

Douai Oblate

October 2009 No 31

From the Oblate Director

It is well over a year since the last issue of the *Douai Oblate* for which I apologise, and can only plead that I have been rather busy. A lot has happened in that time. The second international Oblates Congress is under way in Rome. We are delighted that Paula Holmes has gone as our representative, and that she is now fully recovered from her illness. I must thank all the oblates who contributed towards her expenses and raised the grand sum of £400, which has been greatly increased by the tax rebate from the Inland Revenue. It is important that everyone contributed since Paula is going as our representative.

Oblates of all the monasteries in the country owe a great debt to Zina Neagle who has been the National Coordinator and has also been co-opted onto the organising committee in Rome. After the congress, Zina will be standing down as will the national committee, and other oblates will need to be found who will take the work forward in preparing for the Third International Congress, which we would expect to happen in 2013.

Last December two very successful national oblate retreats were held at Douai, given by Mgr, now Bishop, Richard Moth. We were very pleased that we were fully booked and that oblates from many different communities came. Nothing but good can come from the interaction, and we hope more national retreats will occur, hopefully at a different monastery each time. Richard was ordained bishop for the forces at Westminster Cathedral on Michelmas Day. He will surely need our prayers for this task which is especially difficult at the present time.

The continuance of this Newsletter depends on Oblates contributing content. I am delighted that one of you has written on Silence and Prayer and that Simon Bryden-Brook has contributed a piece about money. ♦

THE GIFT OF SILENCE: CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER - PURITY OF HEART - PURE PRAYER

St Benedict obviously cherished silence and saw it as a necessity for anyone who wanted to pursue the spiritual path. He devotes a whole chapter of the Rule to silence (RB 6) as well as mentioning it in a number of other places too. The very first word of the Rule, and the sentences that follow imply the need for silence: “Listen ... listen with the ear of the heart”, obviously influenced by the Psalmist (Ps 95): “today if you hear God’s voice, harden not your heart”. How had he arrived at this thinking of the importance of silence?

Here we have to revert to the teaching of the 4th century Desert Fathers in North East Egypt, the earliest monks. The monk, Ithagus, handed on to Abbot Isaak and his monks an approach to silent prayer concentrating on one word such as *Abba*. This approach is to strive towards what they considered pure prayer - prayer going beyond words and thoughts, to empty oneself of the ego, and thus making one accessible to the Holy Spirit. In other words to LISTEN in silence. You cannot be listening if you are occupied in speaking! John Cassian, a monk from the Balkans area, who visited Fr Isaak, listened to this teaching and indeed practised what Fr Isaak practised and taught, and recorded this in his *Conferences* - a handbook for Christian Meditation in our own times. It was from John Cassian that St Benedict learnt about the necessity of silence/silent prayer to strive for purity of heart, as he termed pure prayer, in our life of prayer.

Benedict speaks of some of the reasons why his followers should observe silence. First of all personal prayer, *lectio divina*, and study are hard to achieve in the midst of noise and chatter. He sets aside certain times, seasons and places in the monastery that will provide an environment of silence: “The oratory must be a place of

prayer ..when the Work of God is over all must depart in absolute silence..” (RB 52). During meals there should be complete silence disturbed by no whispering. Only the reader’s voice should be heard (RB 39), etc etc Yet recognizing our human weaknesses he goes on to say: “I have resolved to keep watch over my ways, so that I may not sin with my tongue”(RB6). He further suggests that sometimes silence can be better than speech even when the conversation is about good things: “I have accepted silence .. refraining from words that are good .. because of the value of silence.”(RB 6). In RB 7 he encourages his disciples to “speak gently and seriously with words that are weighty and restrained”.

It may all seem today unnecessarily detailed and perhaps rather negative. We have to remember the times in which St Benedict lived, and the kind of people with whom he was dealing, many of them would have been recent converts from barbarism (RB 22). So silence was a new idea to many of them - so equally true of our own times. What does emerge from the writings of St Benedict is his deep love and appreciation of silence, not just for the sake of silence but silence, for the sake of something - as a way to God and union with him. For Benedict it was a matter of cultivating an inner stillness and silence in order to LISTEN to God and to experience his presence within.

Whilst it is not easy for any of us, including the monastic, who would be the first to admit it, to incorporate Benedict’s teaching into our lives, to find places and time for silence and stillness in our daily living, since it requires discipline, and faith that leads to practice prayer in silence, nevertheless, we yearn for silence and stillness if we but realized and ac-

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DON'T TALK ABOUT MONEY! *by Simon Bryden-Brook*

A number of oblates have said to me that they are unsure about their financial relationship with the monastery. This is particularly so when an oblate retreat is coming to an end and they are assailed by doubts about how they can contribute to the expenses of their stay. How much? Should it be done discreetly? Is it expected?

The monastery itself does not give oblates any help, and for excellent reasons. Oblates are not paying guests, like those who come to attend one of the monastery's advertised courses. Such people pay varying amounts, depending on whether there are expenses such as speakers' travel and fees to be covered, but a quick look at the Douai

Silence continued from the previous page.

cepted it..

This spiritual search for pure prayer - purity of heart is exemplified in the teachings John Main OSB and is being taught across the world in true Benedictine tradition by his successor, Laurence Freeman OSB. Another monk, the late Bede Griffiths OSB was a great exponent of the prayer of the heart, which he taught in his Ashram at Santivanan in India with both Hindu and Christian meditators. This pilgrimage in pure prayer/purity of heart transcends all religious differences and unites us in our silence that all human beings share in common however much we resist it. Our resistance is because we remain in fear of silence, whereas the journey leads us away from fear to the realms of the love of God in totality. Pure prayer/purity of heart is surely the way we place ourselves at the disposal of the Holy Spirit.

All this proves how tradition in essence and at best prevails from generation to generation. St Benedict's voice comes through in silence into our silence: "LISTEN ..." he says. In that way we might hear the voice and feel the breath of God through the Holy Spirit in our lives. ◇

Pastoral Programme reveals that a weekend course is normally sold at between £90 and £200, with £110 being usual.

Nor are oblates to be compared to ordinary guests who come to stay privately. Hospitality is the traditional ministry of monasteries and it is freely given to people asking for an opportunity to rest and pray. The poor are not turned away. On the other hand, the monks would feel somewhat ripped off if guests who arrive in smart cars and clearly enjoy a healthy annual income, leave after a visit without making any contribution. They have used the charitable resources of the monastery as if they are entitled to them. Again £110 for a two night stay seems fair – they are told £103.50, if they ask.

Oblates are different because they have a special relationship with the resident community; indeed they are part of the Douai monastic family. In a sense therefore, oblates are their own hosts. But if we wish to see ourselves as members of the wider monastic community then we should be taking care to ensure that we are givers as well as receivers. The solution is surely to make a regular monthly contribution to the expenses of the monastery. If one is a tax-payer, then this is at present worth an extra 28% to the community. If one aims to attend two retreats annually, then a monthly standing order of £17 or £20 would seem fair and would be making a reasonable contribution to the hospitality ministry of the community, especially when the 28% recovered tax is considered. If one aims to attend three retreats a year, then a monthly contribution of £25 or £30 seems fair.

Some oblates are on low incomes and others pay no tax. The Gift Aid Scheme has nothing to offer therefore. However, I would urge that they too consider a monthly standing order, however small, to avoid making the oblate retreat seem a commercial transaction by handing over a cheque on departure. But two points need stressing: no one should feel obliged to make any contribution – the monks demand nothing. On the other hand no one should hesitate to be generous towards the community, however this is done. As oblates we share in the work of the monastery by our financial contributions and I would encourage generosity (£50 per month from those of us still earning?), rather than simply not leaving the monastery out of pocket as a result of one's visits.

Standing Order and Gift Aid forms can be obtained by writing to Brother Simon Hill at the monastery. ◇

News

Oblations, enrolments and a death

Since the last issue of the Newsletter the following have made oblation:

Loretta Cassidy
Veronica Hilda Bell
Mary Anna Overington
Beverly Thomas More Olsen

and the following became oblate novices:

John Ashman
Franz & Klara Brunnhuber
Anne Ishikawa
Gillian Davis
Richard Guion
Thea Van Dam
Bernadette Lister
Madelaine Lee.

We were sad to learn of the death of Anthony Boulton on August 12. He had been Anglican Dean of Reading, Rector of St Giles, and chairman of Christian CND. After retirement he had become Roman Catholic. In recent years he had suffered ill health and a number of strokes, but had been cared for in his flat by members of his former parish and by parishioners of St James, Reading, where he had worshipped latterly. He was an oblate of Elmore, but had attended a number of oblate retreats at Douai. Loretta Cassidy represented us at the Requiem Mass in St James, Reading.

Retreats

It was suggested that it would be a good idea to have a lady lead a retreat, so we are blest that Sr Miriam and Sr Judith, oblate directors at Turvey have agreed to come to lead the retreats in October and December. For these retreats we will be able to use all the guest rooms as is our practice whenever someone from outside the community gives a retreat, and I am happy to say all places are taken for October, and only one is left for December.

Chapters

A London chapter was established last July and meets every two months at Simon Bryden-Brook's flat, and in September a preliminary meeting was held at Ormskirk, Lancashire, to explore the possibility of setting up a North West chapter.

The other chapters meet monthly and the dates are published on the website.

Fr Boniface who had been assistant oblate director has moved from the monastery to the parish at Ormskirk and was instrumental in progressing the North West chapter. Fr Gervase visited the Wulstan chapter at Studley, Warwickshire, in March, and will be going to the Julian Chapter in Norwich in October.

Oblate Directors Meeting

There will be a meeting of Oblate Directors at Ealing in November, to hear reports from the International Congress and to discuss the setting up of the new committee to prepare for the next Congress, and also to discuss the organising of another national Oblates retreat. Following the two held at Douai last December, there was widespread agreement among the participants that it would be good to have another. It is important that the next one does not take place at Douai, but at another monastery.

Congress

The second International Oblates Congress in Rome has as its theme "The religious challenges today - The Benedictine answer, and has as its aim that 'Benedictine oblates can set out together on the road of dialogue with the world'. The schedule is full, each day begins with Lauds at 09.00 and some days do not end until 23.15! The texts of the presentations will be published each day on the web at:

<http://www.benedictine-oblates.org/2009/testi-en.php>

Hopefully oblates who have internet access will be kind enough to print out these texts and send them to those who do not. Paula, our delegate, will report back from the Congress at the next two oblate retreats in October and December. ◇

Douai Oblate is the Newsletter for the Oblates of Douai Abbey. It is published at Douai Abbey, Upper Woolhampton, Reading, Berks, RG7 5TQ. *phone* 0118 971 5333 *e-mail* douaioblate@aol.com *web site* <http://www.douaiabbey.org.uk/douaiobl.htm> No 31 October 3, 2009