

# Oblate Reflections: Living the Rule of Benedict

*by the*

OBLATES OF ST. BENEDICT

*at*

ST. PLACID PRIORY



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# I N T R O D U C T I O N

“Is there anyone here  
who yearns for life  
and desires to see good days?”

- RB PROLOGUE 15



The small book you are holding is the work of the current (2011-2012) oblate community of St. Placid Priory in Lacey, Washington. The Priory began to accept oblates in 2000. The year 2000-2001 was the first year of oblate formation. The first oblates made their oblation on June 3, 2001. Since then, new oblates have joined our community each year on St. Placid's Founders' Day, June 28. We have also lost oblates to death, moving and changes in commitments. Today's community includes oblates from every year, current oblate candidates and guests.

From the start the Priory wanted its oblates to form a community among themselves. Most of us live within a commuting distance of Lacey, so that we can attend monthly meetings together. In the past few years the monastics of St. Placid have responded to the needs and preferences of oblates by allowing those who live near Seattle to meet there monthly. They have also allowed individual oblates to pursue, for a time, solo explorations of Joan Chittister's *Monastery of the Heart*. We, as oblates, rely on two practices to sustain our sense of community: the monthly meetings at the

Priory of oblates, oblate candidates and guests, and an annual retreat held at St. Placid.

As oblates, uppermost in our minds is the commitment we have each made to this Priory to live out the Benedictine way of life outside the monastery. What this means though is not laid out neatly in a book anywhere. Instead, it is something each of us, alone and in our group, must figure out. From the time we first entertained notions of becoming an oblate, until however many years later, we find we are all still figuring it out. It is the unspoken but regular agenda of our group lectio at each monthly meeting. Some shared understandings seem to be emerging in recent years. It makes sense to many of us to try to articulate these by writing our reflections on how we currently develop and adhere to Benedictine values and practices in our lives. This little book is the result of that attempt. It addresses principal topics in the Rule of Benedict. It asks how each topic relates to oblates in general and how it shapes our individual lives.

This book is meant for ourselves, for new oblate candidates and for future guests. It is a record-to-date of what we aspire to, and of what we have come to practice with more or less regularity. It provides a glimpse of a community of persons engaged in an ever-renewing quest for life and good days.

Having finished writing, we see that we ourselves have not laid out neatly how to live the Rule of Benedict outside the monastery. We do not regret this. Indeed, we are happy to find that there are so many and varied ways a person can live in fidelity to Benedict.

✠

# { 1 }

## COMMITMENT, RELATIONSHIPS, ROLES (LEADERS, MENTORS) AND DECISION-MAKING

“Those who become oblates  
are committed above all else  
to seek God in Jesus Christ.”<sup>1</sup>

We live the word of God in a community committed to Benedictine spirituality, therefore, our common heart and vision guides our relationships, our roles as leaders and mentors, our decisions, and everything about how we shape and live our lives. *“It is a matter of the total community seeking what is best for the spiritual welfare of each member and of the whole body.”*<sup>2</sup>

As oblate members of St. Placid Priory, we make a commitment to follow the Rule of Benedict and Benedictine values in community and as individuals living in the world. Our commitment to the oblate community builds a common and shared spirit among the oblates, as in, “We’re in this together—no matter what.” Together we become a common heart that beats with a common vision. Such commitment takes great trust and great faith, but gives us the shared strength to live our life fully as an expression of God’s love.

An oblate's voice:

“We try to know each other intimately, to learn from each other, and to support each oblate's commitment to put God above all else in our lives.”

In our relationships with other oblates, we are fully present to each person, seeing them as Christ would see them. We practice listening with the ear of our heart, realizing that our relationships are reciprocal and built on the cornerstones of mutual responsibility and support. We are called to honor and respect our differences, learning from the wisdom of all. The strength of our oblate relationships and the love of Christ enable us to live out a life of service and respect for those we work and interact with on a daily basis.

In our roles as leaders and mentors, we encourage each other and care for each other's souls as we seek God on our individual and communal paths. Together we live the Rule and pray with gratitude for the gift of community. As oblates, we show devotion and kindness for each other, consoling those in need. When challenged by difficult situations, we practice forethought and consideration in our care for others and remember to *“Exercise the utmost care and concern for wayward sisters and brothers, because it is not the healthy who need a physician, but the sick.”* (RB 27.1, Mathew 9:12)

An oblate's voice:

“In praying for an oblate sister this year, I felt a strong connection to her—an intimate bond—even though I have never spoken with her outside the Priory walls. My friendship with another oblate has come to the point where I am able to stop by her house at any time and I am always welcomed. This friendship is different from any other because God is at the center of our relationship. I know that she is always there with support, comfort, love, and

Benedictine wisdom. Her unconditional love and leadership serve as a model of what it means to be a Benedictine mentor.”

When making decisions and coming together to discern the will of God we strive to build consensus, using the teachings of Christ and the Rule as guides. We promise to express our views with humility and to be present to what is being said—verbally and non-verbally. With Christ in attendance at the table, we seek to avoid criticism and to listen to the advice of each other, while pondering and judging the wiser course. We remain open to the wisdom of those present, and remember that often wisdom is revealed to the young.

An oblate's voice:

“The Benedictine quality of decision-making impacts me daily. It teaches me to be a better listener and to seek the advice of others. God speaks to me frequently through others and often through books. I used to agonize over decisions. Making a difficult decision was a painful process. I was fearful of making the wrong choice. I didn't know if the decision was my will or God's will. I have learned to listen to others with an open mind and an open heart. I then take it to God and I sit still and listen. After input from others, prayer, discernment, and time alone with God and Mary, the answer always comes.” ✠

# { 2 }

## VIRTUES

We work on the Tools of Good Works: love, zeal, patience, perseverance, balance, self-discipline, reverence, joy, justice and peace. God cannot love us more than God does right now. Steeped in that love, committed to our Benedictine path, work on the Tools is the only response that makes sense, that seems worth doing, and that deepens this relationship of boundless love and endless grace.

### Love

*“... your way of acting should be different  
from the world’s way.”*

(RB 4:20)

Benedict reminds us that the first Tool of Good Works is love. We strive to have all our thoughts and actions flow from love. We are told to always answer with love, obey with love, foster zeal with love, receive all guests with love, correct, instruct and serve with love. We are told to love those who are outside the community, to love with equity, and above all to love Christ. We are well-versed in what love is, what it looks like and feels like. As oblates, we attempt to embody love, giving to others from the abundance we have received. This is not an easy task because it requires us to choose consciously; to intentionally speak, act and think in a loving manner.

### Zeal

*“... there is a good zeal which leads to God.”*

(RB 72:2)

Benedict explains exactly what good zeal is and how it should look. We can often become impassioned about a cause. As oblates, we must temper our passion with compassion for others and ourselves. As oblates, we withhold judgment, but support with patience the weaknesses of others. We respect one another and ourselves. Above all, we offer honest and humble love, not seeking love in return but delighting in the opportunity to serve.

*An oblate’s voice:*

*“When I think of good zeal, I think of passion: a desire so overwhelming that one must respond. It is an action virtue; a focus on the other rather than on self, which leads me to ask, ‘What can I do for you today? What can I do for God today?’”*

### Patience

*“... those who are patient amid hardships  
and unjust treatment are fulfilling the Lord’s command.”*

(RB 7:42)

Benedict points out that it takes patience to establish a new habit, that we will need patience when we are tested, and that we need patience to develop tolerance and love for others.

*An oblate’s voice:*

*“I would describe myself as a relatively patient person with occasional lapses. Life tests both my patience and perseverance, being a caregiver to my mentally ill son. So, am I more patient because I am a Benedictine oblate? I don’t know. The Rule mentions tolerance of others, and that is necessary within the oblate community as well. Some people are harder to like than others, but the Rule asks us to support one another with the*

greatest patience, so this is an injunction I feel I can live.”

### **Perseverance**

*“... in difficult, unfavorable, or even unjust conditions,  
our hearts quietly embrace...”*

(RB 7:35)

Benedict tells us over and over throughout the Rule to persevere. When practicing our lectio or correcting our behaviors, we should always begin again. Perseverance means to try even when it is difficult. In the Rule, perseverance is linked with suffering and the reward that Benedict offers is joy at the end of our suffering. In truth, after suffering there is a feeling of relief, joy or satisfaction. The difficult part is reaching that place of peace.

*An oblate’s voice:*

“Perseverance often links with patience, and ties into endurance. I often feel I am supported by the prayers of the sisters, oblates and friends, which I appreciate. The Rule speaks of sharing in the sufferings of Christ and that’s one way to look at suffering. I wish it gave me comfort, but, in truth, it doesn’t—maybe that’s an unpayable debt. I think it was embraced more in earlier times.”

### **Moderation and Balance**

*“... all things are to be done in moderation...”*

(RB 48:9)

Benedict urges us to moderation in all things. The Rule continually points to balance; be zealous but not excessive; pray but work, too. In a world that is geared to doing it all and having the best, pulling back and seeking to balance ourselves can be tricky. The act of keeping our lives in balance keeps us actively seeking and refining. This task is a good place for beginners and those who might find the whole Rule too big a task to take on all at once.

*An oblate’s voice:*

“I am not a moderate person. I tend to look at extremes as challenging! I have always enjoyed pushing the outer limits: mountain climbing, rock climbing, skiing, snorkeling, backpacking, and exercising. I go for the gusto. When teaching, I love inclusion and a thematic approach. I love the adventurous: field trips, excursions, long overseas trips, immersing myself in other cultures! So I am pursuing another adventure today, the adventure of the soul. I am using the Rule of Benedict as a framework for my soulful adventure. I hear Benedict urging me to moderation and balance in my prayer life, using my possessions with care, restraint in food and drink, and blessing God without grumbling, so that my life shows moderation in all things.”

### **Self-Discipline**

*“... that in all things, God may be glorified.”*

(RB 57:9, 1 Peter 4:11)

Benedict tells us that discipline involves both the mind and the body. We discipline our body through moderation in food, drink, and leisure. We practice the self-discipline of our emotions by responding to others with sincere compassion, patience and love. We practice the self-discipline of our actions by being honest, humble and peace-seeking. Benedict urges us to practice the discipline of holy reading and frequent prayer. And always he tells us to *“never lose hope in God’s mercy.”* (RB 4:74)

*An oblate’s voice:*

“The practicing of the Rule causes change. Everything that Benedict tells us to strive for; all the changes we make in the name of self-discipline, are so that God may be glorified.”



### Reverence

“They should each try to be the first  
to show respect to the other.”  
(RB 72:4; Rom 12:10)

We are to always approach God with reverence, but Benedict tells us that this Godly reverence is also for everything in God’s creation. Material goods are to be treated as “...*sacred vessels of the altar.*” (RB 31:10) We are to respect and reverence the humanity of every person, including the one with whom we fundamentally disagree.

*An oblate’s voice:*

“When I hear the word reverence I think holy, something to be worshiped or handled with special care. If I apply what Benedict says about reverence, I am forced to look at the people and things around me in a different light. Nothing is trash and unworthy. In this light, I am now transformed into considering what I am doing and saying. I become more responsible.”

### Joy

“... look forward to holy Easter  
with joy and spiritual longing.”  
(RB 49:7)

Benedict speaks of joy when he is telling us about the season of Lent and suffering. The joy we wish to achieve comes from our confidence in God’s love and the rewards that will come from a life lived in fulfilling God’s commandments. Benedict is insistent on this confidence. We are told our love of Christ should grow from good habit and joyful living.

*An oblate’s voice:*

Rule of Benedict;  
Moderation, balance, joy;  
Soulful adventure

### Justice

“... to dispose all things with prudence and justice”  
(RB 4:6)

Benedict does not say much about justice, but shows us how to act with justice through the careful and thoughtful way we deal with others. When making a decision, our judgments must reflect our consideration of events and people. It is our ultimate goal to treat others with fairness even in the face of adversity.

*An oblate’s voice:*

“Justice in the Rule is most often a quality of the Abbot. Yet I ask myself, am I just in my decisions? I have two sons with unequal needs and it is a struggle to be as just as possible in this situation. How does justice play out in the oblate community? Candidates and oblates come and go—some persevere. I don’t know if some have a sense of injustice about decisions made without their input.”

### Peace

“Let peace be your quest and aim.”  
(RB Prologue 17)

Benedict’s rule is for the peace-seeker. In every instruction on how we are to conduct ourselves, it comes back to living in a peaceful and loving manner. The Rule stresses getting along and, most importantly, how to build peace within ourselves through our speech and good works. Fairness and equity create peace. This means we need to work for this on every level of life from the personal to the global. Communities in prayer create peace—between one another and in the world. Joan Chittister says that the life of the Rule “...*is a lifestyle that foregoes violence on every level, for any reason.*”<sup>1</sup> She goes on to say that “*Benedictine spirituality is a recipe for peace and a prescription for a life lived well on every level.*”<sup>2</sup> ✠

# { 3 }

## LISTENING

As oblates, we advise and admonish ourselves to listen with our whole body, not just with our eyes and ears but also with our heart. We hear the words and the content, along with the intent of what is being said. Be it speaking, singing, praying, mourning, or laughing, we strive to listen and understand. We are on our journey with the people in our lives, our oblate community, our spiritual directors, mentors, spouses, and children. When we have decisions to make, all bring wisdom to our decision-making. Before we make decisions that affect others, we seek to follow Benedict's advice. We ponder in our hearts and listen for God's wisdom. (RB 3:2) Truly, listening is difficult, requiring us to be attentive and to concentrate on what is being spoken. True listening asks us to pause and examine our conversations. Did I listen? Did I acknowledge? Was I superficial? What was my response? Listening is the key. When we listen we find that we are asked to respond or obey the call of another. How do we respond or obey? In asking this last question, we come to understand that listening is not separate from obedience; it is the very heart of obedience: the *audiens* (hearing) of *ob audiens*, which means "by way of or resulting from hearing."

### *Oblate voices:*

"Listening is a lost art. We are so distracted that at times we forget that others need us to hear what they have to say for them to continue on their journey. I've also found when I listen to

others I learn so much about them and often find answers to my own struggles."

"I listen to more than just the words being said."

"Listening is being totally present, and hearing more without words or, at times when there are words, hearing more deeply, beyond the words."

## SILENCE

To support listening, the Rule admonishes monks to keep watch over their ways and refrain even from good words. In the monastery, "... *permission to speak should seldom be granted;*" (RB 6:3) silence is to be valued. As oblates, we, too, need to seek silence in order to promote our listening. Creating and keeping a quiet time can be particularly difficult in our noisy world, especially if we live with others who find silence threatening. Often our silence can be perceived by co-workers or managers as disengagement. We must take care that, in our need for silence, we are not using it as a barrier against the world. In order to achieve silence, we need discipline and a schedule so we can assure that we have silent moments in our lives: a regular time for lectio, a day in the week to withdraw from the chaos. This moving away requires a commitment to the schedule we create.

### *Oblate voices:*

"Only in silence can one truly discover one's self. I seek silence every day, if for nothing else than to breathe in the peace and fortify myself for another day."

"Silence brings peace and an intimate encounter with God."

Exterior silence is difficult, but interior silence can be even harder. Often the demands of the noisy world interrupt our physical silence of lectio or prayer. The internal chatter of laundry lists and work responsibilities can become much louder when we are attempting to be silent. To combat this, we can create a habit of mindfully turning

away from the mental distractions. Saying a prayer when we become aware of the internal dialogue, or refocusing our breathing can bring us back to center. In creating the habit of silence, exterior and interior, we may find that the silence is nurturing and becomes like a physical need.

## SPEAKING

Disciplining our speech is not commonplace. Benedict encouraged us to refrain from vulgarity, gossip, and inappropriate laughter. He encouraged us instead to speak gently, modestly, reasonably, and briefly. The disciplines to think before speaking, to speak only when adding value, to avoid hurtful talk, are all Benedictine values.

When refraining from unnecessary speech we find ourselves practicing silence, and this silence cultivates a listening heart. By engaging in silence, we can now hear others, and when we are listening, we are able to respond meaningfully to what is heard.

## OBEDIENCE

In the Benedictine sense, obedience is not the everyday understanding of obedience as immediate compliance, in which one person commands and another complies. In the Benedictine sense, obedience requires we respond to what it is that we have heard, to act on what we have understood from our listening well with the ear of the heart.

For Benedict, this obedience is the first step of humility, our journey to becoming our authentic selves. Our obedience is to be open-hearted, immediate, and focused by the fruits of our listening. If we have heard with the ear of our heart what has been said in the dialogue with another, responding obediently and cheerfully will be genuine.

*Oblate voices:*

“I listen to the wisdom of others because it frees me to hear, discern and respond.”

“Obedience is an expression of devoted, deep love and listening.” ✠

# { 4 }

## HUMILITY

Jesus Christ said,  
“I am the Way”

“Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart.”

(John 14:6)

The root words for humility and humble are *humilis* (low) and *humus* (earth).<sup>1</sup> As the Bible says, “*we are dust and to dust we will return.*” (Genesis 3:19) Humble people show respect for the nature of all creation and understand their place in the universe.

“*Humility is Truth. Truth is the created reality united with God as intended.*”<sup>2</sup> Humility is the connection of the body and the soul. The path of humility is the process where human expectations, self-will, and common sense give way to God’s will. There is a growing inner conformity with Christ in developing humility.

We can picture the path of humility as a multi-directional vine on a trellis, with many interconnecting branches. The upright supports for this trellis-path are body and soul. The base is earth and the top is

God. We ascend the trellis by humility, and descend by pride. Growth on one branch benefits growth in other branches. Conversely, failure or slippage damages the entire vine.

### **Branch 1**

As oblates, we are always aware of God's presence in our thoughts and actions. Practicing reverence and obedience to Christ, keeping the fear of God before our eyes are some ways this occurs. We internalize our dependence on God as the beginning of wisdom.

*Oblate voices:*

"I have icons in every room in my house as reminders."

"I know that God is God, and I am not. I take this step daily."

"In daily prayer, I place myself in God's presence."

"I put God at the center of my thoughts through meditation, communion and worship."

### **Branch 2**

As oblates, we look for and take pleasure in God's will. We trust in God's lead and we work at cultivating trust with others.

*Oblate voices:*

"I meditate to discern God's will."

"I attempt to practice constraint."

"I work to develop my habits of listening (for the 'still, small voice') before talking or acting."

"I practice discernment and trust that God will lead me in thought, word and deed."

### **Branch 3**

As oblates, we respect authority not only within in the community, but in the world at large. This respect comes from the fact that we attempt to recognize the divinity and humanity in each person.

*Oblate voices:*

"I am a rule follower in all but my creative endeavors.

Yes, I (mostly) stick to the speed limits..."

"I attempt to practice respect for the cosmos, and obedience to superiors."

"My default and intent is to treat all as Christ."

"Treating everyone with compassion and respect is very important to me."

### **Branch 4**

As oblates, we show respect and patience—even when the events are difficult and when we are faced with contradictions and injustices.

*Oblate voices:*

"I tend to stand up to injustices but I try to stay calm and respectful. I walk away from arguments and wait for a calmer time to discuss the problem."

"I attempt to practice endurance and perseverance joyfully."

"It is hard, but I attempt to endure injustices and other difficulties calmly but firmly."

"I try to discern (with God's help) who owns the problem and whether I am called to act."

## Branch 5

As oblates, we find a spiritual director or mentor whom we can trust and from whom we can receive guidance.

*Oblate voices:*

“I have a spiritual director who lives near me and who is always available via email or phone.”

“I seek forgiveness for myself and others. I attempt to forgive quickly.”

“Since becoming an oblate, I have not had a spiritual director, but resolve to seek one out.”

“My oblate mentor is a good sounding board for spiritual guidance.”

## Branch 6

As oblates, we are content with what we need and do not desire more. We see every possession is a gift from God.

*Oblate voices:*

“I am still struggling with getting rid of *stuff*. I practice detachment.”

“I attempt to be content in all things.”

“I am trying to de-clutter and make better choices.”

“I do not seek out frivolous things, but seek simplicity.”

“I try to live ascetically and surround myself only with what’s important.”

## Branch 7

As oblates, we put the needs of others first.

*Oblate voices:*

“I work at staying flexible so that I can go along with what others want or need.”

“I know that I am humus and of the earth.”

“I am working more to listen to others, especially those in the margins of society.”

“I try to live my life through a lens of service and compassion.”

## Branch 8

As oblates, we consider the Priory and the example of the sisters before acting. We strive to practice mutuality and discernment, recognizing what is best for the common good of the community.

*Oblate voices:*

“As an oblate I am part of the community of St Placid and always try to act accordingly.”

“I attempt to practice mutuality and discern what is best for the common good.”

“It is a priority with me to listen to the communications from the Priory.”

“I enjoy being helpful to the sisters and the Priory community.”

## Branch 9

As oblates, we listen attentively, hearing not only what is being spoken but what is not being said. We listen for God in the conversation. We think before speaking, choose not to assume or pre-judge, and avoid gossip.

*Oblate voices:*

“I try to keep any immediate negative reactions to myself until I

can think it all out and react calmly.”

“I value silence, and go to great lengths to experience silence in my home. I practice detachment from becoming overly involved in the lives of others.”

“I seek to practice (1) listening and hearing without a personal agenda, and (2) intuitive listening - not only hearing what is being spoken but what is not being said.”<sup>3</sup> These two types of listening, along with seeking God in the process, are listening “with the ear of the heart”.

“When listening, I attempt to determine the needs of the speaker, instead of my own needs.”

### Branch 10

As oblates, we have a sense of humor that is not hurtful, bawdy or self-aggrandizing. We are quick to smile and cultivate a positive attitude.

Oblate voices:

“I tend to laugh more at myself!”

“I tend to smile and nod a lot! I enjoy a good laugh!”

“Since becoming an oblate, I have thought more about why I am about to say some humorous thing—in addition to not being hurtful or bawdy, I think about whether I am saying something to impress, and not because it is simply funny.”

### Branch 11

As oblates, we speak with concern for others, using few and sensible words. We listen and reflect on what others say, keeping full attention on the speaker.

Oblate voices:

“I tend to be a listener, but every once in a while I can't seem to stop talking. I need to work on reining those times back! I do think I listen more readily than many other people I deal with daily.”

“I attempt to practice wisdom while speaking to or touching others.”

“I work for a sense of balance between talking and listening, leaning on the side of listening.”

“When I converse with others, I try to focus on the speaker and their message.”

### Branch 12

As oblates, our appearance, actions, and tastes reflect the humility in our hearts. As Joan Chittister says, “*It is, in essence, in humility—in the sense of our place in the universe—that the Spiritual life must both begin and end.*”<sup>4</sup>

Oblate voices:

“Sigh...just being a redhead makes others assume that I am flamboyant! I am an artist and I love color, but I do TRY to keep it modest. “

“I know that if I am constant in practicing these steps; I will experience the freedom that comes with “*...love for Christ, good habit, and delight in virtue*” (RB 7:69)

“*Love is not haughty, arrogant, or rude. Not vain or puffed up...*” (St. Paul, 1 Corinthians 13:4)

“I try to be a good role model but I do love accessorizing!”

We can only approach God with great humility and reverence. If we are constant in practicing these steps, we will experience the freedom

that comes with “...love for Christ, good habit, and delight in virtue” (RB 7:69). As oblates, we strive in all things, and at all times, to climb this trellis of ascent. ✠

# { 5 }

## PRAYER

Liturgy of the Hours, personal prayer, lectio and holy leisure are various types of prayer that celebrate our relationship with God in different ways. In his Rule, Benedict includes lengthy instructions for the daily prayer of monastics. But, ever a practitioner of moderation, he also allows for changes. Over the centuries, Benedictine monastics have altered their schedule of prayers to fit the changing conditions of the times. Likewise, oblates of the twenty-first century find that the multiple claims on their lives necessitate alterations in prayer disciplines.

### LITURGY OF THE HOURS

For Benedict, nothing should delay, obstruct or take priority over the celebration of the Work of God. “*With its nighttime Vigil and sevenfold punctuation of the day, the divine office beats at the very heart of the community’s life.*”<sup>1</sup> Whether the community is physically gathered or apart, this communal work of prayer, praise, chant, and reading unites Benedictines in mind and spirit. As the Rule says, “*Brothers who work so far away that they cannot return to the oratory at the proper time...are to perform the Work of God where they are, and kneel out of reverence for God*” (RB 50:1-3). Prayer is both a spiritual

work and a rest from manual labors.

*Oblate voices:*

“To me the essence of what Benedict is saying regarding Liturgy of the Hours is to read all the psalms in an orderly, consistent manner...why I do it is because it feeds me. It’s a connection with a community that has meant a lot to me in my spiritual walk. I love the ritual.”

“I first started about ten years ago with Phyllis Tickle’s three-volume daily office, *Prayer of the Hours*. I also have lots of poetry books. I have a morning prayer on CD, which I chant while I’m getting dressed. I think the music is praying me. At other times I randomly pick a book off my shelves, I’ll read one or two lines and think ‘yes, that’s it.’ It takes me all day to digest it; there is so much depth. In the evening I listen to vespers, chanting whatever I hear.”

Some oblates follow the times of the office at the Priory:

*An oblate’s voice:*

“I set my alarm to five minutes before 8:00 am during weekdays. Then I visualize the sisters going to the chapel; it’s as though I show up and am there, even if I am really somewhere else. I also have the other Priory Liturgy of the Hours times as alarms on my cell phone, as reminders to at least stop, breathe, and say a short prayer if I am busy. I use the website: [www.divineoffice.org](http://www.divineoffice.org) especially for evening praise. In the morning, after some yoga or qigong moves to wake up my body, I sit for centering prayer.

### PERSONAL PRAYER

“*We must know that God regards our purity of heart and tears of compunction, not our many words. Prayer should therefore be short and pure, unless perhaps it is prolonged under the inspiration of divine grace.*” (RB 20: 3-4)

Our prayer life cultivates an intense, personal relationship with God. Simone Weil describes prayer as absolute attention to God. Painting, yoga, calligraphy, or sketches of Jesus, Mary, angels, and mandalas can also be prayer. Prayer can occur spontaneously all day long.

Oblate voices:

“I will sing a simple chant or a line of scripture or have a piece of a prayer or hymn that I use as a touchstone during the day.”

“It’s like a conversation with God.”

“I love that Benedict advises to keep prayers short and pure unless under the inspiration of grace. As one who has practiced Centering Prayer for about ten years, I know that a single word can, with God’s help, carry me a long way.”

“So, whether you are drawing or doing the dishes, it’s the quality of attention that makes it prayer.”

“My overall impression on prayer is that this process last forever.”

## LECTIO

*Listen readily to Holy Reading and devote yourself often to prayer.*

(RB 4:55-56)

*Listen with the ear of your heart.* (RB Prologue 1)

Oblates practice lectio in a variety of ways. One can use scripture, music or visual images for focus. Lectio can be spontaneous or practiced with great regularity.

Oblate voices:

“My lectio is usually visual lectio, inspired by something in God’s creation: a child, a sunset, an animal. Or when I’m walking in the woods, it could be a general visual appreciation of God’s environment. Sometimes I will do a reverse lectio: I know there is something in the Bible that applies to this situation, so I will

go find it.”

“A stranger meets me eye to eye and we smile. I think: ‘Thank you, God.’ Lectio on life is basically what I do.”

“I think God is one and in all things. Creation is like reading the Bible.”

“Sometimes, I feel a grateful awareness of God’s presence in activities, and this feels somewhat like lectio.”

## HOLY LEISURE

Joan Chittister observed that the sisters in her community are never too busy to realize that life is not only lived in doing. “*Leisure... is an essential part of Benedictine spirituality. It is not laziness and it is not selfishness. It has something to do with the depth and breadth, length and quality of life... Work is to be integrated into monastic life without doing violence to either... We need to learn to play again if our spiritual lives are going to be healthy at all.*”<sup>2</sup>

St. Benedict warns in the Rule that “*idleness is the enemy of the soul.*” (RB 48:1) How do we live a life that includes leisure, but not idleness?

Oblate voices:

“Leisure goes back to balance; you can’t do only work, or only prayer, or only holy reading.”

“St. John of the Cross said, ‘Remember always that you came here for no other reason than to be a saint; thus let nothing reign in your soul that does not lead you to sanctity.’<sup>3</sup> This thought is echoed by Thomas Merton: ‘For me, to be a saint is to be myself. Therefore the problem of sanctity and salvation is in fact the problem of finding out who I am and of discovering my true self.’<sup>4</sup> So I thought, ‘why not be a saint then?’ I work toward that goal by incorporating yoga, dance, and tai-chi movements, sketching and drawing, origami and haiku poetry to my prayer toolbox. It is holy leisure



to explore how particular Bible passages express themselves in the body; it crystallizes the meaning of *'the Word made Flesh,'* and makes unceasing prayer a possibility. The journey itself, of becoming a saint, of finding out who I am, is transformative and goes hand in hand with one of our commitments: continuous conversion of the heart.”

“When I think of holy leisure, I think of a dolphin jumping in the air, just for the joy of living. I believe that is the vital role of holy leisure: to take time out to be the person God created me to be and to practice letting go of my usual performance-oriented agendas.” ✕

## { 6 }

### SIMPLICITY

The topic of simplicity is viewed and lived out differently by each oblate. Simplicity comes into focus when we realize that everything flows from the Creator. When we acknowledge that all we have is pure gift, nothing is disposable: not material goods, not people, not souls, not the planet.

As oblates, we are called to live a simpler life and to take an honest inventory of the clutter and material goods we have accumulated. Our needs for food and clothing must be met, but St. Benedict points out that the weaknesses of the needy must be considered or there will be grumbling. (RB 55:7) The task at hand is to recognize what is a need and what is a desire, and to know when and how to set boundaries and practice mutuality—with ourselves and with others.

Order, discipline, balance, accountability, and obedience free up time, energy and resources for a life of prayer and service. De-cluttering brings freedom and the emergence of a clean, light, and peaceful environment. According to Terrance Kardong, OSB, a lack of focus leads to a fragmentation of self.<sup>1</sup> Our environment is a reflection of our self-image. Does it glorify God?

We are all trustees of our goods. In truth, many of us have too much. Benedictine spirituality reflects a “green” choice for living with a focus on re-purposing possessions and an eye to creating beauty. We are called to sweep away and clean our spaces of unused and unwanted “stuff,” and to give the excess to those in need. Even our garbage should be seen as a sacred gift, to be recycled and converted for new purposes.

*Oblate voices:*

“When my life is not surrounded by things and people, or my time spent accumulating more, I free myself to do more and to be attentive to the work and the tasks God asks of me.”

“I stop to consider if I really need something, and I buy, sell, or give away used items before buying something new. Perhaps a small icon that enriches my prayer life is of more value than a new couch.”

Our exchange and use of goods, like a pebble thrown into water, has a global ripple effect. Excess is a result of the myth of happiness, independence, and private ownership. There is an alternative to the self-sufficiency movement in the world today—to share with and rely on one another. At its core, private ownership spurns the need of others, while the heart of community is expressed in our need for God and others. “*Simplicity is more than the key to personal freedom. It is the basis for human community.*”<sup>2</sup>

How can St. Placid Priory and The Rule of Benedict help oblates with the difficulties and challenges of embracing a life of shared goods and

simplicity? We seek to follow people who embody Benedictine values. In the community, the cellarer (the one in charge of distributing the community's goods) is frugal without being self-righteous. Sometimes necessity or loss of a job puts us in the position of living with less. But frugality can be a choice. St. Placid Priory is an example of lived simplicity. The care of the facility and the use of resources evoke a strong sense of place and of stewardship that gives glory to the Creator.

Looking through a window or a lens of simplicity, oblates see a world with these values: everything in moderation, gratitude for all creation, and stewardship for God's goods. With an ordered management of material goods and a life of simplicity, *"a rhythm in my life emerges that makes me fit for more difficult work."*<sup>3</sup> ✠

## { 7 }

### WORK

"Work is our contribution to creation."<sup>1</sup>

By work we mean professional and other occupational jobs. The ability to work is a gift from God. As oblates, we approach work with gratitude. All work can be contemplative.

Benedict saw work as a sacred act. Our challenge is to project that sacredness through our attitude and behavior in our work environment. We try to perform work to the best of our abilities, respect co-workers and foster peace in our workplace.

Despite social and economic pressure to equate success at work with success in life, we work to structure life with a balance of work, prayer, study, and leisure. Becoming a workaholic distorts this balance.

*An oblate's voice:*

"Work can sometimes take over, keeping me busy doing the things necessary for life: the job, the kids, the meetings. I sometimes wish I had more time to pray, a bell to call me away from work. That is the challenge: getting the moments of prayer in, even when it's been a long day. The thing is, when I take the time and plan a few moments pause in the car in prayer before racing to the ball field or grocery store, it's like a reset button; I'm always refreshed and ready to tackle the next event."

There is dignity in all work including manual labor, housework, underpaid work, volunteer work and even unemployment. As oblates, we should not judge people by the type of work they do. As employers or employees we strive to regard all people, able or disabled, with the same respect.

We are called to use our talents to the best of our ability, keeping in mind that our work, even the most menial, is shaping the future of the world.

Although the line between work and prayer is indistinguishable for Monastics and they can structure their work around prayer (*ora et labore*), the separation is more visible outside the monastery. Oblates find ways to structure our prayer around work. ✠

# { 8 }

## STABILITY

*“The purpose of stability is to center us  
in something greater than ourselves  
so that nothing lesser than ourselves  
can possibly sweep us away.”<sup>1</sup>*

Stability can be about place, but it is not limited to this. It can also include stability of heart and stability of life’s purpose. Unlike stagnation, stability requires a great deal of courage. It requires us to commit, to contain anxiety, and to go through difficulties instead of around, over, under, or in the other direction. Stability asks us to be centered. Grounded in stability, we stand and face what we would rather run from. We commit to staying the course, to persevering and enduring. We face life. Within a community, we have stability but we also gain stability when we stay in a community.

The tree is a powerful image of stability. Its roots are planted deep, yet it is flexible enough to meet challenges of weather and seasons. Rooted, but alive with change, stability assists conversion of life.

*Oblate voices:*

“Stability is the anchor of my life, being close enough to join a community in prayer, celebration and work.”

“I struggled with stability until I read about ‘stability of heart.’ Then I had no need for concern. ‘What if I moved someday?’ I knew without a doubt, no matter where I was, I would always

desire the Holy Rule of St. Benedict to be in my life, and the Sisters at St. Placid Priory, would always be in my heart.”

In our Benedictine life, stability can come from formative connection with a community of oblates or another trusted group from whom we receive spiritual nourishment. This connection supports stability. Such communities provide nurturing as well as challenges. In a healthy community everyone’s talents are valued and supported. When we are in community, we find we are given the time and the resources we need to develop. In turn, our talents are given back to the community as gifts. In such a community, we have the courage to look at ourselves and the compassion to bear with one another. We develop the ability to meet life in all its messiness and still love.

Prayer supports stability in a life based on Benedictine values. Regular daily prayer leaves us open to God’s influence, encourages us to surrender to God’s will, and allows God to remake us. ✠

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## HOSPITALITY

*“Hospitality,  
rather than being something you achieve,  
is something you enter.  
It is not something you do,  
as much as it is someone you become.”<sup>1</sup>*

Hospitality is a very broad topic within the context of a community, and can mean many different things to different people. The practice

of hospitality is at the heart of what it means to be Benedictine.

As Benedictine oblates, we believe that practicing hospitality, like all virtues, is a continuous and never-ending journey and one of constant conversion. This journey begins with basic and foundational kindness and in having a continuously open heart. We ask ourselves daily, “Is my internal house ready to receive guests?” For this is how we must always be with people. We see Christ in the other person, as well as in ourselves, and we let this sight of Christ guide all of our actions. We strive to treat everyone as if they were Christ.

Hospitality is like prayer: if we practice prayer, we become a prayer. If we practice hospitality, we become hospitable. Just as we must learn how to pray ceaselessly, we must learn how to be always hospitable. There are always ways to practice hospitality as Benedictines, no matter where we are, who we are with, what we are doing.

So how do we, as Benedictine oblates, view and practice this virtue of hospitality? We welcome, greet, embrace, love, serve and honor the other. We listen with the Spirit. We rest in this place of hospitality. We are present and we are humble. By making hospitality so much a part of ourselves, we become the essence of hospitality, and it flows naturally from our divine soul, like water bubbling from a spring in the earth.

*Oblate voices:*

“I feel it is in my parish that I have the most opportunities to exercise the virtue of hospitality, to recognize and to be the face of Christ.”

“Each person has her/his story and I honor that.”

“To me hospitality is opening my heart to someone, as well as giving refreshment and/or rest for the body.”

Our hospitality is shown in small ways and acts of kindness: a smile, a door held open, a helping hand with groceries. The simple act of

greeting or a sincere inquiry into another’s welfare, coupled with the willingness to listen to the response, each is a way we can practice hospitality. Talking and praying about what hospitality is and how we practice it increases our capacity for hospitality—the process never ends. This is the path of the Benedictine oblate. ✠

## { 10 }

### CONVERSION

Benedictine monastics take three vows: Obedience, Stability, and Conversion (in Latin “*conversatio morum*”). Conversion, for the Benedictine monastic, means to grow within the structures and practices of the monastery to which they make a commitment. Oblates, however, lack the structure the monastery provides. Often we live busy, crowded lives. We don’t have bells that bring us to communion with God. Our time is often not balanced between work and prayer. This makes the commitment of conversion a big challenge.

When we begin our journey as oblate candidates, we are given the Rule, and that is where we begin: studying and learning what Benedict saw as a path to holiness and oneness with our Creator. But as seasoned oblates, we begin to realize that the Rule is just the framework, a jumping-off place, and that the actual miracles of conversion are often surprises. As we focus on making the loving choices, the choices that often are not what the world would expect of us, we find one day that we have changed. Sometimes, it is just a bit of a change, but often it is a small and wondrous change: a person

who bugged us so much before now has become just a distraction.

*An oblate's voice:*

“Whether I like it or not, my life, my relationship with God, my ‘vision’ of God, how God leads my life—all these seem constantly changing and out of my control. God seems to first call me to conversion—and then, if necessary, to force me there.”

Conversion is a Möbius strip. We begin on the outside, then as we move forward, we change on the inside. Before we know it, we are back to the outside in a continuous circle. As Benedict says, we begin again. Our experience is that the world expects us to accomplish something, to define a goal and pursue it. But Benedictine conversion is not a goal we set and go after; rather, it is something that happens to us as we strive to be Benedictine.

*An oblate's voice:*

“The great thing about conversion is that we can always begin again.”

Conversion requires that we keep focused on what we are doing. When we think we have accomplished a change, we look to see that there is more for us to do. The key to growing is that we stay receptive, listen, wait, and trust. Sometimes the necessary action is no action at all. Conversion is not a quick fix; it is a life-long response. It is a change in the way we do the ordinary things in our lives, a daily attitude adjustment which requires us to participate and make a mindful choice. Am I going to grumble because it rained or look for the moment of sunshine when the clouds break? Am I going to hurry my children or show patience and understanding as they make a mountain out of their mashed potatoes?

*An oblate's voice:*

“We never fully achieve conversion, because it is a continual reshaping of our lives through response and grace.”

What are we converting our lives to? Some would say God or to become a vessel of openness to others, a beacon of peace in a restless world, a thing of beauty for the world and the Creator. What we are sure of is that conversion is an action, a choice, a desire that begins with the dawn each day, and every day shows us blessings in all the things around us in our ordinary world.

*An oblate's voice:*

“Conversion starts with being contemplative and listening to the needs of the community around us.” ✕

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