learn about obedience as a monk has softened me (hopefully) with regard to obedience.

What does it mean for me to be obedient?

When I first made that remark a few years ago, I understood obedience as more of a one-way conversation that a superior gives to someone, like: “You will do this and I do not care if you like it or not.” That is not obedience. Obedience is much more interesting.

Br. Martin and I were talking several months ago, and I related the dialogue that the abbot and I had several years earlier. After chuckling over my brazen remark, I added: “I still do not like being told what to do, but rather I get to do what is asked of me.”

God gives us ample moments to listen to Him and practice obedience. For me, it could mean apologizing for something I said, though my pride may take a hit.

For you, it could be your boss asking you to stay late at work when you would rather go home; it could be your children begging you to take them to a concert, though the singer’s musical stylings are too contemporary for you; or it could be your duty to wear a mask in public to slow the spread of a virus.

Obedience is about listening and about getting to do what is asked of you.

*Br. Stanley Rother Wagner, OSB
Oblate Novice Mentor*

Opening doors to deeper faith: Beloved

Editor's note: This is the second part of a three-part series on spiritual direction.



Beverly Weinhold

In a time when I was undergoing a personal struggle, a friend gave me a children's book titled *You are Special*. It's a story about a little wooden

boy named Punchinello. Punchinello suffered from low self-esteem. Comparing himself to others, he didn't think he was good enough.

One day he met Lucia, who was more self-assured. He asked her how she did it. "It's easy," she replied. "Every day, I go to see Eli." So he went, too. When Eli called Punchinello by name, he was afraid: "You know my name?" he asked. "Of course, I do," Eli replied. "I made you."¹

Working as both a spiritual director and psychotherapist, I see people like Punchinello who struggle with self-worth. Self-worth, or how we see ourselves as persons, is a common theme in both practices. Some people compare themselves to others and come up short. Others have failed at work or a relationship and feel ashamed. Some have sinned and, though repentant, can't accept God's forgiveness.

Others have experienced dysfunctional dynamics affecting their capacity for close relationships. In my case, I felt less than. I grew up on the wrong side of the tracks, and my parents were hardworking, but poor. And my classmates never let me forget it.

At age 16, I had a conversion experience and was baptized into Jesus

Christ. Accepting God's acceptance, I became a more solid self. But I struggled to find words to describe this sacred relationship. I called myself a child of God (*John 1:12*). But I knew there was more.

When I read "This is my beloved Son" (*Matthew 3:1*) at Jesus' baptism, it hit home. Because I was baptized into Christ, I must be beloved, too. This opened a doorway to faith that anchored my worth and crystalized my vocation.

"Beloved" is a word used repeatedly in the Old and New Testaments. In the Hebrew scriptures, it corporately references Israel as God's chosen people. In the Greek New Testament, "beloved" is personalized. Writers reference their recipients as beloved (*I Corinthians 4:17, John 19:26, Romans 16:5*). Both Testaments show that "beloved" is more than a term of endearment. Rather, it's a seal of deep identity denoting dignity, equality and respect created in God's image.

I am not aware that St. Benedict ever speaks of himself as beloved. But leaving his family and learning God's ways in Subiaco shows a man who not only loved God intensely but was loved lavishly by God. Scripture teaches that "we love because Christ first loved us" (*John 4:19*). In that same spirit, St. Benedict addresses his monks as "a father who loves you" (*Prologue, 1*).

Spiritual scholar Esther de Waal emphasizes in her book *Seeking Life: The Baptismal Invitation of the Rule of St. Benedict* that the *Rule's* Prologue recursively invites Christians to renew

our baptismal vocation: "There, at the waters of the Jordan, Jesus Christ knew who he was, with no agenda given – he simply knew that he was deeply loved.... This is the gift of beloved-ness, and it tells me that God delights in me."²

Unwrapping this gift of beloved-ness opens a door to deeper faith. Practicing that truth is as much an antidote for our low self-esteem as it was for Punchinello's. De Waal invites us to practice beloved-ness by reflecting on the *Rule's* Prologue with *lectio*.

Another way is to rehearse the meaning of our baptism: We are created in God's image. We are forgiven of our sins. We are adopted into God's family. We are becoming a new creation. "Those who were not my people I will call my people, and her who was not beloved I will call 'beloved'" (*Romans 9:25*).

Sitting in Eli's presence and seeing Eli see him, Punchinello found that his self-worth was strengthened: "Eli stooped down and picked him up.... 'Hmm,' the Maker spoke thoughtfully. 'Looks like you've been given some bad marks.'

'I didn't mean to, Eli. I really tried hard.'

'Oh, you don't have to defend yourself to me, child. I don't care what others think.... All that matters is what I think. And I think you are pretty special.'³

Beverly Weinhold, oblate novice
Louisville, KY

¹ M. Lucado, (1997). *You Are Special*, 23. Crossway: IL.

² E. de Waal, (2009). *Seeking Life: The Baptismal Invitation of the Rule of St. Benedict*, 78, 79. Liturgical: MN.

³ M. Lucado, (1997). *You Are Special*, 27. Crossway: IL.

The Maker of Masks: Brenda Black



Brenda Black, executive secretary for the Oblate Office, models her Daughters of the American Revolution mask.

Brenda Black is a member of the National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, and she holds the position of chapter regent in Boonville, IN.

On March 20, 2020, at the beginning of the quarantine, a call was issued asking any Daughters who knew how to sew to volunteer at making masks. Many essential workers had contacted the NSDAR seeking masks to be donated. Making the masks and shipping them to wherever they were needed would be at the expense of each member.

Brenda is a semi-retired family and consumer science teacher (home economics teacher for those born before 1990) and knows how to sew. Anyone who sews always has a stash of fabric that never seems to end.

Brenda started out making masks with a goal of 100. Somewhere she lost control! She is at 900 masks and still sewing. The national office in Washington, D.C., has kept count of the masks and PPEs (personal protective equipment) made by

members. As of July 31, 2020, almost 600,000 masks and about 45,000 PPEs have been donated.

Wyoming, Arizona, Texas, Kentucky, New Jersey, Iowa, and Indiana are some of the states that receive Brenda's masks. They shipped one order of masks to the state of Washington, only to be notified later that the military masks ended up at a base in Japan.

Some masks went to women's shelters, HUD (Department of Housing and Urban Development) housing units, first responders, churches, schoolteachers, students, families of migrant workers, local restaurants and as far as New Jersey. The places that received masks that were special to Brenda included a Navajo reservation, two military bases, and educational facilities that teach at-risk students. Also, Brenda made masks for the

monks who work in the Oblate Office, including some specialty masks requested by one monk.

There were some "special requests" for masks that were lots of fun to make. Most were embroidered with special designs on them. Since they were more labor intensive, a donation to her DAR chapter was requested as the pandemic caused the cancellation of the chapter's fundraiser. Some special requests included Calvin and Hobbes, Spider-Man, Toy Story, Batman, Chicago Cubs, Tampa Bay Buccaneers, political masks, school sports – and other characters too numerous to mention.

Brenda is not only a vital member of the Oblate Office and editorial staff; she is one who understands obedience as answering the call when needed.

*Kathleen Polansky, oblate
New Salisbury, IN*



These are among the many mask designs Brenda Black has made during the pandemic.

Liturgical Chant: In the beginning was the Word



Charles Thatcher

In the summer of 1963, a not-yet-famous rock band named The Beatles recorded the song, “She Loves You.” Its toe-tapping refrain was a simple phrase, sung three times: “She loves you, yeah, yeah, yeah.” This feel-good song became a hit, but not because of its banal lyrics. It was all about the music!

By contrast, liturgical chant is all about the words. To quote Fr. Columba Kelly, OSB, “chant is sung speech.” Whether the chant melody is simple or complex, it is at the service of the text to which it gives expression.

How does this music serve the text? Words are the foundation out of which tones arise; a phrase of text brings these tones together to form a melodic motif, whose contours rise and fall with the word and phrase accents. As phrases come together in sentences, the musical motifs form a melody. The rhythm of this melody is the rhythm of its text. The meaning within the text is expressed and expanded by the act of singing it.

A chant melody does not come together haphazardly. It takes a composer, using creativity, knowledge and intuition, to discern the music within the text. Essential, too, is the inspiration that comes from doing a sort of musical *lectio divina*. The finest chants are not just sung prayers, but also spiritual art.

Liturgical chant has some traits in common with other types of song, for

example, the recitatives of classical opera, through which the action of a story unfolds. Chant stands out because of the degree to which the word is given primacy. This is done through pure melody, without relying on harmony or instrumentation to give full expression to the text.¹

The monks of Saint Meinrad sing English plainsong and Latin Gregorian chant as they gather in prayer throughout the day. For the most part, the chant texts come verbatim from sacred Scripture. The monks sing to God, using God’s own word.

In the spirit of hospitality, the monks welcome guests to their liturgies. Worship aids are available that allow all to join in the spoken and sung prayers. Guests are asked to speak and sing quietly so they can hear the monks and thus adapt to their rhythm and pace. (Anyone with choir experience knows the importance of listening while singing.)

Those who have attended liturgies at Saint Meinrad in person or via livestream may notice that the chants are not all alike. For example, the psalms of the Divine Office are sung to simple psalm tones, ideal for the recitation of these multi-strophic texts. Office hymns have a repeating tune and poetic texts.

Another chant form is the antiphon, a type of refrain with a prose text (generally from Scripture), sung in association with a psalm or canticle. The antiphons of the Mass (e.g., Entrance and Communion) alternate with psalm verses, while the antiphons of Lauds and Vespers are like

bookends, sung only at the beginning and end of the psalms and canticles.²

Fr. Colman Grabert, OSB, composed one of the more recognizable Saint Meinrad chants, an inspired setting of the Philippians Canticle sung every Saturday at Vespers.



This QR Code will access a recording of this canticle.

The antiphon, “Christ died for our sins and rose that we might live,” illustrates how even a simple melody can perfectly interpret a profound text. After the antiphon is sung, the chant takes flight, as cantors sing the verses of the canticle, each verse punctuated by the acclamation, “Lord Jesus!” Prior to the doxology and final antiphon, the whole community’s voice soars to heaven, declaring that “Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father!”

It is apparent how, from start to finish, the music derives from the text, brings out its meaning, and helps singers and hearers assimilate it. With the aid of such liturgical chants, we are able “to sing the psalms in such a way that our minds are in harmony with our voices” (*RB 19:7*).

Charles Thatcher, oblate
Winter Springs, FL

Smugmug

For more photos of
Saint Meinrad events, visit:

<http://saint-meinrad.smugmug.com>

¹ By its nature, chant is unaccompanied. At Saint Meinrad, organ accompaniment of the community’s chant is not an essential part of the music, but merely helps the monks keep the chants on pitch.

² The four Marian Antiphons (e.g., *Salve Regina*) are an exception, in that they are not connected to a psalm or canticle.

Considering the Psalms:

Psalm 40 (39): ‘Ears open to obedience you gave me’

I waited, waited for the LORD; who bent down and heard my cry, Drew me out of the pit of destruction, out of the mud of the swamp, Set my feet upon rock, steadied my steps, And put a new song in my mouth, a hymn to our God.

Many shall look on in awe and they shall trust in the LORD. Happy those whose trust is the LORD, who turn not to idolatry or to those who stray after falsehood.

How numerous, O LORD, my God, you have made your wondrous deeds! And in your plans for us there is none to equal you. Should I wish to declare or tell them, too many are they to recount.

Sacrifice and offering you do not want; but ears open to obedience you gave me. Holocausts and sin-offerings you do not require; so I said, “Here I am; your commands for me are written in the scroll.

To do your will is my delight; my God, your law is in my heart!” I announced your deed to a great assembly; I did not restrain my lips; you, LORD, are my witness.

Your deed I did not hide within my heart; your loyal deliverance I have proclaimed. I made no secret of your enduring kindness to a great assembly.

LORD, do not withhold your compassion from me; may your enduring kindness ever preserve me. For all about me are evils beyond count; my sins so overcome me I cannot see. They are more than the hairs of my head; my courage fails me.

LORD, graciously rescue me! Come quickly to help me, LORD! Put to shame and confound all who seek to take my life. Turn back in disgrace those who desire my ruin. Let those who say “Aha!” know dismay and shame.

But may all who seek you rejoice and be glad in you. May those who long for your help always say, “The LORD be glorified.”

Though I am afflicted and poor, the Lord keeps me in mind. You are my help and deliverer; my God, do not delay!

—New American Bible, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, <http://www.nccbuscc.org/>



Kathleen Polansky

Have you ever just sat and examined how the pieces of your life fit together? How God’s plans require us to have ears open not only to listening and hearing, but also to obedience? How we are challenged to act on what God is laying out before us?

Psalm 40 warns us that offerings and sacrifice are not the things God is seeking from us, but rather the obedience that comes from delight in God’s will.

I find it amazing that people and places so often come at the right time, and the only thing needed to do is to say, “Yes.” Even the times that appear to head in a direction that seems confusing can open us to hearing God’s call for greater service through obedience.

I marvel at how my life progressed to where it is now. I quit a paying job with benefits, so I could remain faithful to a promise I made to second graders as their CCD teacher. That decision led to my theology studies and a career I love as a theology teacher. How I met my husband and we became best friends to now celebrating over 26 years of marriage

is still a series of events that keeps us asking, “How did that happen?”

None of these events were in my plans. They did, however, require a level of trust that it was God offering compassion and kindness beyond anything I deserved or could have produced for myself.

I am awed at how God is, often in seemingly mundane moments, setting our feet on rock, steadying our steps and offering new life – if only we will listen, hear and act on it.

Psalm 40 speaks beautifully of obedience to the Lord in a way that recognizes God’s presence and

guidance. It reminds us that to do the will of God is the way to true joy. Our challenge is to hear God's nudge, listen for it and trust that in God's plans for us there is no equal. Obedience asks us to set aside our own will and to follow the will of another. This is difficult, living in a society that worships individualism and self-determination.

Our choice to obey is humbling and requires a genuine relationship with God. Our worship is not in superficial offerings and sacrifice, but in hearing and doing the will of God. The challenge of this psalm is to recognize the behaviors that conflict with hearing and obedience. We must see the falsehoods that pull us away from listening and hearing, then actively work against their influence. We need

to fix that which confounds and overcomes us.

Fr. Michael Casey writes, "For St. Benedict, the opposite of obedience is not rebelliousness or insubordination, but laziness, negligence, doing nothing. In the Prologue is expressed a labor of obedience against the laziness of disobedience. Obedience is the opposite of inertia. ... Obedience is to act now, in this moment. ... A fuller righteousness is required. It is the good zeal. It is going 'the extra mile' of the Gospel. It is sensitivity to the promptings of the Spirit, not just to obey to commands."

According to the *Rule*, "Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot but to each other, since we know that it is by this way of

obedience that we go to God" (*RB 71:1*).

If we ask God to help us, it follows that we must listen and hear that which God has chosen as an answer to our plea. We have placed our will into God's hands. Our next step is to hear, to obey, and to act. "Sacrifice and offering you do not want; but ears open to obedience you gave me" (*Ps 40:6*).

I am a fan of the TV show "Blue Bloods." A line that sticks with me, spoken by Frank Reagan (Tom Selleck), is, "You're listening, but you're not hearing. Fix that!" I wonder if God says that to us.

*Kathleen Polansky, oblate
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The Busy Benedictine: On obedience

The Busy Benedictine is an occasional column about trying to be like a monk when you're working and taking care of kids.



Edward Castronova

Obedience has become a dirty word. My work colleagues would never agree that it is important to obey a superior, especially when you disagree with the policy.

When people at work follow orders they don't like, they think it has been forced on them to do so, and that's just the way it is. The System imposed its will. It would never occur to them to embrace the orders given as an act of obedience, a good unto itself. In our world, very few think it is good to obey.

Teenagers espouse this rebellion. We are now in that stage of life where our older teenage children criticize us for not being harder on them. The irony! "You guys are like drapes in the wind," says 17-year-old Luca. "You

should craft a policy and then be firm to make sure we follow it."

Ah yes. That is what we should do, be firmer people. Being who we are, however, drapes in the wind is all we can manage.

Can you convince a teenager that obedience is a good unto itself? "Luca, what would happen if you allowed the drapes to stop you, even though they are merely drapes?" It is a hard sell; you are pitching a mentality that our entire society denounces.

Society says that you should push through, around, over or under a rule. If you succeed, the fault is in the rule and its enforcement. Not in us; certainly not in us.

We, like my daughter, yearn for a firm God. Wouldn't it be easier if every time we sinned, we got zapped with a divine jolt? Wouldn't it be

easier if God drafted his commandments and then made sure that we followed them? But God is like drapes in the wind. He does not compel us to be good. It is our decision to obey or not.

*Edward (Ted) Castronova, oblate
Bloomington, IN*

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Workers in the Vineyard

Obedience begins by listening for God's word



John Brooks

St. Benedict begins his *Rule*, “Listen carefully, my son, to the master’s instructions, and attend to them with the ear of your heart” (*Prologue, 1*).

Obedience, so it

seems, is about listening and attending to what you hear with the ear of your heart.

What do we listen for, how do we know when we hear it, and what do we do after we hear it? For me, my search begins with my favorite chapters of the *Rule*: chapter 4, “The tools for good works”; chapter 5, “Obedience”; chapter 6, “Restraint of Speech”; and chapter 7, “Humility.”

In chapter 4, St. Benedict tells us, “Your way of acting should be different from the world’s way; the love of Christ must come before all else” (*RB 4:20-21*). In chapter 5, he

writes, “The first step of humility is unhesitating obedience, which comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all” (*RB 5:1-2*).

In chapter 6, St. Benedict reminds us, “Speaking and teaching are the master’s task; the disciple is to be silent and listen” (*RB 6:6*). In chapter 7, he tells us, “The first step of humility, then, is that a man keeps the fear of God always before his eyes and never forgets it” (*RB 7:10*).

We listen for God. It is in the silence of our hearts that we listen and hear God. It is in the words and actions of others we listen and hear God. It is in God’s creation, the beauty and complexity of nature, that we listen and hear God. When our way of acting becomes different from the world’s way and God becomes the center of our lives, we know we have heard God.

St. Benedict tells those who hear God to “put aside their own concerns ... lay down whatever they have in hand,

leaving it unfinished ... follow the voice of authority” and eagerly “take the narrow road of which the Lord says: ‘Narrow is the road that leads to life’ (*Mt 7:14*)” (*RB 5:7-8, 11*).

Obedience leads us to the narrow road of Christ, but listening to God and attending to what we hear leads us to our road. A road that narrowly focuses on our quest for eternal life, but widens as we peel away, as an onion, the layers of life that shield our hearts from the love and light of God. As our road widens, we spread the love of God with our actions.

Our road is unique to each of us. It is a collage painting of our answers to the voice of God in our hearts, detailing our trials, our joys, our loves and our sorrows. Our road is revealed in others as we are free to joyously pour out the water of charity, feed the roots of hope, grow the branches of faith, and build our community garden.

John Brooks, oblate
Columbus, IN

Reflections from the Wilderness

After living in their house for several years, our friends realized that their living room was sinking. Cracks appeared on the walls and a window would no longer open. They learned that this room had been added without a foundation. Rectifying the shoddy work would take months as builders laid a new foundation.

They had the work done and, when I visited them afterward, I didn’t see much difference. Although now the cracks were gone and the window opened, I understood that a solid foundation matters.

This is true in our lives as well. Jesus shared a parable about wise and foolish builders to illustrate the folly of not listening to Him (*Luke 6:46-49*). Those who hear and are obedient to his words are like the person who builds a house on a firm foundation, unlike those who hear but ignore his words. Jesus assured his listeners that when the storms come, their house would stand. Their faith and obedience would not be shaken.

We can find peace knowing that, as we listen to and trust and obey Jesus, He forms a strong foundation for our

lives. We can strengthen our love for Him through reading the Bible, praying, and learning from other Christians.

Then when we face the torrents of rain lashing against us, whether by betrayal, pain or disappointment, we can trust that our foundation is solid. Our savior will provide the support we need if only we will be obedient. May we listen to and obey what God has revealed in the Scriptures.

Ron Lewis, oblate
Greencastle, IN

Meeting the Monks: Fr. Germain Swisshelm, OSB



Fr. Germain Swisshelm, OSB, at work in the Archabbey carpentry shop.

It was a watershed moment. Fr. Germain Swisshelm, OSB, was in his senior year of college at the Diocese of Cleveland's seminary in Cincinnati. As far as he could tell, he was headed straight for ordination and subsequent service as a diocesan priest. Until he met some Benedictine seminarians attending classes with him that year.

As he rubbed shoulders with them, they kept talking about their home on the Hill. They talked about the liturgy. They talked about the Archabbey Church. They talked about the buildings on campus. They talked about programs.

The contemplative life of the Benedictine community was drawing him like a magnet. He read through the *Rule of St. Benedict* in secret, then wondered how to break the news to the diocese about his strong leanings toward the monastic life of the Archabbey.

He need not have worried. "It all went smoothly," he recalls, as Archabbot Bonaventure Knaebel, OSB, received him as a novice in July 1956.

Taking the plunge, he made his first monastic vows the next year on the

Feast of the Assumption, August 15, 1957. Right on time, he finalized his vows on the same feast in 1960. Ordination followed on September 25.

The new priest soon found himself back in the classroom, this time as a teacher of high school mathematics in St. Placid Hall for two years.

Then the world shifted under his feet. The Archabbey intended to establish its Los Piños mission in the city of Huaraz, Peru, in the heart of the Andes Mountains. Archabbot Bonaventure needed a few good men to launch the work. He asked for volunteers. Fr. Germain accepted the assignment given to him.

One of the first orders of business in the new mission was to learn the local language. Since pre-Inca times, that language has been Quechua (pronounced Ketch-wa), spoken in numerous dialects throughout the Andean region of South America. With the aid of local native speakers, Fr. Germain mastered this new language.

Taking the task further, over the next several years he produced a Quechua-Spanish dictionary, several other related texts and, most notably, a

nine-volume manuscript of the New Testament in Quechuan. Fr. Germain celebrated Mass and heard confessions in the native language of the people.

Although the Great Peruvian Earthquake of 1970 (see *Meet a Monk, Benedictine Oblate Quarterly, Winter 2020*) punctuated his service in Peru, it did not end it. Ill health in 1975 is what sent Fr. Germain back to the Archabbey and a different assignment.

Since 1980, he has celebrated the Saturday Mass at the Monte Cassino Shrine. Due to the current pandemic, those services have been suspended.

Since 1996, he also has served as coordinator of liturgical readings for the monastic community. He estimates he has spent thousands of hours researching and selecting writings of the Church fathers to be used alongside the Scripture readings used in the Archabbey's four-year lectionary cycle in the Divine Office. With his academic background in history and philosophy, Fr. Germain enjoys mining the vault for theological gems to share with the entire community.

Fr. Germain, we thank you!

*Angie McDonald, oblate
Huntingburg, IN*



Fr. Germain Swisshelm, OSB, in Peru.

Introductions: From Monks

Editor's note: We will enjoy the opportunity this year of working with four of the monastic seminarians who are in their third year of theology studies. They will work with the oblate chapters during the school year, thus fulfilling their pastoral ministry requirements. Below, we asked each one to briefly introduce themselves.



Br. Jerome Aubert

I am a monk of St. Joseph Abbey in Louisiana. I grew up in Baton Rouge and moved to New Orleans when I was 16 years old. I began discerning

religious life when I was 17 after a powerful conversion experience at the March for Life in Washington, D.C.

I went to Loyola University in New Orleans and earned a degree in religious studies. I was involved in the various retreat groups and ministry opportunities that Loyola offered. I discerned with several religious orders throughout college, but zeroed in on Benedictine life during my senior year. St. Joseph Abbey felt like home more and more each time I visited.

I spent one year at my abbey's seminary college, and since then I have been a monk of my abbey for the past five years. I am now studying theology at Saint Meinrad, hoping to become a priest and a faculty member of my abbey's seminary. I would love to teach Scripture or a biblical language.

While attending Loyola for four years, Jesuit spirituality strongly influenced my faith development. I think the Jesuit ideal of "finding God in all things" has been very compatible with Benedictine spirituality, which has taught me to experience God's presence in the ordinary aspects of life and in the rhythm of the monastic timetable.

In the past five years, I have grown in my capacity to hear God's voice in

prayer, meals, academics, work in the library, walks in the woods, house chores and community recreation. It is my conviction that God deeply loves us as we are and strives to manifest this love to us through the world. My prayer for this year is that all of us might become more zealous in allowing ourselves to see and know God.

Br. Jerome Aubert, OSB



Br. Aloysius Sarasin

I hope and pray that all of you are remaining safe and healthy during this time of pandemic.

My name is Br. Aloysius Sarasin, OSB, and I am a monk of St.

Anselm Abbey in Manchester, NH. Originally from Massachusetts, I graduated from St. Anselm College in 2017 with a bachelor's degree in theology.

Shortly after graduation, I entered the novitiate and a year later professed my first vows on July 7, 2018. Following my profession, the abbot assigned me to study for the priesthood at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. I am currently entering Third Theology.

During college, I worked as an emergency medical technician for a private ambulance company in Massachusetts. I was asked by my abbot to keep my certifications up to date, and Saint Meinrad has allowed me to do just that with my volunteer work as an EMT for the Saint Meinrad Volunteer Fire Department.

I, along with Br. Benjamin Brown, OSB, serve alongside 28 lay men and women as a 24/7/365 on-call department. I firmly believe this is a unique way to live out St. Benedict's call for us to care for the sick in and around the St. Meinrad area.

As a visiting monk, I have the distinct privilege and joy of residing in the monastery, where I have come to know many of the good monks who have played an important role in your life as an oblate. I hope to one day be able to meet many of you in person, but until that time comes, please be assured of my prayers for you and your families.

Br. Aloysius Sarasin, OSB



Br. Kolbe Wolniakowski

My name is Br. Kolbe Wolniakowski. I entered Saint Meinrad Archabbey as a candidate in May 2015 and made my final vows in August

2019. I have been studying in our school since August 2016 and this fall will enter my third year of theological studies.

I grew up in Pewamo, MI, a tiny town with a deep Catholic tradition. I was blessed to be raised surrounded by families who worked together to build a thriving community. Being the oldest of 25 grandkids on my mother's side and one of the 11 grandchildren on my father's side, I have always had a deep love for family life.

Entering Saint Meinrad has given me the chance to dive deep into the faith in which my family raised me. I have come to appreciate the deep mysteries, which I was baptized into as a Catholic.

Learning how the *Rule of St. Benedict* helps guide a person toward a more profound love of God, neighbor, and self has been a large part of my journey at Saint Meinrad.

For a brief time, I served as a dean of the oblate chapters in Michigan and Merrillville, where I shared this understanding and had the opportunity to give talks at several chapters.

Because of conflicts with seminary formation and education, I had to step away from those duties to focus on my studies. While I have been away for a time, I look forward to this year and the chance to spend time again with the oblates of Saint Meinrad.

Br. Kolbe Wolniakowski, OSB



Br. Nathaniel Szidik

In 2014 I entered Saint Meinrad Archabbey and professed solemn vows in January 2019. My introduction to Saint Meinrad was as a high school student through the “One Bread, One Cup” program. “One Bread, One Cup” is a week-long summer liturgical conference at Saint Meinrad for high school students across the nation. College students help facilitate these conferences.

After high school, I worked with “One Bread, One Cup” as a college student. It was during this time in high school and college that I began thinking about a monastic vocation. My encounters with the monks of Saint Meinrad and my interaction with the place planted seeds deep within my heart for a religious vocation.

As I grew older and entered the working world after college, I came to

realize that I could no longer ignore these seeds. I felt the need to try out the vocation.

I was born in Cleveland, OH, but I spent most of my growing years in Grand Rapids, MI. After high school, I attended the University of Dayton in Ohio and graduated with a chemical engineering degree.

I then moved to the greater St. Louis area and started working for United States Steel as a production manager in part. Today, I am in my third year of theology at Saint Meinrad Seminary and School of Theology. Ordination to the diaconate will be in the spring of 2021 and priesthood ordination in 2022.

My responsibilities include being the master of ceremonies and a co-organizer of Peanut Brother. I am also interested in health and fitness. I enjoy distance running and road biking. Since 2016, I have been a certified personal trainer with the American Council on Exercise.

Br. Nathaniel Szidik, OSB

Emotional intelligence: Learning what to do with our feelings



Br. Francis Wagner

Growing in patience and emotional intelligence is something we all need to work on (especially during these troubled times of COVID-19).

Recognizing that and being willing to deal with them is half the battle!

Feelings come and go, and in themselves are neither sinful nor virtuous. What matters is what we do

with our feelings – how we act upon them, by what means, and to what end. For example, many people think anger is a sin. It is not. What one does because of anger may be a sin, but it also may be virtuous. Many wrongs in this world, many injustices, would never be corrected without righteous anger.

We must be careful about immediately acting on our feelings without the benefit of reason, which is a gift of God. Reason, guided by the Holy Spirit, must direct our emotions – not the other way around.

Doing this is difficult, and will often take a lifetime to accomplish – and always in imperfect fashion. But it is worth the struggle. What does this struggle look like in practical terms? One may have heard the adage that when one becomes angry, count to 10 before you say or do anything in response.

I might count a little (or a lot) higher than that, but the point is clear – one needs to pause a moment and let reason catch up with our emotions before acting.

Continued on Page 18

Obedience seems to go against our culture



Kathy Hurt

Few people would take pride in being known for their obedience. In a culture that sets self-determination and ego gratification as supreme values, setting aside the freedom to chart one's own course in favor of following the course set by another, denying ego desires to place oneself at another's direction – these are not behaviors that garner approval by most.

As a pastor, I hear from couples who meet with me to prepare for marriage an expectation that I will not be having them say vows with any mention of obedience. Other than in certain hierarchical settings (such as when, unless a person is at the top of the hierarchy, obedience to whoever is of a higher rank is built into the system), being obedient is likely to be viewed as some sort of weakness, a

sign that one is incapable of managing life independently.

All of which can make St. Benedict's call for obedience as an ongoing priority in a life of faith hard to accept. Schooled from the time we are born to think for ourselves, to be in control, to put what we want first, we can find that overriding those patterns, replacing them with a new pattern in which we follow rather than lead, is not likely to come easily.

All of which may be why St. Benedict also set listening as the first response for anyone "who yearns for life and desires to see good days" (*RB Prologue, 15*).

The very word "obedience" has its Latin roots in *obaudire*, standing by ready to listen. Again, much in our culture runs contrary to this: we do far more talking than listening, and we prioritize self-expression, making known what is on our minds, above hearing what might be on the mind of another.

Given how difficult it is to be obedient, to silence my inner demands so that I can hear what God and others might be asking of me, the only way I am likely to be able to be obedient is if my motivation is one of love. Love alone is the response that sets aside my own will for the will of another to be primary. St. Benedict points toward this when he notes that obedience "comes naturally to those who cherish Christ above all" (*RB 5:2*) and that "it is love that impels them" (*RB 5:10*).

Learning to follow rather than lead, learning to obey rather than control and direct, will be a lifelong challenge in a culture that constantly urges us the other way. But with each step in obedience, discovering the joy of having God be in charge and the ease of Jesus' yoke when He is walking right alongside, the path of listening and obedience grows a bit easier.

Kathy Hurt, oblate
Louisville, KY

Obedience: A lesson on listening



Peyton Reed

I remember a Jewish teacher, whom we would have called Messianic, say that, in the Old Testament, to obey means to hear. Later I learned that it relates to the English word to hearing. So I checked it:

Obedience in Hebrew is: shema (שמע). It means to hear, to listen, to give attention, to understand, to submit to, and to obey. There is only one word in Hebrew for

obedience, and it is this word – shema. This Hebrew word is also generally translated as "hear."

obey (v.) c. 1300, *obeien*, "carry out the commands of (someone); submit to (a command, rule, etc.); be ruled by," from Old French *obeir* "obey, be obedient, do one's duty" (12c.), from Latin *obedire*, *oboedire* "obey, be subject, serve; pay attention to, give ear," literally "listen to," from *ob* "to" (see *ob-*) + *audire* "listen, hear" (from PIE root **au-* "to perceive").

Compare King Saul and King David. Saul was commanded to wipe out

Amalek, but he saved the best of the flocks "to offer to God." David was confronted on the matter of Uriah, and he repented.

Obedience is often dramatic, as in "[Jesus] learned obedience through suffering." But then not always, as in the man of quiet obedience and quiet action: St. Joseph. Three times St. Joseph obeyed a dream and acted. The fourth time he obeyed the prophecy, "He shall be called a Nazarene," and acted. We may well conclude that his obedience continued to protect the Holy Family.

Peyton Reed, oblate
Cincinnati, OH

Listening and obedience go hand in hand



Mark Plaiss

One of the three promises made at oblation is obedience to the will of God. The virtue of obedience is a primeval virtue of monasticism, and the virtue is of prime importance to oblates as well.

Cassian tells a story of how the Egyptian monks, upon hearing the signal to gather for prayer, would drop everything and “immediately rush out of their rooms.” Those who were engrossed in writing would not even “dare to complete the letter,” but would dash to prayer “not even dotting an i but abandoning the unfinished lines of the letter.”¹

Cassian then finishes this little story with an interesting commentary on the virtue of obedience. The following quotation is rather long, but it speaks to the heart of Cassian’s thoughts on the virtue. So upon hearing the signal, the monk:

is not thinking in terms of abbreviating and saving his efforts so much as he is striving with all his energy and zeal to pursue the virtue of obedience. It is this that they prefer not only to manual labor or to reading or to the peace and quiet of their cells but even to all other virtues, such that they judge everything else as negligible in comparison with it and are content to undergo any loss whatsoever as long as they do not violate this good in any respect.²

If one compares Benedict to Cassian on the matter of obedience regarding attending to the work of God, one sees a slightly different nuance. Whereas Cassian thunders that nothing is to be preferred to the virtue of obedience, Benedict notes that “nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God.”³

This is not to say that Benedict shies away from obedience. The whole of chapter 5 in the *Rule* zooms in on the subject, and at verse 7 Benedict exposes the root purpose of the virtue: to “abandon their own will.”⁴

Kardong rightfully comments that “self-will in its myriad forms is the worst enemy of all spiritual growth ... this is the true face of sin and the deadliest enemy of community life. It is the hardest aspect of sin to overcome.”⁵

But the destruction of self-will has a purpose. Obedience, though crucial to the spirit of monastic life, is not an end in and of itself. Rather, the purpose of obedience is to allow for “listening to God so as to know how to respond in love to his will.”⁶

Listening and obedience go hand in hand. Listening is so crucial to Benedict that he makes the word “listen” the first word in his *Rule*. You can’t listen to God if you are hearing only yourself.

Obedience is not a prized virtue today. It smacks of infringing upon personal freedom, and in the culture we live in today, nothing is more

anathema than that. But aside from the cloister, has it ever been so? Were people more inclined to obedience in the 12th century than in the 21st? I don’t think so.

However, when the culture is imbued with Christianity, as it was in 12th-century Europe, then obedience has a fighting chance for recognition. In a culture ambivalent to the faith, obedience has a steeper hill to climb, and I would contend that the hill is quite steep today.

Hence, the value of monks and oblates. Both are living witnesses not only to a virtue, but to a way of life. A life seeking God.

Mark Plaiss, oblate novice
Fox Lake, IL

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¹ *RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in Latin and English with Notes*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1981), 188-189.

² Terrence Kardong, *Benedict’s Rule: A Translation and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 107.

³ Kardong, 115.

⁴ Cassian, *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers (New York: The Newman Press, 2000), 83-84.

⁵ Cassian, 84.

⁶ *RB 1980*, 243.

Finding stability in plague space-time



Bill Hamerick

time during our lockdowns, and the abnormal tempo of time passing while quarantined.

The question I would like to examine here is: Will we miss anything about our quarantined existence when we regain our post-pandemic lives? I believe that many of us will, and that the pandemic has made us realize significant obstacles in our usual lives to realizing our vocations as Benedictine Oblates.

The premier necessary condition of Benedictine spirituality, which appears right off the bat in chapter 1 of the *Rule*, is stability. Stability comes from living under the *Rule* in a fixed, non-disrupted space and time. Cenobites, who do this within the enclosure of the monastery governed by an abbot, “are the most steadfast kind of monks” as opposed to sarabaites and vagabonds.

The sarabaites are without discipline and live only to gratify their own desires. Vagabonds likewise live only for their own pleasures, but they also lack the stability of a fixed and constant abode. Cenobites can flourish because they have both the discipline of the *Rule* and an abbot, within the secure enclosure of the monastery. They live well-regulated lives spatially and temporally, and they are protected from themselves by their dedication to the higher good of the community.

Regarding the rest of us, however, things are usually very different, and it

“Plague space-time” in my title is a triple entendre. It means the artificial space imposed on us during our quarantines, the equally artificial

is sometimes a struggle to achieve spatial and temporal stability. Prior to quarantined life, many of us lived in a fast-paced, even frenetic, society. We were constantly racing to finish everything we needed to do to get through the day. Competing demands of work and family life were draining.

Think, for example, of the complex schedules of children’s activities on the refrigerator that took up every weekend and left parents exhausted and grumpy on Monday mornings. Leisure and rest were largely nonexistent. Likewise, stability was constantly threatened because of being hostage to fortune in the demands on our time – mostly benign, but also mostly uncontrollable. As T.S. Eliot memorably put it, we lived time as

Neither plenitude nor vacancy.

Only a flicker

Over the strained time-ridden faces
Distracted from distraction by
distraction²

In that other life, I can remember frequently asking co-workers and friends in the community how they were doing. It was surprising at first to hear almost all of them parrot the same response, “I’m really busy.” But that had to be my honest answer as well. We were always in motion, such that our space was radically unlike our current confines.³

Busyness and ceaseless motion are ways of acting out our distractedness and avoiding thinking about what we’ve become. Another way to describe this phenomenon is that we get reduced to sets of functions. We have work functions, psychological functions, family functions, and on and on. There is nothing inherently dehumanizing in that regard, but what destabilizes us is when we are forced to, or allow ourselves to, define our

lives solely or primarily as fulfillers of functions.

In that case, as the 20th-century French philosopher Gabriel Marcel pointed out, “The individual appears both to himself and to others as an agglomeration of functions.”⁴ Life that reduces merely to fulfill functions “is liable to despair because in reality this world is *empty*, it rings hollow” (p. 12).

And things are not necessarily any better in retirement, defined as a life of fewer or no functions. Marcel considers that “there is something mocking and sinister” in how the retired are tolerated (*Ibid.*). As evidence for that claim, consider why the classic retirement present was, and perhaps still is, a gold *watch*?

Even prior to retirement, however, that feeling of emptiness and hollowness will be familiar to many at the end of a furious workweek who wonder what they are doing and what they have become.⁵ They have been destabilized.

Marcel’s alternative for restabilization comprises what he calls “recollection” or “second reflection,” which is a self-conscious recollection, to bring out “the gap between my being and my life” (p. 24). What he means is this: The objects of an ordinary reflection comprise things in the world, tasks to perform, other people with whom one interacts. This is an outward-directed reflection.

A “second reflection,” however, is inner-directed. Its object is *oneself* in relation to all those objects. It’s a reflection about what happens to the self in performing functions.

This difference is plainer in the original French. The verb translated as “to collect” is *cueillir*, which is better

rendered as “to gather.” A “recollection” is a *recueillement*, a “regathering.” Thus, Marcel’s concept of a therapy for getting lost in a maze of functions is to re-gather all the loose threads into a coherent whole of one’s being rather than the way one has been living.

This objective has always struck me as one of the main reasons for making retreats – that is, a re-treatment of one’s life to make it more congruent with one’s being. There again, the object of a second reflection consists of all the objects of a first reflection in connection with the self who is reflecting.

I submit that the COVID-19 quarantine has provided us with unexpected space-time conditions

that encourage and protect our stability and thus enable us to close the gap between our lives and our being. That is because our enclosed space imitates that of the monastery, and, if used properly, neutralizes distractions.

The same is true of time. Proceeding at a slower, more deliberate pace allows for deeper reflection about not only a task at hand, but also what we become in doing it. Likewise, it provides for and encourages a deeper sense of prayer than merely saying prayers on the run.

Analogously, the radically different pace of life on the Hill always hits me when I first arrive. At first, it seems that I’ve hit a brick wall and have to move in slow motion. And that is

true literally as well as figuratively: I cannot help noticing the difference between the way the monks and I walk. Mine is a productive walk because I’m always in a hurry to get things done; theirs seem meditative and reflective. After a day, I also note a significant drop in blood pressure and pulse rate to my quarantine measurements.

As a result, when our lockdowns lift, I will miss this serendipitous cloister and the stable spirituality it has made possible. I will again be drawn into a complex web of functions, but with new understanding and greater resistance to be defined by them.

*Bill Hamrick, oblate
St. Louis, MO*

¹ It was a close friend, Fr. Gary Braun of the Archdiocese of St. Louis, who first got me thinking about this.

² T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1944), p. 16.

³ We are, in general, a much more mobile culture than most others. We seem to have a lot of trouble being still, unless we’re forced to. Alexis de Tocqueville noted this in *Democracy in America* when he observed that Americans even stay in motion in their rocking chairs instead of resting.

⁴ Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Manya Harari (New York: The Citadel Press, 1963), p. 10. Further citations from this essay are cited by page number only.

⁵ Eliot rather dramatically pictures such mental exhaustion as follows: “And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen/Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about” (*Op. cit.*, p. 24).

Metanoia: An experience of teaching in prison



Marian Prentice

For over 15 years, I have taught classes in an Ohio pre-release prison, a prison medical center, and in the Ohio Reformatory for Women. In

those years, I have seen God transform hearts, heal shame and guilt, restore lives, and reconcile families.

I entered the Ohio Reformatory to accompany a friend who was taking a class there. I thought it would be an interesting experience. God had a different plan. I said yes to his nudge; I left that day as a mentor to Angela,

who had been incarcerated for murder. She was belligerent and aggressive, yet asking for help. I became her mentor for five years.

Being obedient to God’s will can take us to the most amazing places! What qualifies me to teach in prison? God showed me that, just like these women, I have stresses, failures, family struggles, brokenness, tragedies, insecurities.

But I also know the joy of God’s comfort, peace, forgiveness, grace, mercy. God has never abandoned me. That is what I bring to the ladies, the truth of who God is. I want them to know they are never alone and deeply

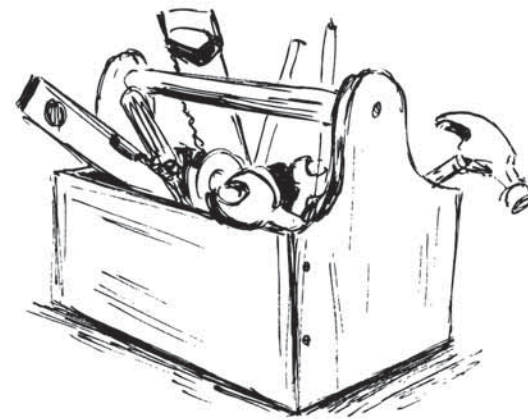
loved by God. The cycle of poor life choices can be broken. Change is possible. God’s arms are wide open. In class, I see tears and desperation for hope, a new start.

My goal is to model and bring these women the love of Jesus, the truth of God’s word, and let the Holy Spirit work. These women are hurting inside. As I say yes in obedience to God, He uses my fiat to bring, not just relief from the pain of life, but also metanoia, a change from the cycle that has kept them bound for so long. There’s a better way. Thanks be to God.

*Marian Prentice, oblate
Pataskala, OH*

The Oblate Toolbox

St. Benedict ties obedience to love



“These, then, are the tools of the spiritual craft ... the workshop where we are to toil faithfully at all these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community.” – Rule of St. Benedict 4:75, 78



Angie McDonald

How desolate are you today? Has the COVID-19 pandemic made you depressed? Do you feel hopeless, trapped or despondent? Are

you suffering spiritual deprivation over not being able to attend Mass or other worship services? How about not being able to pray in person with our beloved monks on the Hill?

Welcome to a deeper walk with God, and with it, deeper obedience.

The pandemic in our midst is a distressing event on so many levels. No part of our society has been left untouched. We still do not yet know when, or if, we will be able to return to a somewhat normal existence

without masks, social distancing, contact tracing, or quarantine.

How does this tie into the practice of obedience as Benedictine oblates?

St. Benedict ties obedience to love in chapter 5 of the *Rule*. God’s love poured out into our hearts produces within us a fountain of life that shall never run dry (*John 4:14*). Through the Liturgy of the Hours and *lectio divina*, God constantly sends us signs of reassurance in times of desolation. Our very act of regular prayer is itself an act of obedience and spiritual worship (*Romans 12:1-2*).

The deeper our trial, the greater our need. We hunger and thirst for God’s presence. We cry out for help. We recognize our utter poverty and dependence upon Him for everything. We really need to hear from Him.

We’re listening for Him. And when we hear, we respond – and quickly. St. Benedict places this response within the context of the monastic community.

Members of the community are called to obey the directives given them with eager readiness. This readiness demonstrates a constant and lively attention to what is being asked. We remain poised to respond, at all times, with willingness and expectancy.

If we find ourselves resisting the call to obey, this pandemic is tailor made to put us back in touch with our need for God, and the love with which He desires to meet that need. It’s a great tool.

Angie McDonald, oblate
Huntingburg, IN

Continued from Page 13

All of this must be based in a life of prayer. Pray, while calm, peaceful and still, for “strength and wisdom” to respond appropriately when irritated, angry or anxious. Surely, it is good to pray in the moment of temptation as well (“God help me!” is short and to the point!), but prayer before the fact can help fortify one’s defenses. Since patience is a fruit of the Holy Spirit, please consider invoking the Holy Spirit often in prayer, and ask for specific guidance.

A little self-reflection during our quiet moments is helpful – go deep. For example, if something or someone causes anger, ask why that is. Be honest. This may bring a surprise revelation. Often, we find that the actual problem is not the situation or another person, but within our very selves.

Suggested Reading

1. Emotional Intelligence: Why It Can Matter More Than IQ
2. God, I Have Issues: 50 Ways to Pray No Matter How You Feel
3. Growing in Patience (Focus on Faith)
4. <http://pathoflifeblog.blogspot.com/2017/10/be-angry-but-do-not-sin.html>

Br. Francis Wagner, OSB, monk
Saint Meinrad Archabbey

OBLATE NEWS

UPCOMING EVENTS

All 2020 events, including oblations and investitures, have been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ♦

DEATHS

Thomas Mandrackie of Cincinnati, OH, June 10, 2020

John Wilson of St. Meinrad, IN, June 17, 2020

Daniel Bauer of Putnamville, IN, July 9, 2020

Mary (Betty) Redden of Centerville, OH, April 5, 2020

Donald Louis Casey of Dayton, OH, July 8, 2020

Georgianna Kassman of Miamisburg, OH, July 8, 2020

John Campbell of Cincinnati, OH, August 15, 2020

Margaret May Goffinet of Ferdinand, IN, August 18, 2020

Elizabeth Wollenmann of Ferdinand, IN, August 29, 2020 ♦

VOLUNTEERS APPRECIATED

Recent volunteers in the Oblate Office were Br. Stanley Rother Wagner, OSB, Fr. Mateo Zamora, OSB, Br. Michael Reyes, OSB, Novice Benjamin Ziegler, OSB, and Holly Vaughan. ♦

WE WANT YOUR ARTICLES!

The Benedictine Oblate invites you to submit news and information about your chapter, submit a book review for the Reading Room column, or send in photos of you or your chapter.

All submissions must include your name, city and state, and an explanation of how it connects to the theme. Submissions will be edited and published as they fit the theme or need of the newsletter. Articles of 500 words or less are suggested.

Please send all submissions to Kathleen Polansky at kpolanskyoblate@yahoo.com.

The theme of the next issue is humility, with the deadline for submission as November 1. ♦

CANONIZATION CAUSE FOR DOROTHY DAY

The canonization cause for Dorothy Day is making great progress. We are asking people to begin a habit of asking Dorothy's assistance in their daily lives.

Also, there is a new book published about Dorothy Day. If anyone would like to read and submit a book review for our November 1 deadline, it would be appreciated. The book is titled *Dorothy Day: Dissenting Voice of the American Century* by John Loughery and Blythe Randolph. ♦

Prayers sought for good health

Recently, Fr. Meinrad Brune, OSB, began experiencing difficulty in breathing whenever he walked. After many tests at the Jasper Heartland Clinic, the medical team has determined that he is suffering with atrial fibrillation.

They have put him on two medications: one to prevent blood clots and another to reduce fluids that can result in swelling and difficulty breathing. We are relieved that they do not see the need for surgery at this time. Please keep Fr. Meinrad in your prayers in the months ahead.

Prayer to St. John of God

St. John of God, I honor you as the Patron of the Sick,
especially of those who are afflicted by heart disease.

I seek you to be the patron and protector of Father Meinrad Brune,
during this season of his present illness.

I ask that you entrust his soul, his body, all his spiritual and temporal interests —
as well as all those sick throughout the world, to our Lord God above.

I seek your help. Consecrate my mind, that in all things it may be enlightened by faith,
accepting this cross as a blessing from God. Amen.



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Reading Room

Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line by Christopher Pramuk. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.



There never has been a better time for this book to be published in paperback format. Christopher Pramuk, professor of theology at Xavier University in Cincinnati, OH, addresses the crossing of the color line. It's a book in a time of protests and demonstrations under the banner of Black Lives Matter.

Oblates will need to read this book if they are to understand and lend a supportive voice and role to this awareness movement. The book is richly illustrated, written in elegant and penetrating prose, and shaped by questions of theology, spirituality and pastoral practice.

Chapter 1 reflects on three different entry points into the conversation about race: the world of academic discourse on race, the global world of the poor, and the song circle,

by which the author means the world embodied in the African American spirituals tradition and, more broadly, any community of faith to which we may belong.

Chapters 2 through 9 focus on several themes, stories or case studies from the worlds of literature, music, art or theology, which then form entry points for exploring, as the subtitle presents, graced encounters across the color line.

This is a book about how our essentialism breaks the bones of our humanity and, more importantly, a book about hope and grace. We are a body of broken bones in need of resetting, in need of love. The author uses his experiences as a teacher in Jesuit institutions to give the reader insights into the problem of racism.

This book is highly recommended for its use in stimulating conversation and fresh thinking, whether it is in private study, classrooms, churches or reading groups.

*Thomas J. Rillo, oblate
Bloomington, IN*