

## **Second World Congress Benedictine Oblates**

**Rome October 2009**

The Second World Congress Of Benedictine Oblates took place at the Salesianum Retreat Centre in Rome in October 2009. It brought together 210 oblates from 37 different countries, representing all 5 continents of the world. The theme of the Congress was 'The Religious Challenges of today- the Benedictine Response'. The Congress aimed to approach the subject from the points of view of mission, communion and contemplation.

As our society becomes more multi-cultural and multi-religious, Christians are urged to open themselves up to new challenges. We need to be able to recognise and welcome 'the other' as a brother or sister with whom we can begin to develop an authentic ecumenical, intercultural and inter-religious dialogue.

The abiding recollection I have from attending this Congress was the meeting, sharing, praying and worshipping with oblates from monasteries from all over the world. It was a privilege to have been there, a view shared by many. We were encouraged to socialise as much as possible with the other oblates, especially at mealtimes. There was a wonderful atmosphere of openness and sharing. It was exciting to be part of such a large and diverse group, but, at the same time, it was exhausting trying to communicate with so many others. Many prayer cards were

exchanged and invitations extended to stay at other monasteries.

We stayed at The Salesianum, a lovely Salesian retreat centre about 20km from Rome. It was an ideal place, situated within beautiful grounds, and we were blessed with glorious weather the whole week. The food was excellent, served always with plenty of wine!

Our days proved to be very structured and very long, starting at 7am and not finishing often until 10-11pm. The primary emphasis was on liturgy and prayer, together with a number of lectures, testimonies from several oblates, discussion groups and some inspiring days out.

### Liturgy and Prayer

The Offices of Lauds and Vespers, together with Mass, were celebrated each day in one of the five main languages spoken (English, Italian, French, German and Spanish). Each national group shared responsibility for organising the prayers, readings and music for the day. We had a couple of services led by our Anglican delegates. Each day ended with Silent Adoration and Compline in Latin. We were fortunate in having Fr. Lawrence Freeman OSB with us for a few days, along with a couple of other representatives from the World Centre for Christian Meditation, who kindly led us in meditation sessions each day, first thing in the morning and again before Vespers. These were always well attended and were a highlight of the Congress for me.

## Oblate Testimonies

We had testimonies from four oblates from around the world, from the USA, Brazil, Nigeria and Vietnam. These all proved to be very moving. The USA delegate told us how her Oblation had ‘changed her life and given her life’. The most memorable testimony, however, was given by the Vietnamese delegate. He reported that the number of monastics and oblates is steadily growing in Vietnam, but explained that living a Benedictine life under a Communist regime was not easy. These oblates spend much of their time in the city slums, ministering to the poor and needy. It was humbling to hear him talking about his Oblation as if it were a very special gift, deeply revered.

## Lectures and Talks

### The Contemplative Oblate Today Fr Lawrence Freeman OSB

Fr Lawrence opened his talk by urging us to consider why we had become oblates, and how we live the vocation at different stages of our lives. He described Benedictine life as ‘mixed’, that is neither solely contemplative nor active. We need to merge the two together, as in the Martha and Mary story. People from all walks of life, and in many different forms of vocation, now seek and practice serious forms of contemplative discipline. Three modern monks, Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths and John

Main, have been instrumental in channelling a specific monastic form of

contemplative prayer to those living in the world, and John Main went on to establish a lay community for oblates at his own monastery. Finally, Fr Lawrence reminded us that no matter what form of commitment we find ourselves in, the oblate must always seek God through prayer and work, and make peace our 'quest and aim'.

Mission and Interreligious Dialogue Mgr Andrew Tanya-Anan

Mgr Tanya-Anan, Undersecretary of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue (IRD), gave an inspiring and very amusing talk on the subject. He said that in an increasingly multicultural society, we are obliged to learn about the different religions and that IRD is not an option, but an obligation for us all. He also said that dialogue is not about negotiation or debate, and never an argument, but it is the way in which we walk and search together, holding each other in mutual respect, with no underlying political issues. Above all, he reminded us we must be prepared to 'listen', both to the word of God in our own life and to the 'other'. We have to be certain of our own identity, love our own identity, and be open to sharing our beliefs with others (though not with the intention to convert).

As oblates, there is much we can do in our own communities and parishes. Just being aware of the 'other', in the parish, workplace or community, can be the starting place. We can establish interfaith groups and invite those from other faiths into our parishes and homes. Furthermore, we can extend our dialogue to other

denominations as well, and stressed that we, as Christians, must learn to talk together before we go out and talk to others.

Personal Relations and Communion Mother Maire Hickey OSB

M Maire Hickey OSB, Abbess of Dinklage Abbey, Germany and Administrator of Kylemore Abbey, Ireland, commented in her opening remarks, that the Congress, looking for a 'Benedictine answer to the religious challenges of today' had set itself an ambitious goal. The Congress aimed, she said, to 'encourage and activate Benedictine Oblates all over the world to become active participants in the great movement for peace, justice and the protection of creation'. She spoke about the Second European Ecumenical Assembly at Graz in 1997, at which many of the Religious decide to do that which they would do normally at home, namely, to pray. This led to the growth of a new movement within the Christian churches of Europe, recognising the need to join forces in trying to articulate a Christian response to the challenges of our time. A slogan at Graz at the time was, 'think globally, act locally'. She challenged us to 'move out of the narrow perspectives of our own place and culture ...and through networking, ongoing education, intercultural encounter and relationships...get closer to the whole picture of the global situation...to a world torn apart by war, injustice and destruction', moving toward a 'vision of a world in which a deep ecumenical, interreligious and intercultural dialogue works toward a healing process'.

M Maire described the monastery as a place of peace, justice and love, and as a training ground for an increase in self-knowledge and deep prayer. Community life is about learning to get on with others, in order to live in Christian communion with them. Hospitality, as practised by the monastic community, is a powerful means for us to open up and be welcoming to what is foreign to us. The encounter with the stranger is an opportunity to tell him who we are as well as to listen to him.

#### Panel Discussion : 'The Religious Challenges of Today'

On the panel were representatives from the Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu and Roman Catholic communities, who each shared with us their own beliefs. It was acknowledged that we live in a time of conflict between different religions, which means we must learn more about the 'other'. Interreligious dialogue is the basis of a fairer world, a world of peace - there is no peace without interreligious dialogue.

#### Buddhist monk:

The Venerable Ajahn Chandpolo suggested we must work to develop our inner Selves. Buddha said there are three causes of suffering (3 fires) -greed, hatred and delusion. The opposite is generosity, contentment (with sufficient), kindness, compassion, patience, forgiveness and wisdom. We must be visible and bring witness to the benefits of a life that has a spiritual direction.

#### Hindu Nun :

Dr Hamsananda told us: ‘Through contemplation and worship the Hindu who is devoted to the divine, is returning to God. Meditation...focuses the mind away from the world ...If we link ourselves to our origin, which is God, through meditation, devotion and selfless activity, we will purify both the world and ourselves’.

#### Muslim Representatives :

Adnane Mokrani and Shahrzad Houshmand Zadeh : Treat Creation as the manifestation of God.

#### Jewish Rabbi:

Lisa Palmieri explained we all have the divine capacity within ourselves to listen, but we have forgotten how to do this. We need to learn to listen to one another.

Discussion finds solutions to new problems.

#### Roman Catholic Representative :

Fr William Skudlarech OSB: The greatest pioneers of interreligious dialogue have been monks, most notably Bede Griffiths and Thomas Merton. Interreligious Dialogue is a contemplative practice precisely because it demands that we listen. The Rule of Benedict starts with the word ‘listen’. Interreligious dialogue implies listening receptively and non-judgementally, we must listen to what the ‘other’ is saying is important in their lives. The main problem with ‘dialogue’ is that it puts too much emphasis on speech: interreligious listening might be a better term.

#### Discussion Groups

Following each of the main talks, discussion groups were held which gave the opportunity for delegates to discuss with one another, within their own language group, those topics explored within the official talks.

### Visits/Outings

The week was not all hard work, however, as we had several outings during the week. On Sunday morning we travelled into Rome to St Peter's Square, to hear the Pope's Address and Angelus. It was a very moving experience to be amongst all the pilgrims in the Square. Afterwards, some of us stayed on in Rome to do some sightseeing.

On Tuesday, we visited Subiaco and what a glorious day that proved to be. It is situated in a national park and in a breathtakingly beautiful location. We were shown around by two of the resident monks (four monks reside there). The church, built into the side of the mountain beyond the cave, was a delight to behold, but most importantly, we had the opportunity to see where it all began.

Thursday took us to Montecassino. We had Mass in the Abbey church, after which all the oblates renewed their Oblation to their own monastery. After a three course lunch, served in the monks' refectory (the first occasion women have ever been allowed inside the Monastery), we were given a guided tour, before joining the Monks for Vespers back in the Abbey church.

On the final day we travelled back to Rome, to the Primatial Abbey of Sant' Anselmo.

We made our way up the Aventine Hill in silent procession, praying as we went for world peace. After a short tour, we joined the monks for Vespers, followed by supper outside in the cloisters on a lovely, balmy evening. The food was splendid, and the wine plentiful, as it had been all week ... yet more treasured memories!

To bring the evening to a close, we were treated to a concert by the Abbot Primate, two of the brothers from Sant'Anselmo and a Benedictine sister, all accomplished musicians, and who delighted everyone. Finally, in his concluding speech, during which the Congress was formally brought to a close, Abbot Notker stressed the important contribution made by oblates to Benedictine life. He said we must be witnesses to the love of God to mankind. His hope is that an international network of oblates may be established in the future, which would provide the opportunity to share information and resources, although he stressed that an oblate's primary allegiance will always remain to their own monastery.

The week passed all too quickly. Congress afforded me the opportunity to do things I might not otherwise have done, most notably the trips to Subiaco and Montecassino. Likewise, I have met many new people and forged some lasting friendships along the way. It has made me realise what a grace Oblation can be in our lives.

Paula Holmes, Oblate of Douai Abbey Feb 2010