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## **Introduction**

Gathered to move forward together, and to learn to live the wisdom of the Rule of Saint Benedict, coming from the four corners of the world, we constitute a cell of the Church, on this 10th September 2023, here and now, a cell of the Mystical Body of Christ, called to form a synodal assembly. A challenge, for sure, that of the Spirit, the Gentle Host of our hearts, the Master of prayer, one of the two Hands of the Father, according to the expression of Saint Irenaeus. There is also the risk of allowing ourselves to be led astray by the Evil One, the enemy who goes out to sow the tares. Let us take the risk, since we have the good fortune to live, of fighting under the banner of the Lord Christ, our true King, the other Hand of the Father. We are not alone, but accompanied by the whole Church, the Church in heaven and the Church on the move. St Irenaeus, Teilhard de Chardin, Benedict XVI, among others, and above all our contemporaries, with three major texts that are current, even very current, today: Pope Francis' encyclical, 'Laudato Si', his apostolic letter of June 2022: 'Desiderio desideravi', and the Church in synodal process, communion, participation, mission, the 'Instrumentum laborem', Oct 2023. We'll be following the paths that he outlines in dotted lines.

The Oblates you represent will also be present. Those from my monastery have helped me to reflect and to orientate my readings. Unfortunately, for our international congress they are too French-speaking, with Amédéo Cencini, Roger Dewandeler, Marguerite Lena, Henri Jérôme Gagey, but also German-speaking with Hartmut Rosa, and English-speaking with P. Timothy Radcliffe, not forgetting an unexpected diversion into Manga culture.

**Methodology:** on reading the theme sent to the oblates, I was looking forward to working freely on the wisdom of the Rule, to letting the Spirit guide my lectio, my work times, opening me up to certain overlaps, those of life with regard to my commitments and encounters.

And then the roadmap that had been sent to me suddenly emerged from the emails I had saved. What a surprise it was to read the subject that had been proposed to me: **Exploring the training needs of the future**. A nice four-point roadmap, lots of hows, a few whys... A roadmap, GPS mode. A sudden great fear! My inability to follow any of the suggested itineraries in the long term. Because how can one not take a detour, a break, or even a more adventurous escapade when reading or writing an article? How can you put together, within a given framework, the fruit of a long walk in the garden of life? In short, you get the idea: the two wings, that of faith and that of reason, have had me foraging here and there over the last few months. As a Benedictine bee, rather than a Cartesian speaker, on this first day of the Congress I offer you a little spoonful of honey from the thousand flowers of today. A spoonful of honey from the Hodie of God, honey from his Love for us, honey as nourishment to continue the journey and return to the One from whom we have strayed.

**My today?** We are all members of the universal Church, on a synodal journey. For my part, I am president of my small Benedictine congregation of Saint Bathilde, still young, founded in 1921,

with a missionary desire to respond to the call of Pope Pius XI to establish religious life and therefore also monastic life in places where it did not exist. I am familiar with our monasteries in Madagascar, Vietnam and Benin, and we are supporting the beginnings of monastic life in Ethiopia.

**Our today:** we are experiencing a radical change in civilisation that is both promising and worrying. One crisis follows another, leaving many fields of ruin. The climate crisis that Pope Francis urges us to tackle head on: at number 13 in 'Laudato Si': "The urgent challenge to protect our common home includes a concern to bring the whole human family together to seek a sustainable and integral development, for we know that things can change. The Creator does not abandon us; he never forsakes his loving plan or repents of having created us. Humanity still has the ability to work together in building our common home."

We are here today, we are part of this changing world. Heirs, co-heirs, responsible, sometimes powerless in the face of such increasingly complex challenges, we have to respond, to give an account of the hope that lives within us and shapes us.

It's a huge challenge to be and to invent this new way of being the Church, in the heart of our disorientated world, which has lost touch with God. There's no point in taking stock of the situation with you. Let's just keep a few key words in mind: faith, commitment, instability, institutions, abuse, misuse, lies, individualism, the culture of death, war, violence, dignity, freedom, responsibility... a veritable rosary of catchwords. It's up to each of us to open one of these suitcases and explore it! Training as exploration...

Together, let us be like the bees that gather pollen and carry it back to the hive for honey. For us it is the honey of wisdom to offer to the world, not as experts, but as fervent sons and daughters of the same Father, as joyful seekers of God, as humble workers filled with the Spirit.

For the spoonful of honey, I'm bringing you here are a few nectars I've gathered:

## 1. The nectars:

**1. 1. Teilhardian nectar** to set the tone, or not be set as arrows according to an expression of this mystic and man of science. For him, man is not the center of the universe but rather the upward arrow of the great biological synthesis.

*"Since Jesus was born, and grew to his full stature, and died, everything has continued to move forward because Christ is not yet fully formed: he has not yet gathered about him the last folds of his robe of flesh and of love which is made up of his faithful followers. The mystical Christ has not yet attained to his full growth; and therefore the same is true of the cosmic Christ. Both of these are simultaneously in the state of being and of becoming; and it is from the prolongation of this process of becoming that all created activity ultimately springs. Christ is the endpoint of the evolution, even the natural evolution, of all beings; and therefore evolution is holy."* Hymn of the Universe, LVIII. Pocket edition.

Teilhard gives impetus to a dynamism that comes from elsewhere, this state of permanent research. When we talk about ongoing research, we mean evolution, movement, trial and error, distance and, more broadly, the cosmos and the noosphere. Here again, these words inform and shape us: we are part of this dynamic that goes beyond us, and yet we can grasp it without grasping it... as if we were glimpsing it from afar. Seeing it makes us want to come closer, and the light becomes shadow, and "at once we are and we become". Today, this cosmogenesis

teaches us that the evolution of matter is in continuity with spiritual evolution. André Manaranche, a Jesuit, asked: "Can we remain in our First Communion costume when we are adults? Ever-evolving science raises questions about faith. Is science for us an untouchable amount of knowledge or something that joins us in our present day to walk with us and challenge our saved world? **From Teilhard, let us keep this nectar of ongoing research that challenges us to articulate science and reason at the heart of human current affairs.** Let's simply remember these breathtaking words: *Christ has not finished forming himself. He has not brought back to Himself the last folds of His Robe of flesh and love that His faithful are forming for Him.*

We are thus folds of his Robe of flesh and love on the returning path to Christ. This is a good reason to believe in the need for ongoing formation; a good reason to love being part of this movement towards completion, and to respond to it; a good reason to invite our contemporaries to bring their folds of flesh and love for the one Wedding Robe!

### **1. 2. Let's rediscover the Nectar of the Bible!**

Three words from the same root in French: to form, form (noun) and formation. Let's keep the two main ones: form and to form.

#### **Form:**

Num 12:8: "Moses contemplates the form of God".

Is 44, 13: "The sculptor gives him human form".

And Luke 3, 22: " And the holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased." (synoptics)

#### **To form:**

Gen 2, 7: The Lord formed man out of the clay of his hands.

Job 10, 8: Your hands formed me and fashioned me.

Ps 118, 73: Your hands formed me and fashioned me; give me insight to learn your commands.

Wis 9, 2: By your wisdom you formed man...

Sir 17, 1: God formed man in his own image.

Is 42, 6: I took you by the hand and formed you... or Is 44, 2 : The Lord formed you from the womb.

1 Ti 2, 13: Adam was the first to be formed.

### **God forms man with his hands, in his image according to his wisdom, so that he may learn his will.**

Sir 51, 17: Praise him who forms the whole universe.

Heb 11, 3: The world was formed by the word of God...

#### **And God forms the universe**

Other meanings, few in number, where God is not the subject...

Dan 13:48: "Daniel, in the midst of the circle that was forming, cried out, 'Sons of Israel, are you mad?'

Ga 4, 19 - 20 : "My children, you whom I give birth to anew in sorrow until Christ is formed in you, I would like to be close to you now and be able to change the tone of my voice, for I do not know how to deal with you".

Col 3:15-17: "Let the peace of Christ reign in your hearts, to which you were called as one body. Live in thanksgiving. Let the Word of Christ dwell in you in all its richness; teach and admonish one another with all wisdom; with psalms, hymns and inspired songs, sing your thanks to God in your hearts. And whatever you say, whatever you do, let it always be in the name of the Lord Jesus, offering thanksgiving to God the Father through him."

2Ti: All scripture is useful for training in righteousness.

We can quickly grasp **the force of this biblical pollen**: God forms the universe and all that it contains, he forms man in his image and he gives man the Spirit so that he forms the living Christ in man. Paul unfolds the image and says: "You are one Body", and he gives us the program of formation by the Master Formator: the Spirit. The Father desires for us this stature of perfect man, the Spirit is sent to give us a share in his life. What exhortation do we hear? Let the Word of Christ dwell in you

Teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and how, through psalms, praise, songs... So, what does the training lead to? To praise God at all times, in everything, to do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus and to offer honour, glory and praise to the Father through Christ.

**An appeal: to have a Bible, to have a psalter. Have them with you... and open them.**

### **1.3. Patristic nectar:**

A Father has held my attention for more than twenty years, having had the privilege of working with Ysabel de Andia, director of research at the CNRS and a specialist in Irenaeus of Lyons. Under her direction, I worked on "the progression of man according to Saint Irenaeus of Lyon". A great teacher! I'm setting the scene to better highlight the foundations of our question: what about training?

The question posed by Irenaeus in Book IV of *Adversus Hæreses*, "Could not God have made man perfect from the beginning" (IV, 38,1), places the problem of the creation of man against the backdrop of a triple theological controversy with the Gnostics, namely:

- *Is the Demiurge powerless to create man perfect from the beginning? In fact, what conception of God did Irenaeus defend against the heretics?*

- *Why didn't God create man perfect from the beginning? In the face of the Gnostic conception of the three natures of man, what conception of man does Irenaeus affirm?*

- *Is there salvation in the flesh? What concept of time, death and therefore the flesh does Irenaeus oppose?*

From this triple controversy we see the emergence of the future of man in a perspective of the economy of salvation. Irenaeus' anthropology is situated within soteriology, in the light of recapitulation. He characterises the future of man as an increase, a progression.

Irenaeus is opposed to the Gnostics, who set out to "weave ropes out of sand" (I, 8, 1). To do this, he chooses to give "in all simplicity, truth and candour" (I, Pr), the seeds to refute their doctrines and weave the ropes that keep the mast upright, strong and resistant to the various attacks: "Jesus Christ our Lord, who because of his superabundant Love, made himself what we are, in order to make us what he is" (V, Pr).

In 'Adversus Hæreses', Irenaeus explicitly develops the question of human progression. Progression means formation.

Like this Adam-child, the newly born human being is called to attain the perfect charity poured into his heart by the Spirit and thus, by participation in this same Spirit, to become "perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5,) by acquiring the power of the Uncreated.

Irenaeus marks Books II and III with the affirmation of the rule of truth, which is thus deepened: "A sound, circumspect, pious mind, enamoured of truth, will turn to those things which God has made available to men and of which he has made the domain of our knowledge. It is to these things that it will apply itself with all its ardour; it is in them that it will progress...". (II, 27, 1), "This man... abiding in his love, in submission and in the state of grace, will receive from him a greater glory, progressing until he becomes like Him who died for him..." (III, 20, 2). (III, 20, 2).

Basing himself on the law of truth received within the Church, "the ladder of our ascent to God" and "his breasts" (IV, 24, 1), Irenaeus develops his response and gives the means to adhere to it, through enlightened faith.

**Enlightened faith:** this is indeed the way to progress, to become "con-corporeal" with God, participating in his divine nature, to respond to our vocation as men, to become free with the freedom of the children of God.

The semantic field is interesting to note: **first**, the vocabulary that indicates time: nouns, adverbs and verbs. It marks the conception of time.

- *at the beginning, at the end, initially, in the middle (e.g.: III, 24, 1)*

- *first, then, finally, newly (nuper),*

- *duration, extension: to last, to prolong, to persevere,*

**Then** there is the vocabulary that indicates an action or a passage. This becoming is oriented towards the individuation of time: ascent (e.g.: III, 17, 2), to grow, to increase, to become (e.g. II, 34, 2), to get accustomed, to exercise, to seek and to find, (a couple which emphasise the search).

**Finally**, the vocabulary that indicates a state. It highlights the nature in question: to be, existence, to exist; seed, unfinished; child, adult; completion, to complete; maturity, fruit; perfection (*perficere*), to make perfect (e.g.: III, 12, 5).

This simple semantic survey reveals an induction, characterised by a first state, a **passage** in time leading to a **final state**. This passage through time can be seen as the interval of progression, an interval open to the infinity of He who is the Uncreated. This passage is also the **time of becoming**, which crosses duration to blossom into eternity.

**Enlightened faith is therefore enlightened by and in this time of becoming...**

The images chosen by Irenaeus are developed in two registers throughout his work, intersecting and responding to each other, mutually enriching each other:

- *vital images: plant: seed, growth, fructification and animal: child, maturity, adult*

- *musical images: rhythm, melody, symphony, polyphony, tuning.*

These images are a **work of representation, of creation**, and stimulate the creative process. In this way, the concept of man becoming accustomed to the symphony of love and opening up to the silence of contemplation is gradually developed.

**For Irenaeus, this revelation is in no way a science reserved for initiates**, but *"having received it from us as seeds, as mere beginnings, you will make what we have expressed to you in a few words bear abundant fruit in the breadth of your mind, and you will forcefully present to those who are with you what, though insufficient, we have made known to you"* (I, Pr 3).

Like me, you can hear some of the tasty nuggets that give a special flavour to our spoonful of honey.

**Three of them stand out in my mind:** enlightened faith; the work of representing and creating the chosen images; and the capacity of every human being to bring to fruition and share the seeds of the Word.

I'll summarise the harvest before going any further:

**An appeal to live, Bible and psalter in hand, inhabited by an enlightened Faith, worked on, fruitful: yes, all capable.**

#### **1.4. Benedictine nectar**

The same semantic method was used in the search for words that convey transformative dynamism, enlightened faith and commitment to the school of St Benedict.

One key word, the portal of the Rule: Listen; a second, the door on the side: School; the third, the person who passes through the portal: Disciple; and the fourth, the action that explains the passage: study to find the goal: the return to the Father.

Five words like five flowers planted in the heart of God. This gives a very special pollen for the spoonful of honey: **a school for every disciple who wants to return to the Father, by listening and studying**. This is not reductive, but perhaps a vision for the 21st century of what the Spirit can give us to see and live in the manner of our Father St Benedict, who saw the world as a luminous point!

I will read just two passages from the Rule this morning:

In the Prologue: "12. We have therefore to establish a school of the Lord's service, in the institution of which we hope we are going to establish nothing harsh, nothing burdensome. But if, prompted by the desire to attain to equity, anything be set forth somewhat strictly for the correction of vice or the preservation of charity, do not therefore in fear and terror flee back from the way of salvation of which the beginning cannot but be a narrow entrance.

1.3. For it is by progressing in the life of conversion and faith that, with heart enlarged and in ineffable sweetness of love, one runs in the way of God's commandments, so that never deserting His discipleship but persevering until death in His doctrine within the monastery, we may partake by patience in the suffering of Christ and become worthy inheritors of His kingdom. Amen.

The school is a place not only for correcting one's vices and safeguarding charity, but also for advancing and progressing along the path of the commandments in order to share in the reign of love. Progression and advancement are thus proposed as a way of realising the Father's

plan of love in a perspective of continual learning. To found this school is to commit oneself to it forever through stability. There are many topical perspectives in our changing, unstable world, with no reference points other than those we choose for ourselves. A school that teaches the doctrine of faith, as a return to the Father for life and happiness, and at the same time a path of participation through patience in the sufferings of Christ.

What an audacity that we hardly dare: do we thus present life in the school of Saint Benedict as a **pedagogy of participation through patience in the sufferings of Christ**, even if we seek a more attractive formulation...? "We proclaim your death Lord Jesus, we proclaim your Resurrection, we await your coming in Glory". I return here to the centre of what we are talking about, the centre of our faith, Christ who died and rose for us, calling us to share in his life and giving us access to the Father. To live under the Rule is to choose to respond to this call to become disciples of Christ, bearing the fruit of the Spirit, the first fruits of the Kingdom.

Saint Benedict speaks of **reading**, the tools of the spiritual art, and of **study**. I read the second very short passage that I have retained:

RB 8, 3: "For the time that remains after the Office of the night, they shall use it to learn the Psalms and the Lessons they need."

Some translations speak of study: the study of the psalms. Verse to be compared with verse 5 of chapter 58: "He will spend in the novices' dwelling where they meditate, eat and sleep." Study, read and meditate on the Scriptures, the psalms and the books of the Catholic fathers "which teach the right way to reach our Creator". (RB 73, 4)

Let's remember this insistence on teaching, on asking people to study, to meditate, to read, and to show the way to the Father, the Creator. Ascending to reach the heights, the summits of love through the practice of good works. An unvarnished coherence outlines the monk's life, a coherence between listening and practice, disciple and master, brother and community, *noviter veniens et perveniens*. The emphasis is clearly on a journey of growth, through conversion, praise and service.

Saint Benedict undoubtedly gives us a precious experience, the search for varied nectars with the scents of **conversion, praise and service** drawn from the well of the Scriptures, through meditation, study and rest in God, which is presented first and foremost as patient participation in the sufferings of Christ.

I'll summarise the harvest before going any further:

**A call to inscribe our path of conversion, praise and service** on the way back to the Father, through participation in Christ's sufferings. **A pedagogy to be initiated.**

There would be many other nectars to pick out, but these four categories are enough for today. The bee still collects pollen with its legs, before returning to the hive and working to produce a variety of products: wax, propolis, royal jelly, honey and even venom. Let's take a look at a few pollens before entering the hive.

## 2. Pollens

### 2.1. Anthropological pollen

Man is in search of himself: "What is man that makes you think of him? This is nothing new. As Ecclesiastes says: "Nothing new under the sun". What is new is the acceleration of science, which has profoundly altered our anthropological reference points and even turned them upside down. We cannot ignore the major ethical questions and the dizziness caused by the lack of solid reflection. One question leads to another: from augmented human beings to artificial intelligence, there are many ebbs and flows that networks amplify and explode, to the point of causing real existential tsunamis. What kind of men and women are we? Which men and women are we addressing? What kind of men and women are we becoming? Far from the barbarians St Benedict addresses in the Prologue. But are we so sure? This man, this enhanced woman, endowed with artificial intelligence, with an omnipotent will, a desire for immortality, a pronounced taste for individual well-being without suffering, a frightening appetite for consumption, don't they have some things in common with biblical man? Fear, mistrust, desire, thirst for happiness, the ability to beget, love, tenderness, forgiveness, gratitude, wonder, growth, words. Father Timothy Radcliffe points to this path of incarnation: "Our words give life or death, they create or destroy. At the climax of the drama that unfolds, the passion, there are the last words of Jesus on the cross. They are precious to us because it is there that our conviction is rooted that human words are indeed the quest for an ultimate destiny and that they can reach it. Our words may be clumsy and only scratch the surface of the mystery, but they are not empty". (Seven Words of Christ on the Cross, p 13) The place of words in our contemporary anthropological vision is everywhere. You know better than I do that we no longer know how to speak or write; everything is in acronyms, abbreviations and other condensed words, SMS, minimalist words or logorrhoea.

So, I see **the relationship between man and the word as the foundation of the culture of dialogue** that Pope Francis is trying to foster in the Church and the world. Yes, the primacy of the word, the primacy of dialogue because of the primacy of mystery.

### 2.2. Philosophical pollen

Let's continue our pollen harvest and turn to a contemporary German philosopher, Hartmut Rosa. At a time of climate questioning, of man's role in the degradation of the world, he takes an uncompromising and rigorously analytical look at man's situation in a world that he wants to be his own, within his reach, always available. "The cultural driving force behind this form of life we call modern is the idea, the wish and the desire to make the world available. But vitality, contact and real experience are born of the encounter with the unavailable. A world that is completely known, planned and dominated is a dead world. This is not a metaphysical discovery, but an everyday experience: life is achieved in the interaction between what is available and what, while remaining unavailable to us, is nevertheless "watching" us. It takes place, as it were, on this borderline. ... (p 6)

Rosa himself defines his working hypothesis, which resonates with us: "Insofar as we members of late modernity aim, on all levels - individual, institutional and structural - to make the world available to us, the world always confronts us in the form of a "point of aggression", or a series of points of aggression, that is to say, objects that must be known, reached,



conquered, dominated or used, and it is precisely in this, that life, what constitutes the experience of vitality and encounter, what enables resonance, that life therefore seems to evade us, which, in turn, leads to fear, frustration, anger and even despair, which are then expressed, among other things, impotent political behaviour based on aggression. " (9)

There are two unavoidable words: availability and unavailability, which structure Rosa's research, starting with the acceleration of the world, which seems to him impossible to slow down. If we can't slow things down, what can we do? Return to the earth its unavailable part so that it can resonate with what is received, taken in and assimilated. In fact, to simplify things, our relationship with the world can be understood as consumption on every level. Consumption of everything that is available, all the time, everywhere, by everyone. From harvesting to extracting precious minerals, to the quest for renewable energy, we operate under this mode of consumption, to such an extent that we have established a day of excess, a day of the year, between the end of July and the beginning of August, when our annual consumption of the earth exceeds what it produces in the year. We are devouring the earth exponentially. This is true in all areas, and this consumption, which is never satisfied, leads to frustration, anger and despair, which in turn leads to violence and creates a culture of death. Leaving the world its unavailable part means integrating what has been given, allowing it to make its way and thus to resonate and respond, by producing, through a fertile gap, a fertile space for life, dialogue and exchange, the seeds of a culture of sobriety, dialogue and fraternity.

I spent a year at the priory commenting on the Rule in the light of this philosophical reflection. We discovered the extent to which we were consumers, not responsible enough and aware that everything is linked and that our small part is essential to the world's progress. Our understanding of today's world must take into account what Rosa highlighted: "the unavailability resulting from the process of making things available produces a radical alienation. The modern programme of extending access to the world, which has transformed it into a heap of points of aggression, thus produces in two concomitant ways the fear of the world's muteness and the loss of the world: where 'everything is available' the world no longer has anything to say to us; where it has become unavailable in a new way, we can no longer hear it because it is no longer reachable." (p 140)

Not inconsiderate pessimism, but a serious call to look at our inconsistencies, our paradoxes, our contradictions, to discern our resonances and look at our places of availability and unavailability. We need to take a closer look at the frustrations and angers that are expressed in our personal lives, in our communities and in society. Then we will perhaps be able to better discover what will open up and become available by consenting not to what is forbidden or refused to us, but simply lost, because we had it as dominators.

**From this post-modern philosophical foundation, I keep this borderline between availability and unavailability, and therefore consumption/integration, acceleration/resonance. In any case, a change in metaphysical position leads to a change in praxis.**

Without mentioning training, you heard it right, always underlying: starting and ending point!

### 2.3. Sociological pollen

A brief look at this societal flower, which is particularly specific to each country and continent. Our bee's legs are already full of this pollen, based on our anthropological and philosophical approach.

In "Les ressources de la foi", Henri Jérôme Gagey engages in a dialogue with the promoters of a pastoral of begetting and the American post-liberal currents, with which some of you here are more familiar with than I am. The author then shows how forms of Christian life committed to a service to humanity are emerging. It's all about inventing new ways of living in a world marked by hyper-consumerism. I'm quoting from a rather long passage that sums up what we're talking about: HJ Gagey himself quotes Gilles Lipovetsky (p 222):

*"How can we put the role of consumerism in our lives into perspective? How can we encourage interests and passions other than consumption? We need to invent or develop ways of giving people a taste for culture, discovery, creativity, work and commitment, and a desire to build their identity in ways other than through consumption. The changes to come will be driven by the invention of new goals and meanings, new perspectives and priorities in life. When happiness is less identified with satisfying the greatest number of needs and the endless renewal of objects, the cycle of hyper-consumption will be over. This socio-historical change implies neither a renunciation of material well-being nor the disappearance of the market organisation of lifestyles, but a new pluralism of values, a new appreciation of life to remove the obstacles to the development of the diversity of human potential. This is a gigantic task... because an entire civilisation has been built around consumption. It calls less for a revolution in modes of production than for a profound redefinition of schools and education."*

**Pollen brings a particular nuance to our thinking, linked to hyper-consumption approached from a sociological point of view. It's an appeal to consume differently, an apprenticeship that starts with education: family and school.** Initial training is certainly needed to reverse a state of affairs, but is the gigantic scale of the appeal realistic? How far are we going to saturate consumption before we can hope to stop and do things differently? The covid crisis is still fresh in our minds: a before and an after. Right? I doubt it... A question for us all!

### 2.4. Theological / ecclesial pollen

A final outing for our industrious bee: heading for the XVI Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, "For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation and Mission" with the *Instrumentum laboris*. This document was first sent to the participants so that they could work on it. A document that is accessible to us. It's up to us to pick out what is useful, good and necessary for us today.

I have retained point A2: Chapter 1 is entitled "For a Synodal Church: An Integral Experience". A1: The characteristic signs of a synodal Church and A2: A way forward for the synodal Church: conversation in the Spirit

This dynamic, born of the Church and given by the Church, reaches out to us today and touches us. Here we are, called together to make our own way, to let ourselves be carried along by this happy Pentecost Wind. The WYD has already borne fruit, and the *Instrumentum* is still in its infancy. It's up to us to see what this way of living encourages, calls for and

generates in terms of change. We are one big family, living under the same Rule, stemming from the same intuition, that of the Spirit who immobilised the man of God, Benedict, in order to teach him to remain under God's gaze, in a tireless search for his Peace, and therefore for his Face, discovered in each person we meet.

The Spirit invites us to this "*habitare secum*" to dare the frontiers of fraternity, by listening to the Word, meditating on it, celebrating it, putting it into practice, not alone in one's corner, but in community. A place of stability, a crest line, a tipping point, a rock buried in the inner cave from which the publican cries out: "Have mercy on me, a sinner".

As Benedictines, we will really have to study how to make this new ecclesial dynamism our own: how can we journey together to discern in the Spirit what he is saying to the Churches? The proposed outline seems clear to me, with the different phases presented, which are quite familiar to us when we practise lectio and group lectio. (Diagram)

A revolution for our Church today that Pope Francis is sowing like good grain. What is this good grain falling on now? I've chosen one single issue as the formative pollen, issue 42:

"Bearing in mind the significance of conversation in the Spirit to animate the lived experience of the synodal Church, formation in this method, and in particular of facilitators capable of accompanying communities in practising it, is perceived as a priority at all levels of ecclesial life and for all the Baptised, starting with ordained Ministers in a spirit of co-responsibility and openness to different ecclesial vocations. Formation for conversation in the Spirit is formation to be a synodal Church."

Let us also learn that this synodal Church must above all be a "listening Church" and that, consequently, it "desires to be humble, and knows that it must ask forgiveness and has much to learn". Isn't that what St Benedict proposes as the path to life and happiness?

It "unceasingly nourishes itself at the source of the mystery it celebrates in the liturgy", during which it "experiences radical unity, expressed in the same prayer", but in the "diversity" of languages and rites. Isn't this what St Benedict proposes as the path of conversion that leads to the Father?

It is a Church "of discernment, in the wealth of meanings that this term takes on within the different spiritual traditions". A1. Isn't this what St Benedict proposes as a path of conformity to Christ, using the tools of spiritual art?

We are at a favourable time, albeit a laborious and painful one, in the midst of the Church's renewal, which is affecting all sectors. The preparatory document specifies some of these, such as the need for "integral, initial and ongoing formation" for all; the "effort" to renew the language of liturgy, homilies, catechesis, the sacred arts and all forms of communication. In Lisbon, the Pope drove a nail in the coffin with young university students: "Be pilgrims of knowledge..." Isn't that what St Benedict proposes as a way of seeking God, by listening to the Word, put into practice in fraternal life and praise?

**Nectar and pollen are not placed side by side, preciously guarded by the foraging bee; they are pooled and transformed by an alchemy unique to the hive to produce its fruits, including**

**honey.** Is this not what St Benedict proposes as a path of disappropriation to found the stability of the community?

### **3. Our spoonful of honey today**

Let's leave the day behind and enter the night, the darkness of the beehive, the place of labour, the place of interiority, the place of transformation. This is our place of formation, of continual conversion. So, what's going on?

#### **3.1 Conformity to Christ: the aim of formation**

Formation is therefore a process that is not just a matter of content, duration and concepts to be learned. It is an inner readiness that is gradually being formed and transformed, and is destined to acquire a profound stability. Growth, progression. Nectar of Irénée de Lyon.

Formation by **imitation**: we copy a model, the most remarkable of which is Christ, himself the perfect image of the Father. A grace and a danger: the grace of the relational context, the master/disciple relationship, well known to the desert fathers. Danger: the imitation that computer technology transforms into a copy/paste that replaces the other, takes its place and therefore eliminates it. It's a danger that René Girard has highlighted throughout his ethnological research. Imitation leads to violence and chaos.

Formation by **following** in the footsteps of Christ, the sequela Christi: we follow a Master, Christ, in the best of cases, on a path to journey with him. This is a process that imparts an effective change of direction, absolute trust, and a personal, and therefore emotional, commitment.

The danger is that the following is very external to the self, with no commitment of the heart, of the feelings, no integration of the road as if driving in GPS mode... fidelity of behaviour, blind obedience, without taking into account the person who is walking.

Formation by **identification**, as Saint Paul exhorted the Philippians: "Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus ". (Phil 2, 5) Diving from the outside in, from following, imitating to integrating, no longer consuming but integrating the feelings that accompany words and gestures. Biblical and philosophical nectar) It's about taming the inner vibrations of life, feeling, experiencing compassion, seeing life according to the etymology of *phronein* that St Paul uses.

"Christ therefore becomes the form of the person who is being formed, not just the norm of his actions and the trace that his footsteps follow", according to Cenini (p. 24).

In fact, formation transforms us so that Christ is formed in us and we become members of Christ, concorporeal with Christ (Irenaeus). This journey goes right down to the depths of the heart, to the most existential instinctive powers, with its resources and weaknesses, to engender us as new men, molded according to the sentiments of Christ.

**In the final analysis, formation is the passage from image to likeness, a total and profound identification with the Son, through a slow process of conformation and assimilation to the sentiments of the Only Son, the obedient Son, the suffering Servant, the innocent Lamb, offered in sacrifice.**

Is it not this slow process of growth that Saint Benedict proposes when he founds a school of the Lord's service, "we may partake by patience in the suffering of Christ and become worthy inheritors of His kingdom."?

### 3.2 Fusion of the constituent elements

How does this slow process of forming the new man, called, loved and saved by Christ, take place? How can we welcome and participate in this new begetting, the gestation of the Son in us through the work of the Father and the power of the Spirit? How can we respond with a global, integral commitment of our whole being, whether human, psychological, emotional or spiritual? The whole man in every man... by all men!

The passion for our Lord brings to life and encourages us to beget others, a kind of permanent revitalisation, we could say a perpetual *aggiornamento*, made possible by the life-giving Spirit, given to each person according to the grace of the Father, for the good of all. The Passion of the Lord opens up this path, from the burning bush of the initial experience, through the light breeze of the desert, to the face-to-face encounter so ardently desired. Solitude, silence, withdrawal, for the prayer that leads to contemplation, work in us as an inner conversation, a growth in the knowledge and love of God. Along the way, with our feet firmly on the ground of reality, in the ordinary through the ordinary, through mediations that are also ordinary and daily, we are drawn by the Father in more or less broad strokes to become adopted sons, pilgrims of the future, to **"to the extent of the full stature of Christ"**. (Eph 4:13)

Everything is material for God's creative, shaping and transforming action. It's up to us to provide this material, these sometimes minute details of life, like a glass of fresh water, a cushion in the boat or a patch of green grass. It's up to us to nourish ourselves, wisely: not too much, not too little, balanced, varied, sometimes indigestible but necessary food, leaving a bitter taste or too little to return to; nectar, pollen from the ordinary path, but also exceptional, extraordinary nectar and pollen like this Congress, WYD, the Synod, a retreat, a training session. Our capacity to integrate - without hyperconsumption - will gradually grow and open up, not to give answers to everything, to dominate everything, to know everything, but on the contrary to give meaning to life, to limits, to suffering, to death. That's what it's all about, conforming to the Son, the lofty heights of love.

Everything can then be welcomed, gathered up to be offered, in this privileged place that is the liturgy.

Pope Francis, a shepherd attentive to all, teaches. His Apostolic Letter, *Desiderio desideravi* (DD, 29 June 2022) offers some food for thought to help us contemplate the truth and beauty of the celebration of the Paschal Mystery. The key appears in the title itself, "I longed for the desire". God desires us. Let's be clear: "God desires us with a great desire". "God, through the new fact of the Incarnation ... goes so far as to desire to be eaten by us. (DD24) The source, the heart of God, the act of love of Christ who gives his life to return us to the Father. Let us draw from this source abundantly to desire to open ourselves to the love with which we are thus loved. Our desire is indeed a response to God's primary desire. The free and unique resonance of each person as a member of the Body of Christ, resonance because it is the integration and symphony of salvation as a mission.

I would like to highlight a few points from the Letter:

Let's focus on paragraphs 34-36, where he encourages us to begin, continue and persevere in a serious formation in the liturgy, which itself shapes us.

The liturgy plunges us into the furnace of God's love (DD56) to become beings of desire. Training in the liturgy involves the art of celebrating. *Ars celebrandi* "is one of the ways of caring for the symbols of the liturgy and growing in a vital understanding of them". This art is passed on, evolving, with rules, knowledge and learning that "is done for the liturgy and through the liturgy", since, in part, it is by doing that we learn. The sapiential dynamic of practice as pedagogy.

“Ah, what art are we summoned to learn for the proclamation of the Word, for the hearing of it, for letting it inspire our prayer, for making it become our very life? All of this is worthy of utmost attention — not formal or merely exterior, but living and interior — so that every gesture and every word of the celebration, expressed with “art,” forms the Christian personality of each individual and of the community.” (DD 53)

**Here we are, nourished and equipped with a powerful word that opens up our horizons as Oblates of the 21st century: through the celebration of the Paschal Mystery we become what we receive, the One we receive, through and in a real adaptation of the art of celebrating.**

At this point, let us dare to take a leap of faith as born blind men, as thirsty Samaritan women, as discouraged Emmaus pilgrims: The Paschal Mystery is a mystery of death and resurrection, a path to freedom, a reversal of mentalities, expectations and perspectives. "Not perfect, but happy" according to the title of the book by Br Michael Davide, an Italian Benedictine monk. (Ed Salvator 2015) He calls for "a paschal spirituality that engenders an ethic of failure capable of caring for and healing wounds, rather than sprinkling on them the salt of judgement that discourages and belittles." (p 37)

### **3.3 Pedagogy of doubt, dissatisfaction, fear and suffering: Easter spirituality.**

We are now integrating all that we have gathered along the way, to understand that we are yes, in exodus, in change, in outwards movement, in transformation, starting from the Cross of Christ, from his Salvation on Easter morning: "Mary", "Rabboni". St Paul forcefully preaches **the folly of Christ's Cross** (1 Co, Ep, Ph), our way, our life, our joy. From "all is accomplished" to "not yet finished", the dynamic of the provisional, the dynamic of the Spirit, provokes believers to doubt and frustration. Jesus has opened and continues to open passages: from fear to love, from suffering and death to life. He opens them in us, through docility and availability to the power of his resurrection, which does its work, that of growth. As the aforementioned Cencini writes: "The alternative to growth is not the status quo but regression". (p 45)

The Bible diffracts fear and doubt, from the Genesis account "Adam, where are you? I was afraid and hid myself..." to Revelation, via the doubting disciples whom Jesus accompanies to the scandal of the Cross: "Man of faith, why did you doubt? "Blessed is he who believes without having seen!"

We are of this calibre: in resistance, debate and protest in the service of faith. We dare to cross the line without wanting to give a perfect answer, a lesson to others, an archaeological, untouchable certainty. We are beings of doubt before our God who reveals himself on the Cross. " The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1 Cor 1:18)

Let us contemplate St Paul's attitude in order to hear **our appeal today, so that we can dare to include doubt in our faith**: "I came to you in weakness, and fear and much trembling, and my message and my proclamation were not with persuasive (words of) wisdom, but with a demonstration of spirit and power so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Cor 2, 3-5)

**Saint Benedict writes down his response and invites us to follow him, to run with our eyes open to the light that recognizes the divine, with our hearts attentive to the Word, with an army of brothers to resist the devil... the service of the Lord, the service of our brothers, the service of faith lived out and doubts assumed, "by participating through patience in the sufferings of Christ to deserve a share in his kingdom". (RB Pr 50)**

Participation at every moment, by every means, in every place, at every time... through the bond of faith, which becomes the patience of the future, the patience of love, the passion of love.

**Participation** is therefore **formation** for St Benedict.

In contemporary terms, Cencini defines ongoing formation as follows: "active and constant availability to learn the life of life (*docibilitas*) which is expressed in a set of ordinary but also extraordinary activities, vigilance and discernment, asceticism and prayer, study and apostolate, personal and community verification which help to mature daily in the believing identity and in the creative fidelity of one's vocation, the different circumstances and phases of life." (p 82)

## **By way of CONCLUSION, an image and an appeal**

### **The image: pollination**

Every bee that passes from one flower to another, carries something of itself with it. When it lands, it leaves something of itself behind, transforming the world microcosmically through the phenomenon of pollination. Wouldn't we be called to invent this new art of evangelising, by pollination, integrating the support of our oblation, of our links with our oblate monasteries, still depositing this taste for formation as incorporation into the totality of Christ? Wouldn't the oblate thus be a messenger of peace and freedom through praise and fraternal life in relation to his or her oblate monastery? If we are truly bearers of the living Christ, then with his Spirit, we will know how, as the Hands of the Father, to encourage new paths of formation for a happy humanisation, divinisation and thus communion in the image of the Trinitarian life from which we come and to which we are going.

### **The appeal: inculturation: hic et nunc**

Gaudium et Spes defines culture as "that body of personal and social data which marks man, enabling him to assume and master his condition and destiny". (53 à 62). Culture is therefore the means by which man becomes human, a man of a place, of a time, and therefore of a culture. Benedict already adapted clothing to the place where he lived. It's up to us, then, to keep up this process of inculturating our faith so that it becomes truly rooted in our whole life - "everything is linked". We believe that "the Gospel frees the ultimate truth of the values contained in a culture, and that the culture itself expresses the Gospel in an original manner and reveals new aspects of it". (Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes, CIVCSVA 1990 No. 92)

So perhaps it's up to us to create a culture of lifelong learning by harmoniously integrating the three dimensions of the human being that Cencini identified: the intellectual and cognitive dimension, the emotional and affective dimension, and the existential and methodological dimension.

Let's take flight loaded with that taste of honey, the *docibilitas*, perhaps a little bitter, but nourishing: "that full capacity of the spirit to undertake, typical of someone who doesn't wait for orders from heaven, but who takes the initiative to look in reality for the resources and training possibilities he needs for his growth". (Cencini, p 7)

Great joy and happy congress in conversation in the Spirit and may the millennium, on 13 July 2024, of the death of St Henri, patron saint of the Oblates, be a landmark for us in verifying the quality of our faith and our formation!

Thank you very much!

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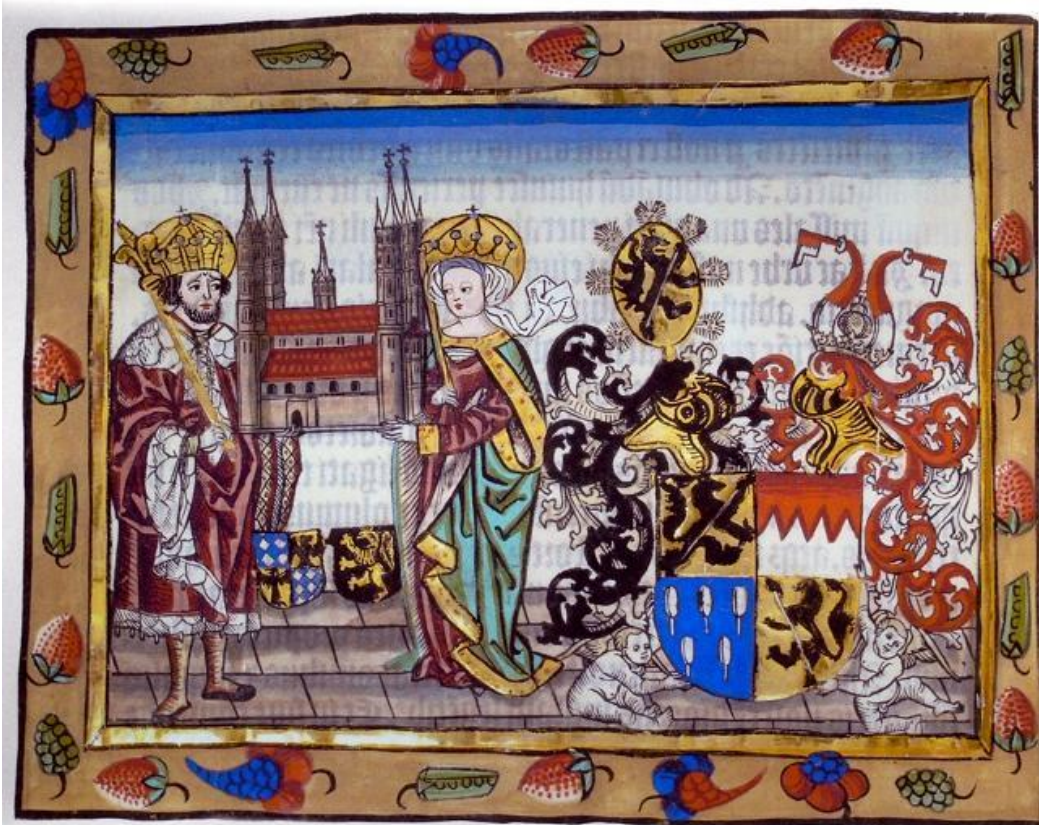
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## The conversation in the Spirit

A dynamic of discernment in the synodal Church



**Abbot Donato OGLIARI OSB**

## **LIVING OUT OUR OBLATE CALLING IN THE 21<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

### **1. How can we live the Wisdom of the Rule in our everyday life?**

Speaking about the wisdom in the Rule of St. Benedict involves first of all, an operation attempting to look back at the temporal and existential context to which the norms and exhortations presented in this writing refer to. To understand a sixth-century text addressed to a monastic community requires, in fact, that we strip ourselves of our preconceptions as much as possible and approach it with a view eager to grasp how much St. Benedict wished to transmit to us and how much of it can also be a source of wisdom for our daily lives today.

On the one hand we are at an advantage in the effort of understanding it, considering that the Benedictine Rule -as Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet said- is a "compendium of the Gospel". It follows that, a docile openness and sincere adherence to the Gospel message should produce a more ready acceptance of the content of the Rule which, in its main lines, refers back to the Gospel.

On the other hand, the many profound changes we are witnessing oblige us to come to terms with a culture that is no longer the repository of Christian thought and that has challenged so many certainties on which the daily existence of generations of Christians was based. In fact - as Pope Francis has reminded us - we find ourselves living not "in an age of change, but in a change of epoch" that, at least in Western societies, has highlighted an "exculturation" of Christianity, a process that began with the Enlightenment and that has confined the Christian faith to a kind of "cultural exile," in that it is no longer considered as the sole vector of meaning for human existence.

The interpretation of the Gospel message, and therefore of the Rule of St. Benedict, must necessarily confront these new cultural paradigms and the challenges they pose before us. The wisdom of the Rule of St. Benedict must therefore be recovered in its essentiality, where the norms and motivations that support it are not subject to the fashion of the moment, and its original inspiration continues to be a living transparency of the Gospel and a source of inspiration. Only in this way can it become a point of reference even within a "liquid" cultural and existential horizon - according to an expression that has become famous by sociologist Zigmunt Baumann -, very different from that of the past.

However, these changes should not instill fear in us. On the contrary, they should strengthen our faith in the Lord who guides history, and prompt us to face the crises and challenges of our time as opportunities through which God invites us to read the "signs of the times" by which He continues to make Himself present in the life of humanity.

### **2. Is there a roadmap for our lives in the Rule of St. Benedict? How can Oblates evangelize and live out stewardship in the world?**

At this point we ask ourselves: can the wisdom of the Rule of St. Benedict also serve as a roadmap for those who - like Secular Oblates - do not live within the shelter of monastic walls, but are in daily contact with the world?

What are the teachings that today can be appropriated and witnessed by Oblates in everyday life? In other words, how can Oblates be helped to recognize the traces of God in the world and be evangelizers among the men and women of our time, allowing themselves to be inspired by the values contained in the Rule of St. Benedict?

### **2.1. The search for peace**

It is not by chance that the Apostolic Letter with which, in 1964, Paul VI proclaimed St. Benedict "Principal Patron of Europe," begins with the words, "Pacis nuntius - Messenger of Peace."

"Pax" is a word dear to the monastic world and one often finds it carved or painted at the entrances or on the pediments of monasteries as a good wish for those who enter.

But what peace is it about? Not simply an absence of war or a pact between social classes, parties, corporations or organizations. As we know, all this - no matter how necessary - is often the result of political compromises and balancing acts. Strictly speaking, we can neither call peace that which, within one or another form of coexistence, whether familial or communal, is presented as the result of a tacit and mutual agreement of non-interference.

True and lasting peace, the kind for which the believer is called to strive daily, comes from an inner achievement generated by grace and sustained by the gratuitousness of love. Which means that in order to experience peace within our relationships with others and with the world around us, it is necessary that we, first, welcome peace as a gift from God and dwell in it. In order to spread it around us, it is necessary that we first experience and love it within ourselves, cherish it and build it day by day in our hearts, minds and actions. Only in this way will it be possible to become "peacemakers" (Mt. 5:9) by unmasking the selfish pretensions that lurk in us and by mortifying in the bud every instinct of domination, of overpowering, of violence on others.

The monastic life envisioned by St. Benedict is a life all about the pursuit of peace. In the words of Psalm 33 he exhorts the monk thus, "Seek peace and pursue it". Peace represents a fundamental aspect of his Rule, and it is intimately linked to the search for God and a harmonious life with oneself, with others, with the world, and with creation.

It is a peace that has, precisely, its origin in God and that has been manifested to us by his Son Jesus: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give it to you. Do not let your hearts be troubled or afraid." (Jn. 14:27). And again, "I have told you this so that you might have peace in me. In the world you will have trouble, but take courage, I have conquered the world." (Jn. 16:33). Peace is among the most precious gifts with which God, in Christ Jesus, manifests his plan of love for humanity.

It is against this background that St. Benedict's exhortations to seek a peace, that is a transparency of Christ's love should be understood. It is enough here to recall those "instruments of good works" where the monk is urged "not to give a false peace", that is, to monitor even through gestures the genuineness of the inner motives that support his actions, and to "return in peace before the sun sets with those who are in discord with us". The same "kiss of peace" offered to guests who come to the monastery is the result of prayer done together, that is, the recognition of common belonging to God. Finally, even in the organization of the monastery, the abbot must always have at heart the preservation of peace and charity, the goods, indeed, most precious of a monastic community and which are a sign of an authentic following of Jesus.

For St. Benedict, the search for peace thus inevitably leads one to seek all that is dear to God and to attune oneself to his will, even when it comes to understanding the great challenges of our time, those that affect macro-history. Benedict himself intervened concretely in a specific case. It was the encounter - narrated by Gregory the Great - that took place between him and the Ostrogothic king, Totila. Benedict took advantage of the occasion to raise his voice in defense of the peoples who were suffering profoundly from the bloody military campaigns, the constant looting to which they were subjected and the terrible devastation that ensued. Filled with the prophetic spirit and freedom that came to him from his daily frequentation of God, St. Benedict confronted King Totila boldly: "You," he told him, "Do many evil deeds and many you have done. Repent once and for all. (...) From that moment," Gregory the Great commented, "(the king) was less cruel."

What a contrast! On the one hand, Benedict, the man of God who, in the name of true peace, confronts helplessly, but inwardly free and rich with the weapons of faith, a leader accustomed to swashbuckling and sowing destruction and death! And yet, Gregory the Great comments, "thanks to the intervention of the saint, Totila's cruelty was partly mitigated." Benedict therefore invites us to desire and love peace with all our strength, and to sow and spread it in every situation, with words and with ways in our life, without losing heart. I am reminded here, of the words Thomas Merton wrote to a friend who was discouraged at the failures of a peace campaign: *"Do not depend on the hope of results. When you are doing the sort of work you have taken on (...) you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no results at all (...) As you get used to this idea you start more to concentrate not on the results but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself»*. We must never abandon the value, the rightness and the truth of peace if we are to keep its desire and commitment alive.

## **2.2. Respect for every human being**

The Rule of St. Benedict also carries a profound respect for the dignity of every human being. We find this not only in the generic exhortation, "Honor all men.", but also - for example - in those concerning the anticipation of mutual esteem, the rendering of a diligent service to the sick, washing the hands and feet of guests who come to the monastery, above all the poor and pilgrims, in whom Christ himself is welcomed.

In imitation of Jesus, St. Benedict invites us to have a new and welcoming gaze that safeguards the uniqueness and dignity of each person, one which knows how to recognize in each brother and sister not a competitor, but a subject with whom to enter into relationship and collaborate; not a hostile territory - or *l'enfer*, as J. P. Sartre asserted - but the "family land" of God.

The *raison d'être* of the patient, tolerant and understanding respect that we are called to show to every human being lies in the gaze that God himself - the Creator - has toward all his creatures. It follows that the truth about the dignity of every person belongs to the natural law inscribed in the heart of every human being. As Pope Francis writes in *Brothers All*:

"If the dignity of others is to be respected in every situation, it is because we do not invent or assume such dignity, but because there is indeed a higher value in them than material things and circumstances (...). That every human being possesses an inalienable dignity is a truth corresponding to human nature beyond any cultural change. Therefore, human beings possess the

same inviolable dignity in any historical epoch, and no one can feel authorized by circumstances to deny this belief or not act accordingly."

### **2.3. The poor and solidarity**

In his Rule, St. Benedict shows a lively solicitude for the poor and needy: "Above all, let it be our concern to receive the poor and the pilgrims favorably, for it is in them that we welcome Christ".

As is well known, Pope Francis has brought the theme of poverty back to the center of the Church's reflection. Starting from *Evangelii gaudium*, he develops it through two complementary angles: on the one hand, he denounces the structural causes of poverty, due to the economic and social context; on the other hand, he introduces a theological perspective. Thanks to the latter, the poor are no longer considered only in the light of a socio-cultural and historical approach, that is, as outcasts, but are understood within a theological category. That is, poverty, even before being a problem from a sociological and ethical point of view, is a matter of doctrine. Pope Francis writes:

"For the Church, the option for the poor is a theological category before a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. (...) This option," Benedict XVI taught, "is implicit in the Christological faith in the God who became poor for us, in order to enrich us through his poverty". That is why I desire a Church that is poor for the poor. They have much to teach us. Besides participating in the *sensus fidei*, by their own sufferings they know the suffering Christ. It is necessary that we all let ourselves be evangelized by them. The new evangelization is an invitation to recognize the saving power of their existences and to place them at the center of the Church's journey. We are called to discover Christ in them, to lend them our voice in their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to understand them and to welcome the mysterious wisdom that God wants to communicate to us through them."

The choice of the poor thus has its foundation in faith. The poor refer to God's action in the Incarnation of his own Son, Christ, who, "for your sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9). By virtue of this assumption no Christian can say he can do without the poor!

"The consequences of this choice affect the entire life of the Church and its very architecture: the poor must move from the margins to the center, since the peripheries are the future of the Church. This is a crucial element to replace the post-Tridentine institution, to move out of the Church-palace stably located in the center of the city in the modern age and to build a Church-tent that moves into the peripheries of the great contemporary megalopolises [...]. This pope is convinced that sensitivity towards the poor will determine the future of humanity, as it appears, for example, in *Laudato si'*. In his vision, the peripheries must become a priority not only for the Church but for everyone: abandoning a vision of problems starting from the center is also a necessity for politics, economics, and culture. Affirming the importance of the peripheries, Francis proposed a pastoral, evangelical, Christian interpretation of a vast historical process taking place in the contemporary world. That of the 21st century is a world of peripheries and its inhabitants, in some way, anticipate a future that is increasingly widespread."

It follows that solidarity also cannot be understood simply as a sporadic act of generosity toward those in need. On the contrary, it "requires creating a new mentality that thinks in terms of community, of prioritizing everyone's life".

In this regard, there is an episode from the life of St. Benedict that I consider emblematic of his way of understanding solidarity. For solidarity to become one of sharing and communion, one must look further than oneself and one's own needs:

"At the time when famine plagued Campania, the man of God had given everything in the monastery to the poor. Only a little bit of oil in a glass jar remained in the pantry. A subdeacon named Agapitus arrived and insistently asked for some oil. The man of God, who was determined to give everything down here (on Earth) in order to preserve everything in heaven, commanded to give him the little oil that was left. But the monk in charge of the larder, upon hearing the command, preferred not to obey. The Man of God after some time inquired whether the order had been carried out. The monk answered: "No: if he had given it," he said, "there would be none left at all for the brothers." Then, in anger, he commanded another monk to throw that glass vessel with the little oil left out of the window, so that nothing would remain of the disobedience. The order was carried out. Below the window opened a deep precipice of huge rocks. So, the jar was thrown. But although it fell on the rocks, it did not break, nor did the oil spill. The man of God then commanded to go and fetch it back and, again in his hands, he offered it to those who asked for it. Gathering, then, the brothers, he rebuked the disobedient monk in front of them, for his lack of faith and his pride.

When the rebuking was over, Benedict went to prayer together with the brothers. There was an oil jar there, empty and covered with a lid. While the holiest was in prayer, the lid of the jar began to rise because of the oil that was expanding out. When the oil spilled over the rim of the jar, it began to drip onto the floor. The Servant of God, as soon as he noticed it, ended the prayer. At that very instant the oil stopped flowing on the floor. Then he scolded the disobedient brother again, that he might learn to have more faith and more humility." .

The message is clear: being in solidarity with others requires that we do not close our eyes to their needs, justifying that we must first provide for our own. St. Benedict's example makes us reflect on the fact that insensitivity to fair and supportive justice stems from a selfish defense of what one possesses and an unwillingness to share it with those who do not even have the essentials to live on.

Moreover, from the above episode, we learn that those who are ready to share even what little they have, show that they do not put things above people, and that they have a humble and steadfast faith in the promises of the Lord and in his providence.

#### **2.4. Unity in diversity. The culture of encounter and dialogue**

Besides being a "messenger of peace," Pope Paul VI had also called St. Benedict an "*effector unitatis*," that is, a "producer of unity." Unity - as opposed to uniformity - implies the diversity of individuals, which must be lived in the light of harmonious interpersonal and intergenerational relationships.

In the Rule of St. Benedict, for example, the abbot must remember that he has taken on the "difficult and arduous task of guiding souls and adapting to different characters (...) conforming and adapting to all according to the dispositions and intelligence of each one". The brothers, too, must bear with the greatest patience the physical and moral illnesses of one another. The elderly, then, must love the young and the latter must, in turn, respect the elderly.

These few examples suffice to understand how the Rule of St. Benedict shows special attention to the "value of the individual man as a person", and how it advocates harmonious integration among all members of the community, regardless of their origin, cultural background and social rank:

"[The abbot] does not put the nobleman before the slave (...). If he thinks it suitable to foster a certain brother, let him do so without regard to his social condition (...), for, 'whether slaves or free men, we are all one in Christ' [Gal 3:28] (...). The only standard, by which we stand out before Him, is this: that we get better in goodness and humility."

For this purpose - as Pope Francis states - it is necessary "to grow a culture of encounter, which goes beyond dialectics that confront one against the other. It is a way of life that tends to form that polyhedron that has many faces, many sides, but all compose a unity rich in nuances, because "the whole is greater than the part". The image of a polyhedron can represent a society where differences coexist, complementing, enriching and reciprocally illuminating one another, even amid disagreements and reservations. Each of us can learn something from others. No one is useless and no one is expendable."

The Venerable Monsignor Tonino Bello, an Italian bishop who died at the end of the last century, enjoyed speaking about the "conviviality of differences," in the sense that these differences - when addressed in a spirit of true dialogue - can trigger a virtuous process of creativity and sharing. Naturally,

"in order to meet and help each other we need dialogue. There is no need to say what dialogue is for. I need only think what the world would be without the patient dialogue of so many generous people who have kept families and communities together. Persistent and courageous dialogue does not make headlines like confrontations and conflicts do, yet it discreetly helps the world live better, much more than we may realize."

Dialogue, too, however, requires patience, the ability to get back on track in the face of setbacks and misunderstandings, and foresight. The very etymology of the term "dialogue" (from the Greek διάλογος, a derivative of διαλέγομαι, which means to converse, to discuss, and which is composed of διά, "through," and logos, "discourse") brings us back to the verbal confrontation that passes through two or more people, and through which different, though not necessarily opposing opinions, ideas, beliefs or feelings are expressed.

We need not, therefore, fear the emergence or presence of conflicts in our relationships. The important thing is to face them with the deep desire and commitment, on the part of everyone, so that they do not become a reason for irreconcilable damage, but rather a training ground for sincere discussion, forgiveness and communion.



## 2.5. Communion and synodality

With globalization, increasingly frequent travel and the massive spread of digital tools, the physical space or place by which one used to define one's own identity is increasingly coinciding less and less with that of their geographical origin. If once the equation between the two locations was a given, today it is no longer. This detachment has paved the way for a rootless subjectivism that often reaches unprecedented peaks. On the other hand, however, it has to be admitted that the process of globalization has not produced the "global village" that was expected; on the contrary, it has brought out the plurality of our world with all its differences and divergences, often generating a sense of bewilderment in the face of the one who is tempted to react instinctively, giving simplistic answers to complex questions or closing oneself within pseudo-protectionist forms. Evidence of this is the growth of nationalisms in various parts of the world.

All of this also had an impact on ecclesial life. The ecclesiology of communion and the sense of the ecclesial "we" revalued by the Second Vatican Council have been severely tested. Individualism is flourishing and has now permeated every area, so much so that in this regard the term "individualization" is used to indicate a situation in which the whole of daily life - its times, its activities - is integrally organized around commitments of one's ego, without stable obligations to others. As a well-known advertising slogan says: "It's all about you". Of course, with individualism, doctrinal and ethical relativism also flourishes. Hence the urgency of recovering the constitutive relationality of the person who must indeed be placed at the center, not, however, so that he or she may be closed in on himself or herself, but so that he or she may be open to others and to the realities that surround him or her, in order to make his or her contribution of knowledge, growth, communion and good. All this is made all the more necessary by the fact that interdependence, exacerbated at all levels by globalization and widespread cross-fertilization not only economically but also culturally, imposes mutual interaction and collaboration, not closure in one's own individualism (as far as interpersonal relations are concerned), nor even less the erection of walls (as far as national spheres are concerned). Interdependence should sharpen the need for welcome, inclusion and integration, not exclusion. It is the challenge of communion that - today more than ever - monasteries and the Oblates connected to them must be able to make their own.

Benedict XVI said:

"Monasteries have a very valuable, I would say indispensable, function in the world. If in the Middle Ages they were centers for reclaiming territories of marsh, today they serve to "reclaim" the environment in another sense: sometimes, in fact, the climate in our societies is not healthy, it is polluted by a mentality that is not Christian, nor even human, lacking a spiritual dimension. In this climate not only God is marginalized, but also one's neighbor. The monastery, on the other hand, is a model of a society that places God and fraternal relationship at the center. We need this in our time as well."

About intra-ecclesial communion - as we know - the Church has initiated a synodal process or journey whose task is to bring out more clearly the very meaning of the Church's mission in the world, a mission to which each member of the faithful is called to make his or her own contribution. Pope Francis affirms:

"If we understand that, as St. John Chrysostom says, Church and Synod are synonymous-because the Church is nothing other than the walking together of the flock of God on the paths of history to meet Christ the Lord-we also understand that within it no one can be elevated above the others" .

Pope Francis reiterated this concept when he said that the syntagma synodal Church itself is redundant, since the two terms are synonymous: "The Church is either synodal or it is not Church". For his part, Fr. Tomas Halik writes:

"The process of synodality is an anamnesis, a reminder and revitalization of the original form of Christianity as a way, a way far overshadowed by pre-modern and modern forms of Christianity - Christianity as a Christian empire (Christianitas) and as a worldview.

Synodical reform must free the Church from mental closure and collective narcissism to listen carefully to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. This ongoing process of reform (the living Church is *ecclesia semper reformanda*) implies a deepening of spiritual life (communication with God), communication among the various groups that make up the Church, and ecumenical communication in a broad sense with other Christians, with other religions and their adherents, and with non-believers."

A pyramidal conception of the Church and its centuries-old clericalization have come at the expense of the active and responsible participation, including at the decision-making level, of all lay faithful, while respecting their different roles.

Regarding the synodal process, the Rule of St. Benedict offers various elements for reflection that can also be of inspiration and help to Oblates. Although in reference to synodality Chapter III of the Rule is generally cited - the one on the convening of the community to council - it is obviously lived out in other community contexts as well, especially there where the fraternal circle acts as a curb to any individualistic escapes, and where the contribution that individual monks make to the building up of the community is in function of the well-being of the whole community body, and not of a mere personal fulfillment that is at the expense of the community dimension. Clearly, all this requires a process of decentralization that must be continually cultivated and kept awake.

Interesting in this regard is an annotation by Fr. Mauro Giuseppe Lepori, Abbot General of the Cistercian Order:

"We risk wasting the grace of this time if we do not understand what conversion to communion synodality requires of us in order to be fruitful as mission. In other words, I have the impression that in living the mission of the Church, at all levels, it is not so much the mission itself that is scary, but communion. Why? Because in order to live communion, more than an outward decision, more than an outward commitment, we are asked for an inner conversion, we are asked to live a process that changes us in depth. Mission, too, certainly asks for an inner decision, asks for charity, asks for sacrifice, for the ability to proclaim and witness, even to the point of martyrdom. But it is above all communion that asks for a profound conversion of the self, a passage of a paschal nature, an entering into life that passes through a death. For communion

calls for a passage from the self to the we, a passage in which the self must die in order to rise again."

If the primary task of the Church is evangelization, it should not be forgotten that the first one who needs to be continually subjected to the light of the Gospel is herself, the Church. All of us, in fact, need to be continually re-evangelized and to become more aware of the basic importance of the synodal journey and the search for communion within the Church.

### **3. SOME TENETS OF BENEDICTINE SPIRITUALITY FOR OUR EVERYDAY LIFE**

At this point I would like to briefly present some tenets of "Benedictine wisdom" that may be useful for our daily witness of life and faith.

#### **3.1. Discretion**

Discretion is that virtue that protects human values from any form of extremism and fanaticism, and helps one to read and live events with openness of mind and heart, in the light of the *humanitas* that stems from the Gospel.

It should not be forgotten that it is precisely because of its discretion, that is, its proper sense of measure, that, starting in the ninth century, the Rule of St. Benedict has imposed itself on all other monastic rules present until then in the West. Permeated with discretion (*discretio*), it contains nothing excessive.

In organizing the life of the monastic community, in fact, St. Benedict -hopes "not to plan anything burdensome or unbearable". The abbot himself, "adhering (...) to discretion, the mother of all virtues," must regulate everything in such a way that "the strong desire to do more and the weak are not discouraged", keeping "in mind the weakness of the needy and not the ill-will of the envious". And again, "Let it be done as the Scripture says: "they were distributed to each according to need." (Acts 4:35). We do not mean, by this, that personal preferences be made-God forbid! - but that infirmities be taken into account. Therefore, whoever needs less, let him thank God and not complain; whoever, on the other hand, needs more, let him humble himself because of his weakness and not be proud of the charity used for him. In this way all brothers will be at peace".

These are some examples that tell us how the proper functioning of the community, that is, the organization of common life, must take into account the concreteness of individual persons.

#### **3.2. Silence**

Like the monk so too should the Benedictine Oblate cherish the dimension of silence. First of all, it is a pedagogical tool that helps to preserve a climate of concentration and recollection that counteracts superficiality and dissipation of the spirit, and encourages the search for the essential. It is in silence that the victory of the inner life over any disordered movement of the tongue, of thoughts, of the whole person is manifested. In a word, silence represents the fertile soil of a unified life.

Silence, then, is essential if one wishes one's heart to be in tune with God's, to be open to the humble and obedient reception of his Word and to be reached in depth by it. The Carthusian Guido II affirmed, "He who does not keep silence, cannot hear Him who speaks (...). Let the earth of my soul be silent in your presence, O Lord, that I may hear what the Lord my God says in me. For the words that you murmur cannot be heard except in deep silence". In turn, St. Vincent de Paul, who was also engaged in continuous works of charity, said, "He (God) does not

speak to us at all outside of silence; for the words of God do not mingle with the words and tumult of men."

In this sense, silence is also the "father of prayer": "Where silence breathes, prayer speaks". It is in silence that the Spirit spreads its wings, fostering a concentration of love that conveys communion with God.

### **3.3. Humility**

Humility should also characterize the faith and life of an Oblate. As we know, St. Benedict devotes the longest chapter of his Rule (ch. VII) to this virtue, which tells us the importance he attaches to it. Like the monk, the Oblate is also exhorted not to indulge in protagonism and not to seek the limelight or headlines. A certain "marginalization," that is, being sociologically inconspicuous -- thus reacting to the image cult by which our Western societies are afflicted -- is a sign of profound inner and outer freedom.

The Oblate's service to the Church and to the world should therefore present itself as a humble, silent and discreet service, analogous to that of monks and nuns, whose life closely resembles that of field flowers. Almost all of the latter will never be admired and appreciated by anyone, and yet these flowers will contribute, by their shape, color and fragrance, to make creation even more beautiful. Similarly, we too can make the Church and the world more beautiful through our simple "being there," manifesting in the ordinariness of our lives the beauty and joy of being disciples of Jesus.

Let us not begin with His incarnation, as the apostle Paul writes: " Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross. " (Phil. 2:6-8).

That humility is also the fruit of the Lord's loving grace working in our hearts is suggested to us by the following episode from the life of St. Benedict:

"One day, as the venerable Father was dining toward dusk, a monk, the son of a lawyer, was standing holding the lamp to him. But as he gave him light, in his heart he harbored feelings of pride and thought, 'Who is this one, whom I must attend while he eats? To whom must I hold the lamp as if I were his servant? Who am I, that I should serve him?' The Man of God, turning to him rebuked him severely with these words, "Make the sign of the cross over your heart, brother! What are you thinking? Make the sign of the cross over your heart, brother!" Then he called other brothers and commanded them to take the lamp from his hand, while he enjoined him to leave that service and go quietly and sit down."

### **3.3. The preciousness in the everyday life**

In his homily delivered in Norcia on the 15th Centenary of the birth of St. Benedict, Pope John Paul II had this to say:

"Benedict, reading the signs of the times, saw that it was necessary to realize the radical program of evangelical holiness (...) in an ordinary form, in the dimensions of the daily life of all people. It was necessary for the heroic to become normal, of the everyday, and for the normal, those of the everyday, to become heroic. In this way he, the father of monks, the legislator of monastic life in the West, also indirectly became the pioneer of a new civilization. (...) One must admire the simplicity of such a project, and at the same time its universality."

For those who have faith there is nothing that is not important, not even that which belongs to the daily routine and which we habitually disregard. If we have eyes to see God at work in every moment of our lives, everything can turn out to be important and valuable. The everyday is the training ground in which we mature and grow in faith, hope, and charity. It is the place of our holiness, that holiness which - to quote Pope Francis - is making its way

"in the parents who raise their children with so much love, in the men and women who work to bring bread home, in the sick (...) In this constancy to go forward day after day I see the holiness of the Church militant. This is many times the holiness 'next door,' of those who live near us and are a reflection of God's presence, or, to use another expression, 'the middle class of holiness'.

As is well known, for St. Benedict even the monastery furnishings, such as the hoe, the ladle, the writing tablet and stylus, are to be considered in the same way as the "holy vessels of the altar". Even these furnishings, in fact, can be tools at the service of petty, daily holiness.

Similar to the relationship we establish with space and things, time should also be lived with the awareness that it has a Christ-like imprint in it. That is, time is inhabited and oriented by that central, unique and unrepeatable event that is the mystery of the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ Jesus. Entering the world as the eternal Son of God, he assumed time into divine eternity and, through the humanity assumed at the moment of the Incarnation and taken to heaven by his Resurrection and Ascension, became the measure of time itself.

It is therefore in the dimension of time, as well as space, that God makes himself encountered. It is in it that we feel him close and can experience his loving attention and grace. Against the tragedy of "inverted time" -- that is, of a time cut off from "God's time" and its life-giving and eternal source -- we are called to live time in the light of God.

Indeed, the preciousness of the everyday, declined in the coordinates of time and space, will be able to be grasped and lived consciously if we yearn for an inner and outer stability that is anchored in God. Only then will it be possible not to become prey to frenzy and scattering, and to pursue a sober, unified and happy existence.

#### **4. What are ways for Oblates to balance *ora et labora*?**

Without a doubt, prayer and work constitute the daily ground on which to build a harmonious balance between the inner and outer dimensions, between contemplation and action, between properly spiritual and liturgical activities and material ones.

In the 4th century, in the early days of the monastic movement, in order to prevent prayer and work from proceeding on two parallel planes, desert monks gave themselves to repetitive work

that did not require the strong use of mind and could therefore be performed automatically, such as weaving wicker or rope baskets. In this way they kept the mind free and allowed it to become absorbed in prayer and meditation.

St. Benedict, however, because of the demands of cenobitic life, had to introduce a formal distinction between the time to be devoted to prayer and the time to be devoted to work. Although this distinction did not nullify the intimate correlation that exists between the two, their simultaneous interaction was nevertheless lost.

Even today, although alternating within the monastic day, prayer and work represent the main directions along which monks conduct their daily search for God. Anselm Grün and Fidelis Ruppert write:

"Monks believe that a right alternation and a balanced dose of prayer and work is the right path that leads to God. This path defends us from exaggeration and excess. Both poles are part of the person: extroversion in work and introversion in prayer. The human being is healthy only if the two poles are in a right relationship with each other."

Obviously, although in a different way than a monastic day, this alternation between prayer and work retains all its validity for Oblates as well. For them, too, it is vital to make sure that these two poles--extroversion in work and introversion in prayer--are lived out harmoniously. Oblates will not be expected to devote the same amount of time that monks devote to *opus Dei*, but certainly they too are called to carve out moments for prayer, Eucharistic celebration and *lectio divina*, in accordance with the activities they carry out and in the ways that the time available will allow them.

### **5. How can our lives be an attraction for others to want to join us (especially young people)**

Regarding the concern of how to reach out to the "youth dimension," which seems to us to be so distracted and disinterested in the religious doing, I simply submit for your attention a quote from a talk by Fr. Tomas Halik, a priest and sociologist from the Czech Republic:

"Today's young Catholics do not react polemically to the Church's traditional teachings on morality (especially sexual morality), as was the case in the post-conciliar era, an attitude that still survives among older generations of Catholics. Research shows that this is because the vast majority of young Catholics today do not know and are not interested in knowing those teachings: the experience of faith and moral choice is increasingly individual for them. In the Church they seek a space for spiritual experience, not directives on private life. Their approach to the tradition and institution of the Church is not hostile and polemical, but selective."

I would like to end this conversation by quoting a passage from the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who, at the very end of his sbook on Moral theory, drawing a parallel between the barbarity after the fall of the Roman Empire and our confused times, argued: «This time (...) the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have already been governing us for quite some time. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict». Perhaps each of us is the St Benedict that this time is waiting. It is up to us to take up the challenge and be true witnesses of Jesus!

## Expanding the Mission of the Monasteries We Serve

Abbot Primate Gregory Polan OSB  
International Congress of Oblates – 2023  
14 September 2023

When we speak about expanding the Mission of the Monasteries we serve, we have to think and reflect on the basic elements of the monastic life of the communities we serve. In very simple terms, we can speak of the mission of Benedictine monasteries in a very few words, though these words are loaded with significant meaning. The words are prayer and reconciliation. It is always clear to think about prayer, but also reconciliation? What do we mean by that? There are so many people that come to monasteries to find some kind of healing and reconciliation in their lives: whether it be troubles in a family; misunderstandings between friends or neighbors; hurt feelings; long-lasting anger; break-ups in marriages; or simple feelings of failure in their lives, their work, their relationships, their families. The list could go on and on, but I think you are aware of the point I am making. We live in a world in which many people are divided, alienated from one another, and searching for peace, but having a difficult time trying to find the peace they seek, need and desire. Reconciliation is often the way to find the peace for which they are searching

I am not a person given to sweeping generalizations, especially when it comes to the texts of Scripture. But I have come to discover over the years that there is a foundation which underlies the whole of the New Testament and which draws us ever more deeply into the mystery of Christ: it is the meaning of reconciliation and forgiveness. In passage after passage, the New Testament tells us of God's plan to reconcile the world to himself through Jesus Christ and how we are to become partners with Christ in reconciling the world to the Father. The message of the gospel is a word of reconciliation offered to us by the living example of Jesus. Every word and every action of Jesus was focused on bridging the gap between human brokenness and divine wholeness. It is my belief that reconciliation is God's great dream for the world. And we are invited to be part of that profound work of God in the world. If we read through the table of good works which St. Benedict gives in his Rule, we find many ways in which our actions can help build up a world in need of reconciliation.

A place where we find this message of the New Testament capsulized in brief is St. Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians, Chapters Five and Six. Listen to this message as St. Paul brings it together in dynamic fashion. "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, and has given *us* the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of *reconciliation* to *us*. So we are *ambassadors* for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled* to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:17-21). These words of Paul are addressed to every Christian who has shared in the gift of Christ's redemption. But it is my conviction that in a world so torn apart by war and violence, in the Christian Church scandalously divided into denominations, prejudices that come from race and skin color, and in parish communities split into camps of liberal and conservative, the

members of Christian communities are commissioned by the gospel to take on the role of being ambassadors of reconciliation more forcefully than any other group; and this is an important work for Benedictine Oblates. And I would say, it was one of my deepest hopes as abbot of a community in the United States, that my monastery of Benedictines can be a haven of reconciliation and forgiveness, certainly among the monks of the community, but also for our many guests who come among us from the experience of brokenness in their lives. If we Benedictines claim a charism of hospitality, then we must also claim to be ambassadors of reconciliation, hope and forgiveness in our lives.

Now it is important to be clear on the next point: this does not call us to be counselors or spiritual directors. In most cases, we are not trained for that special ministry. But in what we should be trained is the ministry of hospitality, kind and gracious welcome. What this means is that, in most cases, we do not have any idea of what a person is either facing or passing through in their life when we first come to meet them, or welcome them to the guest house of our monastery. In so many cases, many people feel some sort of alienation or disjunction from someone or some outside source. So what can we do? We can patiently listen, listen without giving any bodily sign of judgment; we can listen attentively, and then we can direct the person to someone who is qualified to assist him or her. And sometimes, just being listened to and understood is all that a person needs to go forward. In articulating their feelings or hurts, that enables them to hear themselves explain their situation, and they can better understand a way forward for themselves. I can speak from experience that many people simply need someone to whom they sense cares about them, who knows thoughtfulness and possesses a warm humanity. This is more of a gift than we can appreciate. How many times I have only sat with a person, allowed him or her to tell their story, their hurt, their alienation – and there has been some significant interior healing. Expressed very simply, your presence can make the kind of difference that is important for a person to go forward.

If we take seriously the words of Saint Paul, we can be an ambassador of reconciliation in a way that is very simple and humble. What is important is to realize is that God's grace remains the operative vehicle by which we are *fashioned* into ambassadors of reconciliation. The work of becoming a reconciler to others does not come of our own doing, but rather is a journey of the heart. Our desire to live in accord with the gospel of Jesus becomes the foundation upon which God alone builds, refashions, and creates us anew, as his servants, as Oblates of our monasteries. Allow me to explain. Until I understand with a peaceful heart that my human condition is broken and splintered, I will not be able to direct others to God's gift of reconciliation or forgiveness. I have to know and experience this myself. And here I am *not* talking about an unhealthy kind of breast-beating which pulls me down and keeps me from realizing my God-given gifts, sinner though I be. Rather, in coming to the realization of my sinfulness, I am overcome with peace and hope at the mercy, compassion, and unmerited forgiveness I have been freely given by God. All of this needs to flow out of an authentic relationship with God. It is a relationship which shows me "who I am in relationship to God," and "who God is in relationship to me." Though that may sound very self-centered, self-serving, and selfish, there is a powerful element of truth therein. And so often, it is by our prayer that we grow into that relationship with God who continues to love us, and also help us to know our strengths and weaknesses.



Something to be aware of is that being an instrument of reconciliation or prayer may not always give us a feeling or a sense of doing good. But if we are called to be servants and helpers as oblates, “feelings” are not the important thing to think about. We surrender our feelings to God, who knows how to lead us forward, to strengthen us, and to help us to be good servants. In fact, that is our oblation, our offering – to be present to people, to offer them welcome in a world where there is not always welcome and kindness for people to meet. As I mentioned before, there are so many people in our world today who experience significant alienation in some form or another. Can you be a source of healing and peace for these people? That is what is called for to be a person welcoming our guests to our monasteries.

This is not a “labora” that will give immediate satisfaction or good feelings. But that is not what we are about, if our goal is service. By being able to serve quietly and humbly in the welcome of guests, I believe this will help us to get past the reservations which some of you have felt in the past, as you have indicated in your comments to us. And the other comment that has surface among you is “what does your service as an Oblate of a monastery mean for you away from your monastery?” The welcome you give in a monastery to guests is something that will soon spill over into your life at work, in your home, in your neighborhood and in your parish. Developing a good sense of being a listener who pays good attention to people will mark you as someone to be sought out and appreciated.

And now, here is where the prayer becomes an essential part of your work as an oblate. After you have listen to someone, spent time talking to them, there are two ways to enter into the essential element of prayer: 1. Invite them to pray with you, often something simple like the Our Father or the Hail Mary. Those are both prayers found in the Scriptures; let the power of God’s word take its course in the person’s heart. Or you might invite the person to pray in his or her own words. But I would suggest that you pray spontaneously only if you are very comfortable with this. 2. After you have left this meeting, you pray for the person yourself. Believe that your prayer will have an impact on their life. Put them in God’s hands and let God’s Holy Spirit lead them in ways that are important. And then, keep praying for them. I know that when people ask me to pray for them, I automatically put them on a list of people for whom I pray, reminding me of them, forming a bond of prayer with them. Tell them you will remember them in your prayers.

Your final two questions have an answer from me, but I worry a bit that I may disappoint you with my response. Remember, I am a monk, and not a social worker. First, how may Oblates around the world unite to support one another in living the Benedictine charism beyond the Congress? I would suggest that you stay close to the monasteries of which you are Oblates. Be known as someone to whom the monks or sisters can turn as true helpers, as people who stand with them as people of prayer and faith, as ambassadors of reconciliation. Inspire one another with the various involvements you may have in your monastery, your parish, among yourselves. Instead of thinking universal, think “local,” that you can make a difference where you are. Second, “What is your “call to action” to Oblates around the world? I think it is important to distinguish between “doing” and “being “ in the life of an Oblate. And what is more important? I think “being” is most important because it involves your personal growth as someone who is an extension of a monastic community – that means people see you as a person of faith dedicated to service for this monastic community . Your service flows out of your faith and your love of the community. As Oblates of communities, be people whose life resonates with reconciliation –

wherever you are or whatever you are doing.

I will conclude as I began, with the inspiration of St. Paul: "If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who *reconciled* us to himself through Christ, and have given *us* the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of *reconciliation* to *us*. So we are *ambassadors* for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, *be reconciled* to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:17-21).