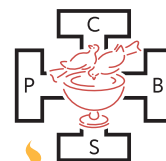




Benedictine Oblates of
The World Community for
Christian Meditation

BENEDICTINE OBLATE NEWSLETTER
No. 29, June 2022



Reading from **Laurence Freeman OSB**
SOURCES OF WISDOM

Pentecost is a time when the whole Easter mystery really find its completion. Pentecost gathers together all of the mystery of Easter and realizes it in us in the present moment. From now on there is only one thing to do: to fully awaken to this living mystery within us as a present reality. This is the work, the pilgrimage of our meditation.

John Main

Monastery without Walls



‘Set your mind on God’s Kingdom before everything else.’ That is what meditation is. And then after the meditation, things will look a little bit more harmonious. A little bit more in order because you have re-prioritised, at least to some degree, your view of the world and you know what the centre and the main priority is. This is cumulative of course. This is why contemplative practice needs to be, as St Benedict understood, regular. Benedict’s genius was to imagine a realistic way of life built around a time-table which allowed a lot of flexibility and a lot of adaptability, but a regular time-table in which the work of our hands and the life of our minds were integrated within and centred on this spring of contemplation. And that was again expressed in these times of prayer, regular times of prayer during the day.

The World
Community
for Christian
Meditation





Message from Fr Laurence

Many of you will have met fellow-oblates Maria and Albert Zakharovy from Lviv, Ukraine, on the online meeting in March. As a young, joyful couple, they have been sharing the oblate path with meditators in Ukraine and Russia for some years, as well as being committed National Coordinators for Ukraine and Russia. Another way of serving the community is their design of each issue of Via Vitae after Stefan has edited it. From responses I receive from around the world, I see how the whole community feels gratitude and admiration for how they are living our mission and vision during the horrific invasion of their country and its heroic struggle for survival.

On March 26th many meditators and friends around the world joined us for the day of meditation they organised for Ukrainian meditators. We felt moved by their steady, peaceful clarity as they described their work with refugees in Lviv, fleeing from the brutalities taking place in the East: a barbarism that Europeans felt would never return to this continent. Their peace was particular, evidently the peace of Christ that St Benedict says must be 'our quest and aim'. Maria said to me in a conversation preparing for this event, 'we are in war but this is the time to speak of meditation'. At that moment I felt called to go there in person to show our solidarity with them and to acknowledge the witness they are making to everything our community believes in. There are moments in life when we speak of the essential teaching and there are moments, and this is one, where we simply live it.

With two Polish meditators, Malwina who is the National Coordinator for Poland and Krzysztof, a

member of the Guiding Board who bravely offered to drive us to Lviv, we crossed the border, a few hundred metres wide, from peace to war. The Russian attack on the peace, which in our comfort zones we so often take for granted and treat superficially, was immediately tangible. Without peace we are attacked by fear, dread, insecurity and doubt. Over the following few days I learned much more of the distinction between the peace which 'this world gives' and the peace of Christ which 'passes understanding'. Clearly it is the peace of Christ, which he breathed on the disciples on the very day of the Resurrection (Jn 20:19) that St Benedict, quoting Psalm 33 in the Prologue to the Rule, says must be our daily 'quest and aim'.



This peace is real. It is an emanation of the solid reality that is Christ and it can be felt in the world even in, perhaps especially in times of war and conflict. I saw how it supports and infuses the generosity of the service to the displaced and the grieving which Maria and Albert are giving to the refugees. It was evident too in the Benedictine monastery of nuns who had opened their cloister to a hundred Eastern refugees including forty children and where we taught meditation during a visit Maria and Albert had arranged.

Because of the way they do things, they show - in so simple and obvious a way - that any separation of contemplation and action illusory. Their way of living as oblates through this crisis shows that peace is infinitely more than the absence of conflict. It is an energy in itself

– the peace, the shalom, of God transmitted directly from Christ to the human heart provided we do not close our hearts to it, thereby turning the heart of flesh to a heart of stone. As we rediscover it each day in the troubles of our lives, we realise this is the same peace that Jesus breathed on his disciples and that we find in meditation, in lectio, in community and in the way the wisdom of the Rule pervades our daily responses to the challenges of life.

Peace is not a private possession that we selfishly protect by isolating ourselves from the needs of others. Like the nuns, like John Main in his vision of the new monasticism, we must open the cloister to the world. Benedict has a special active concern for the young, the elderly, the sick and the vulnerable stranger. We must make and share this peace but first we must receive it as a gift in our hearts. Peace is more than a bunker we climb into during an air raid, as Ukrainians have got used to doing. The peace of Christ is a transmittable energy that flows from the wellspring of love opened in our humanity by the spirit.

aim in a civilised society and they are fighting out of love for their country, not hatred for their aggressors.

Let us remember Maria and Albert in our prayer and hold them in our hearts in loving silence. We are blessed to have them as fellow pilgrims and exemplary teachers in our community.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Laurence



MESSAGE FROM EILEEN DUTT,
International Oblate Co-Ordinator



Dear friends

At the time of writing it is Wednesday evening of Holy Week, 2022. Tomorrow we will celebrate the Lord's Supper and recall how Jesus willingly took on the task of feet-washing that was usually carried out by the

lowliest of servants.

As I reflected on this it took me back to the time when over a 100 people - meditators and members of L'Arche - gathered together in Westminster Cathedral Hall to re-enact the missing Sacrament of feet-washing. Eileen McDade, may she rest in peace, coordinated the event; Jean Vanier was our speaker. We were placed in groups of 6 and given a bowl, jug of water and towels. Each group included at least one member of L'Arche. Where washing of feet was not an option - or maybe the person just didn't wish their feet to be washed - we washed one another's hands or dipped our fingers in the water and gently stroked a cheek. It truly was a humbling experience and one that, years later, I can still recall as clearly as on the day. The love that was shared in and through the simple act of service filled the room



It is a paradox that one can fight for survival with peace and love but at times we have to. The example of individuals, like Maria and Albert and so many other oblates in less extreme conditions, who have found this peace in themselves and let it fill their activity is vital for the health and sanity of those fighting on the front line. In my visit I sensed that Ukrainians are fighting for their survival and the right to make peace their

with a tangible sense of God's presence.

I read today that Origen, the great scripture scholar, said: 'Jesus, come, my feet are dirty. You have become a servant for my sake, so fill your basin with water; come, wash my feet.'

I realise when you read these words Holy Week will have passed but I wonder what memories of it remain with you?

In his book, 'Sensing God: Learning to Meditation during Lent' Fr. Laurence ends his reflection for Holy Thursday with the following words:

But we cannot truly be there and stay merely as observers, consumers, as part of an audience. We will not be able to touch reality unless we allow it to touch us, to wash over us. Participation – and meditation – is what turns darkness into light and opens the portals of grace.

As our Sufi friend Rumi says, 'When the sun has arisen, where then remains night? When the army of grace has come, where then remains affliction?'

At the start of Lent I recall Maria and Albert - National Oblate Coordinators for Ukraine-Russia - sharing with me, and this at time when Russian troops were raging war in Ukraine - how they 'continue to meditate twice daily so as not to lose the connection with inner peace and unity and that the reason people brought the war in Ukraine is because they lost this connection'. For me they embody the words of John Main, 'The conviction we must come to in meditation is that the darkness cannot quench the light'.

I am personally encouraged by the different ways Oblates are getting actively involved in supporting the work of the World Community for Christian Meditation in sharing the gift of meditation and John Mains teaching. If the number of Seekers finding their way to our door is anything to go by then I feel we must be doing it good job as we now have an Oblate presence – Postulant through to Oblate - in 36 countries! Many of these are small embryonic communities so we do need to hold them in prayer.

There have already been a number of Ceremonies celebrated this year and the signs are all looking good that more will follow.

At the last International Oblate Council meeting we discussed the possibility of Oblates/Young Adults offering, possibly, another 24hour Silent Meditation for Peace in our World. Last time over 1400 joined us maybe this time we can get many more.

Wishing you a blessed Easter time.



GROWING IN LOVE

Editorial by Stefan Reynolds

Welcome to the new edition of Via Vitae. This has been another year of growth in the WCCM Oblate community – a difficult year with all the crises in the world but it is in times of crises that a deeper desire arises to commit ourselves to what is most important in life, to find the bed-rock of reality, as John Main would say. Benedictine life is about making daily life into prayer, about consecrating time, that is why we have our 'Prayer of the Hours' and our twice daily meditation. It is about dedicating our life. During times of crisis it is more important than ever that people



find – within the changing things of life – something that they can dedicate themselves to that is also of benefit to the world. The environmental crisis, covid, war, the financial crisis, the crisis of democracy (populism) all point to the necessity of a unified consciousness which has been the theme of WCCM this year. Our life as Oblates is to serve this unified consciousness, to build bridges. But, as the Dalai Lama reminded the WCCM community at the beginning of the year, the first bridge we have to build is from the mind to the heart, to learn to love strongly and impartially.

As we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love. (RB, Prologue 49)

This is the journey to which we are called. It can seem a far cry from the humdrum of our daily life but Benedict says, "through patience share in the sufferings of Christ that we may deserve also to share in his kingdom" (Ibid 50). Everything in life – things that delight us and things that we have to accept with patience - can be an opportunity of sharing in the kingdom. Our meditation and prayer of the hours keeps us open to life as it presents itself. All the crises of the world – of which there are many today – is part of "life in all its fullness." In learning to accept it we realise we are one with all those who suffer. We open our hearts, and in this new vulnerability we also find a new joy – the inexpressible delight of growing in love.

When a novice joins a Benedictine community St Benedict in his Rule (CH. 58) asks both them and the community to repeat this verse from Psalm 118: "Receive me, O Lord, according to Your word, and I shall live: and let me not be confounded in my hope." Our life as Benedictines is an act of faith, founded in hope, expressing itself in love. In the face of all the crises God has promised that he will be with us until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). We are supported by

God's Word, by God's presence – experienced in our meditation – and in community. As the Rule continues, "Let the whole community answer this verse three times and add the "Glory be to the Father." Then let the novice prostrate herself at each one's feet, that they may pray for her. And from that day forward let her be counted as one of the community." That is why it is a joy – during these times of crises – that there has been a revival of interest in the dedicated life. WCCM Oblation is one such form. And every postulant who becomes a novice, every novice who becomes a postulant, is a joy for the whole community. For it is an opportunity for us all to grow in love.

CONTENTS

Articles	6
News	12
Obituaries	15
Poems, Reflections and Reviews	16



ARTICLES

WAR AND PEACE - IN ONE MIND, IN ONE HEART

(Reflections on the WCCM theme of the year during the war)
by Maria & Albert Zakharovy (WCCM Ukraine NC's)



Kyiv Founders Monument

We welcomed with great enthusiasm Fr. Laurence's proposal, sent this year to the whole community, to reflect on the theme of the Unifying Consciousness. The topic seemed very close and understandable to us, uniting everything that we have been thinking about over the past years and what we have felt intuitively, thanks to the practice of meditation. But when at the end of February we were ready to formulate our thoughts in order to share with other meditators of the community, a war broke out, the most terrible of which has not yet been on the European continent since 1945.

Now, a few months after we left peacetime behind, it became clear how our vision of the theme of the year was theoretical, incomplete and woven from careless illusions. For all its horror, war is one of the radical manifestations of the experience of reality. And when we become overly immersed in abstractions, God comes to us as an experience that requires participation without delay. Experience is the best teacher. And now we must learn, transforming the darkness of war into the light of contemplation.

Not long before the war we discussed our theme of the community year with members of the Lviv meditation group. And one of the members of the group shared with us that the theme «Unified Consciousness» seemed rather strange to her and caused her vague

anxiety, leading to the question - «Where is this unity? Where to look for it in a world torn apart by conflicts, in a heart split by anxieties? Where is it in our current moment, full of opposing dualities?» And this question became prophetic for us. He reminded us that we must seek unity not in words, but in the depths of our field of reality. We obtain this field when we put aside all our illusions. We must be able to unearth the hidden treasure in it - the Kingdom of God. And today this field is war, it is the pain of the victims and the cruelty of the aggressors. We have no other reality today. It is in this «here and now» that we must meditate, giving birth to Christ and crucifying our egocentrism together with Christ on the ruins of our cities. We must change and overcome our former selves so that there is no difference or distance between our heart and mind and the heart and mind of Christ. War is terrible, but it becomes the hand of God, which pulls «yesterday» and «tomorrow» out from under our feet, leaving only the poverty of a moment «now».

The war clearly raises a question that we could hide from our attention before - - being distracted and falling into a «pious slumber», as happens in meditation, a moment before we notice that we are «no longer meditating.» This is exactly the question that we found at the meeting of the Lviv group after



Kiev's Wall Mural - Ukrainian Spirit of Unity

the meditation – “Where is the unity in the world of conflicts?”. Probably, we can continue this question with another, more familiar to our ears - «Where is God in the world of the Holocaust and the siege of Mariupol?». In the Gospel, the lawyer asks Jesus about the same things: «Who is my neighbor? Where is he? Where can I look for him so that I can deal with him according to the law?». Jesus gives an answer that is very difficult for us in its simplicity - «Become what you seek and strive for. Become this neighbor.» This basis of Jesus’ teaching is often reminded to us by Fr Laurence and John Main - God cannot be found as an external object. We find God by changing for the better and participating in the lives of others. The kingdom of God is within us and between us.

Yes, this object is still missing in our life - the «United Consciousness». This is clearly shown by a war in which the Russian dictator, out of touch with reality, sends thousands of mindless soldiers to destroy Ukrainian cities and kill children, adults and the elderly people. However, we are always looking for exactly what we do not have. We are looking for something that we have a glimpse of, occasionally visiting our inner room, our secret place of the heart. We believe in God, love, beauty or justice. We believe, although we cannot present all this as material evidence. But we can certainly be gradually transformed, «from glory to glory,» making our very lives the embodiment of our faith. Today, this transformation is taking place in us thanks to a terrible war - in the horizontal and democratic consolidation of the country’s society, in widespread volunteer activities, in selfless help from our friends from around the world. This transformation into Christ also occurs in the partisan activities of those Russians and Belarusians who are trying to stop the new Hitler by protesting and sabotaging criminal orders, awakening their fellow citizens from the haze of propaganda. Perhaps we all changed too slowly. But today the war has come, and we are forced to enter immediately into the stream of «continuous conversion» on which the life of the Benedictine monks is based.

What is the special role of meditation - «pure prayer» about which centuries-old tradition tells us, from John Cassian to John Main? It leads us to that simplicity against which everything today seems inappropriately complicated. The suffering and horrors of war naturally numb us. And meditation is perfectly adapted to

work with this parched desert. It revitalizes and heals the heart and mind, leading them from numbness to silence. Where Cassian and John Main advised us to «give up bodily cares and anxieties,» the war also helped us. We became less distracted by consumption, which intoxicated and comfortably insulated our egos from other people’s problems. Now we understand even better what Cassian’s «repeat the formula in trouble and in joy» means. Whatever distracts us, we need to peer and listen to the reality beyond the ego. In meditation, we practice cleansing the heart, so that later, after meditation, we can see God in his real home - in openness to the needs of Others and in renewing ourselves. Today our field is war, and by continuing to meditate every morning and evening, to the sounds of air raids, we strive to acquire this field and find treasure in it. This treasure is the great Presence of God in which we are all present as one.

READING THE RULE OF BENEDICT TODAY: AN OBLATE REFLECTION, by Nick Polaschek, Oblate from New Zealand

How can we orient ourselves towards the Rule of Benedict today? How can the ancient Rule be helpful for a meditating lay person?



The primary purpose of the Rule of Benedict was to guide the daily life of monks who (in contrast to ordinary Christian people) had committed to live under the authority of the Rule in obedience to an Abbot as celibates in one monastery for the rest of their lives. This commitment was summarized in the three promises of

obedience, stability and fidelity to the monastic life. The Rule contains many rules for monks, some liturgical, some practical, many disciplinary. While Benedict indicates a degree of flexibility at certain places in the text, this is always within the context of a careful and extensive definition of what is required of the monk. For example, while he says the psalms in the divine Office can be arranged somewhat differently than the form he sets out in great detail, he is explicit that recitation of the full 150 within a week is the minimum acceptable.

interpretations of Benedictine Oblation, such as those produced within the WCCM, are beginning to address this question.

An engagement with an actual Benedictine community, embodying in a specific form the spiritual lifestyle suggested within the Rule, is the real source of our Benedictine commitment, whether as a monk or an Oblate. We grow into Oblate life through participating in an Oblate community. An engagement with the written Rule itself is a secondary activity, an interpretive dialogue with the ancient text seeking insights to clarify and support our commitment to a way of life based on the Benedictine model we have experienced. Such reflection on the Rule can identify some key principles and exemplary practices by which one can choose to progressively orient one's life in seeking to follow the divine Word to us in Christ as a non monastic ordinary lay person. Following other contemporary writers, these could be expressed today as:

- *responsiveness to the divine Word to us in our daily lives ('listening')*
- *honesty about our selves (humility)*
- *spiritual development through our communal interrelationships (mutual obedience)*
- *persevering in fidelity to a stable pattern of daily life (conversatio morum)*
- *a balanced day of reflection and action, anchored by prayer*
- *daily recitation of the psalms as prayer*
- *service in the communities we are part of through thoughtful use of our gifts and resources (stewardship)*
- *hospitaleness to all we encounter.*

Today no monks follow the Rule exactly as written, in particular the disciplinary procedures, but also the more general rules. For example, stability in the Rule means actually living permanently for life within the enclosure of one monastery. But today this is typically spiritualized as referring to an inner stability in commitment to monastic life, with the original practice of physical enclosure no longer viewed as meaningful in our contemporary world. Some parts of the Rule, while probably normal for Benedict's time, are obviously problematic from a contemporary perspective, for example the routine abusive treatment of children or public humiliation of monks for liturgical errors. What monks do today, as in the past, is to interpret what they understand to be the key insights and exemplary practices that underly the specific statements and prescriptions in the text. Given this process is undertaken within different monastic communities in different situations there have been, as one might expect, a variety of interpretations produced. Different monastic communities today follow variant interpretations of the monastic practices in the Rule, one example being the Cistercian 'reading' of the Rule. It is not immediately obvious what a 6th century document addressed to communal monastics has to offer those today whose primary vocation is marriage and family life. Modern

Thus, the monastic and Oblate communities both offer a form of shared Christian living that can be understood as being based on these principles and exemplary practices. Dialogue with the Rule in the light of one's experience with a particular Benedictine community can, despite the ancient text obviously being a document of its time, facilitate reflection illuminating the potential meaning and value that can be discovered from sharing in the Oblate lifestyle today. Rather than being about any specific function, ministry or apostolate - a form of doing - the Benedictine way is about a spiritual lifestyle - a way of being. Paradoxically this also makes it adaptable by those living ordinary lives in society, often married with families, rather than

in formal religious groups.

The third bullet point is the main one for the Oblate, a desire, intention, and commitment to be part of the WCCM Oblate community. At the heart of the Benedictine lifestyle is seeking holiness - wholeness as human beings in accord with the divine intention - together in a spiritual community. The Rule is simply about how a group of monks seek to do this by living together day by day, acknowledging the inevitable difficulties on this path. In fact, none of the bullet points above are in themselves unique to the Benedictine lifestyle, or even the Christian way itself. But the ancient Rule comes to life as we engage in a dialogue with the text from our own situation, in particular our involvement with a specific Benedictine community - for us the WCCM Oblate community.

For people for whom meditation is integral to their faith life, engaged in several times each day, the way in which this practice relates to living according to the Rule of Benedict is not immediately obvious. The Rule does not refer to meditation, let alone allow time for regular meditative practice within the daily monastic schedule. The primary focus of the Rule is the 'Work of God', the chanted communal psalmody of the divine Office, whereas for the meditator our primary prayerful 'work' is personal meditation. In terms of its rules, while assuming personal prayer as given (just as it does the Eucharist), the Rule gives no priority or scheduled time for personal prayer of any kind, focussing rather on assigned personal reading. In terms of principles, the Rule appears to affirm the importance of daily communal cataphatic prayer and personal reflective spiritual reading, but lack any affirmation of a regular apophatic prayer discipline.

So most Benedictines do not meditate, just as most meditators are not Benedictines. However, a Benedictine way of life fits well with a meditative practice. Although the Benedictine way is not about meditation as such, it does offer a context that 'fills out' a regular meditative practice into a way of life. For meditators the key principles and exemplary practices that can be derived from the Rule offer a pattern of daily life that complements a daily meditative practice, central to our faith commitment. The principles and practices based on the Rule, that one can experience today exemplified in a particular Benedictine community, establish and develop a shared context, personal orientation and daily

pattern of life that complements and supports a regular meditative practice. Thus, the principles and exemplary practices of the Rule can articulate a spiritual lifestyle that is based on meditation, a prayerful practice that is not mentioned in the Rule. How such a meditative lay Benedictine spirituality is expressed within the vocation of marriage and family is, in my view, yet to be fully articulated.

John Main said, 'meditation creates community.' While any meditation is a personal activity, we learn the practice through it being shared with us by others, and we are supported in persevering in this demanding discipline through sharing with one another in our practice. This implicit community among meditators becomes explicit within the Oblate community of the WCCM, via the Benedictine tradition whose source is the Rule of Benedict. Our relationships with one another, derived from our shared meditation practice, are the basis of our communal Benedictine life as WCCM Oblates.

REFLECTION ON CONVERSATIO MORUM SUORUM (CONVERSION OF LIFE), by Stefan Reynolds, Oblate from Ireland



Someone once told me that in marriage the most important thing is to keep the conversation going. Certainly in human relations there is nothing worse than the 'cold-shoulder'. Benedict seems to have seen community life as a form of conversation - those who through their behaviour show that they don't want to be part of community are given a taste of what 'being

outside the conversation' feels like. For Benedict 'excommunication' is maybe the best way to help us see clearly the rupture which our own actions have made. However, conversation is never fully broken. The moment we regret our self-imposed exile and show it, then we are welcomed back with open arms. The third Benedictine vow could be what Fr Laurence called 'the Holy Art of Conversation' (talk in February at Mediatio).

A form of vows are given in Rule Ch. 58 verse 17; 'Stabilitate sua et conversatione morum suorum et oboedientia.' Scholarly work on the earliest copies of the Rule (e.g. by Cuthbert Butler) shows that conversatio was Benedict's original term, rather than conversio. Benedict throughout his Rule, not only in profession formula but in 10 other places, uses conversatio, where it becomes clear that it means life, way of life or monastic life:

- (Prol.49); *Progression in this way of life (haec conversatione) and in faith*
- (RB 1,3); *Conversatio fervoris novicio: beyond the first fervour*
- (RB 1,12); *Miserrima conversatione: disgraceful way of life*
- (RB 21,2); *Sanctae conversatione: holy life*
- (RB 22,2); *Pro modo conversationis: suitable for this life (bedding)*
- (RB 58,1); *Ad conversationem: (newcomers) to the monastic life*
- (RB 63,1); *Conversationis tempus : date of entry into monastic life*
- (RB 73,1); *Initium conversationis: the beginning of monastic life*
- (RB 73,2); *Perfectionem conversationis: the perfection of monastic life*

These references make up the full content of what this second vow means. In R.B. 73,1 there is talk of a minimum (initium conversationis) at the beginning of monastic life. Benedict wrote such a rule for beginners. However, the monk is called to make progress on the road, he/she is called ad perfectio conversationis (Ch. 73) - full development, flourishing.

Benedict's chapter on humility (Ch. 7) shows this 'progress', this ascending the ladder, as actually a growth in humility, in groundedness. The communal aspect of the second vow - conversatio - is lived out by putting other's wellbeing before our own. The interior aspect - conversio - is lived out in patience, in not complaining.

These form the two sides of the ladder of body and soul which bring the monk to the place of the heart so that, as Benedict says, "with widened heart the monk runs ahead with the inexpressible delight of love." (Prologue 49). At the end of the chapter on humility, Ch.7 Benedict talks of the perfect love which casts out fear. Such love creates the fully-living-human-being, who is the delight of God. All of this is the work of the Holy Spirit! "All this the Lord will, by the Holy Spirit, graciously manifest in his workman now cleansed of vices." So conversatio can be seen as a vow to live in the Holy Spirit, as Thomas Merton said.

Thomas Merton: "Conversatio morum suorum is the most mysterious, hidden vow, the most essential vow. It is so to speak the inner side, the interior of the vow of obedience and of stability, and gives them their depth [...] It is a vow to live in the Holy Spirit, an effort to become people filled with God's grace (pneumatikoi)." (Cistercian Studies 1966)

To break down the Latin words:

Morum means customs, practices, patterns of life.

suorum - possessive pronoun - implies that those customs, practices, patterns are personal, not the same for all.

Conversatio is a surprising verb. Conversatio as a verb lies somewhere between 2 verbs and has so two aspects:

Conversare (convertere, conversio): conversion, repentance: personal, moral, subjective aspect: deals with reversal, inversion of customs.

Conversari (intensification of: Cum + versari): versari means association, companionship, contact, cum/con here puts the emphasis on staying together; walking together; aspect of common, objective life; it has to do with a life style with others; conversation, dialogue, discussion, consultation.

The New Testament roots of these two aspects are two Greek verbs: *Metanoia* & *Politeia*:

Metanoia: literally, going above the mind (as metaphysics means above physics) but also can mean 'changing your mind,' hence conversion, to see one's errors to start a new life. The icon of metanoia is Jesus' message to "repent and believe the Good News."

Politeia: how to live with others, as a team. e.g. Tit. 2,13: "we must be self-restrained and live upright and religious lives (politeia) in this present world." The

icon of politeia is the disciples of Emmaus walking in conversatio with the Risen Christ on the road.

In several translations of the Rule conversatio is translated as: conduct of life or monastic behaviour. This implicates two aspects: the common (this community, this abbot; this interpretation of the Rule) and the personal (repentance of the individual).

Some English translations say Conversion of life which is not so clear about the common aspect of the way of life.

Changes in Interpretation:

4th/5th Century. For the Desert fathers and mothers there didn't exist a profession formula nor a Rule. For the disciple the Rule was the way of life of the abba, the senior monk. Conversio happened by staying with, living with the abba. There are several 'sayings' telling the disciple to do what he sees that the abba is doing. This original understanding is reflected by Benedict in his eighth step of humility (Rule Ch. 7): "Do nothing that goes beyond what is approved and encouraged by the example of the seniors." For Cassian conversio and conversatio are used as synonyms.

St Benedict, in the sixth century, consciously uses the verb conversatio. He is writing a rule for community life, not for hermits. In community life conversion is lived out through interaction with others. In Chapter 1 he speaks of four kinds of monks. Obedience is the answer to the sarabites (who follow their own inclinations), stability is the answer to the gyrovagues (who roam about from one community to another), conversatio is the answer to the hermits in that it is through the help of others that the monk is prepared for the "single-handed combat of the desert."

8th Century, vows limited to Stability and Obedience, as conversatio morum suorum was not understood.

9th century, Carolingian reforms – conversatio was replaced by conversio in copies of Benedict's Rule and in the monastic profession.

16th century: after the Council of Trent: a more legalistic interpretation of conversio: punctual observing of the observances, regulations and customs.

20th and 21st century: emphasis on dialogue and conversation as part of obedience led to a re-instating of the vow of conversatio. Conversion is seen as growth from self-consciousness to grace-centeredness ("I live no longer but Christ lives in me" (St Paul), "He must

become greater, I must become smaller", (St John the Baptist). Progress is not measured by watching ourselves - measuring our virtues and vices - but by seeing what God does in us (despite, or thanks to our failings).



Summing up, we can say:

- Conversatio morum suorum is the interior of the exterior – it is what gives depth and meaning to a life style, the inner growth that is cultivated through our daily practice. It is the vow of orientation toward humility - though we begin good works it is God who brings them to completion (Prologue 4).

- Conversatio morum suorum is the connection which unites the individual and the community. It is about accepting our inner and outer condition. Our hearts have to become open in the specific contexts of our life. One doesn't promise monastic way of living in an abstract ideal form, but according to concrete observances, customs of a particular house.

- Conversatio morum suorum is, for the monastic life, the equivalent of the marriage vows "for richer and poorer, in sickness and in health, 'till death do us part." Like marriage it is directed towards personal growth and development but needs some endurance and patience! It is a life commission.

- By grace, not through our own effort, we can accept and carry suffering. Conversatio morum suorum is not about trying to be virtuous, it is about falling and getting up, getting broken and renewed, being overwhelmed and yet finding new strength, about sharing in the suffering of Christ and His Resurrection.

- Conversatio morum suorum has something to do with the training school for the Lord's service. We don't practice in order to become perfect - perfectionism

is a great obstacle on the spiritual way - but in order to be free of our inner hindrances or limitations. The aim of conversation is “to amend faults and to safeguard love” (Prologue). The process of repentance (metanoia, conversio) was seen in early monasticism as uprooting vices and planting virtues. The real gardener is God, however, not ourselves. Conversatio was based on the “conversation” with God in prayer – this led to “purity the heart” which led in turn to “the vision of God” and it was in seeing the source of goodness that we became good.



Reflection from my own life:

Silence, stillness and simplicity relate to the three Benedictine vows: Silence to obedience as we have to create a silence within ourselves to be able to listen, stillness to stability as, to be stable is to be rooted, to find God within the specific context of our life, simplicity relates to conversatio morum suorum, it is the ability to focus on what is important and adapt our lives accordingly. It is a dying to self so as to “seek first the kingdom of God.” As life always changes this conversation between the external circumstances and our inner intention is ongoing. That is why conversion is never a one off.

The mantra is the sacrament of this simplicity, letting go of the multiplicity of thoughts and choices so as to will one thing. Then, “all things will be given to us as well,” as Jesus says. The exterior rhythm of our life is brought into dialogue with our deepest intention.

Marriage for me is the basic community in which conversatio is practiced. It is to live no longer as an island, making my own choices, but to live as “two souls in one body.” Living with differences of personality and yet never to let the sun go down on anger but to talk, to seek peace and pursue it, to listen when we are asked something, to let go of our own projects so that we can be attentive to the other person

Integrity on the spiritual path means that the interior and exterior aspects of our practice are always “in conversation” – turning toward God happens not only during our times of meditation but in the way we live and work with each-other. The conversion is from self-centredness to other-centredness. In turning to the other, however, we discover who we really are. Conversatio is thus the ground of conversion. By keeping in touch with the ground we are always kept humble. Benedict’s “Little

Rule” makes sure “spiritual life” is lived out in real life!

Community on the spiritual path is the discovery that we may be of “one soul” though we are in different bodies. WCCM members are often separated physically – during Covid only meeting on Zoom – we live in over a hundred different countries around the world - still we share the same rhythm of meditation and a shared intention to serve the unity of all. Conversatio encourages us toward unified consciousness (as this year’s WCCM theme explores).



NEWS

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND OBLATE GATHERING, by Vincent Maire

Auckland regional coordinator of WCCM-NZ and a member of the WCCM Guiding Board



Our much longed-for 2022 biannual oblate retreat had to be cancelled. We only just managed to have the 2020 retreat before Covid arrived on our shores. Little

did we know back then that it would still be with us two years into the future.

The medium of the now ubiquitous Zoom meeting room enabled the New Zealand oblates to at least come together, albeit in two, one-hour chunks a day over the period February 28th March 2nd. Under the enthusiastic guidance of our national oblate coordinator, Jo Ward, more than 30 members of the oblate community attended the event. Each morning and evening one-hour

camp? He pointed out that the Oblate must reincarnate the Rule and its requirements where God has placed us; at home, at work, among people who may not share our views and motivations.

Oblate Tim Auld led two teachings on chapter four of the Rule. To start with he had us re-visit the Prologue and give consideration to the idea of what it means to “dwell in the tent.” In chapter four we pondered what is our “workshop where we are to toil faithfully at these



session included a teaching and a period of meditation. Jo ensured there was time set aside for catching-up and sharing of news from around the country. Cell meetings via Zoom are a monthly event here and those moments when technology invariably lets us down has, I feel, made us more patient with online gatherings.

How wonderful it was to see all those familiar faces on the screen. Some are part of my cell while others I don't see all that often. In spite of distance and technology, we had little difficulty in creating the joy of Benedictine community that is a hallmark of our oblate gatherings.

By way of guidance and perhaps inspiration, Ross Miller presented us all with a 4-page document on the topic Living in the Tent. Ross is one of our longest serving oblates. His writings have long inspired the New Zealand community. Ross is, as exemplified in chapter 21 of the Rule, “a man of good repute and wise teaching”. We considered the various styles of tent where oblates may dwell. Were we a temple / cathedral dweller who pitched a tent in a parish founded on rites and tradition? Could we be a follower of the Abrahamic format where the emphasis is on journeying, pilgrimage, moving on and readiness for change? Maybe we had a foot in both

tasks?” After each session we were assigned to chat rooms to discuss Tim's offering and grapple with finding ways to make the Rule relevant to the call of being an oblate in Aotearoa / New Zealand.

No oblate retreat is complete without novices making their final oblation. Seven of us were ready for this. Along with Jo, we gathered at 0800 on Ash Wednesday and were soon joined by Fr Laurence from the Barn in Bonnevaux. It was 20:00 hours Tuesday evening in France. He invited each of us to give a brief summary of our journey; we read our charts, put on our crosses and in turn were welcomed as Oblates of WCCM.

Even via Zoom the contemplative mass that followed was a beautiful and moving occasion. Although we couldn't see them, many from the New Zealand community along with Eileen Dutt and other oblates from around the globe, were with us via a webinar link. Our thanks to the people in the Barn with Fr Laurence for participating in the mass and helping with the technology.

The mass marked the ending of the retreat. At 10 o'clock on Ash Wednesday morning I had a day of work ahead of me. In spite of this, we seven oblates exchanged

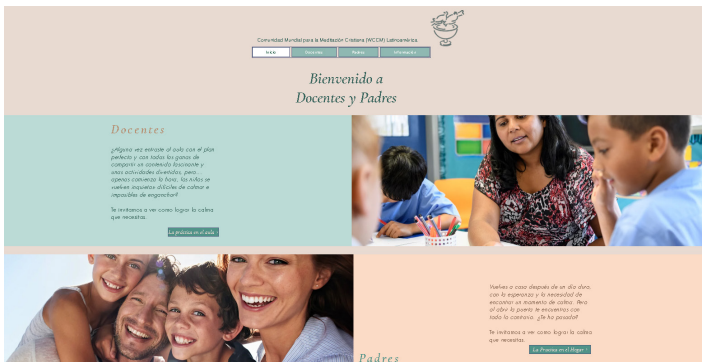
emails and a common theme was finding a peaceful place in nature to reflect on all that happened. For me, I was incredibly energised by the retreat and contemplative mass. I was still buzzing at 1730 that evening when I shared with my online weekly meditation group all that had happened. In spite of distance, time zones and technology, the power of the Holy Spirit was with us during those three, very special days.

On behalf of my fellow oblates, Yvonne Smith, Marie Shepherd, Maureen and Raymond Eberhard and Nick and Linda Polaschek, I wish to thank Jo, those wonderful members of our community who mentored us during our time as novices, Eileen Dutt, Fr Laurence and everyone in WCCM-NZ who walked with us as we journeyed with the Rule of St Benedict.



NEW LATIN AMERICA WCCM WEBSITE, by Mary Meyer

Oblate Co-Ordinator for Paraguay
www.escuelaypadreslatam.com



At the beginning of 2020, a team was formed with members from different Latin American countries (from Mexico to Tierra del Fuego!) to analyze ways of supporting teachers who were facing the challenge of teaching online from home. Well aware of the demands being made of teachers and sharing our own experience and knowledge, we decided to offer teachers, via zoom, the project called «Balm for the soul of the teacher», which offered meditation sessions and short talks by teachers and meditators from different countries on meditation and how to instill calm into the classroom. We knew that teachers were not the only ones stressed by the pandemic; parents and families in general were facing the same challenges. Mexico began offering weekly Meditation for Children sessions on line and Paraguay began its project Parenting from the calm

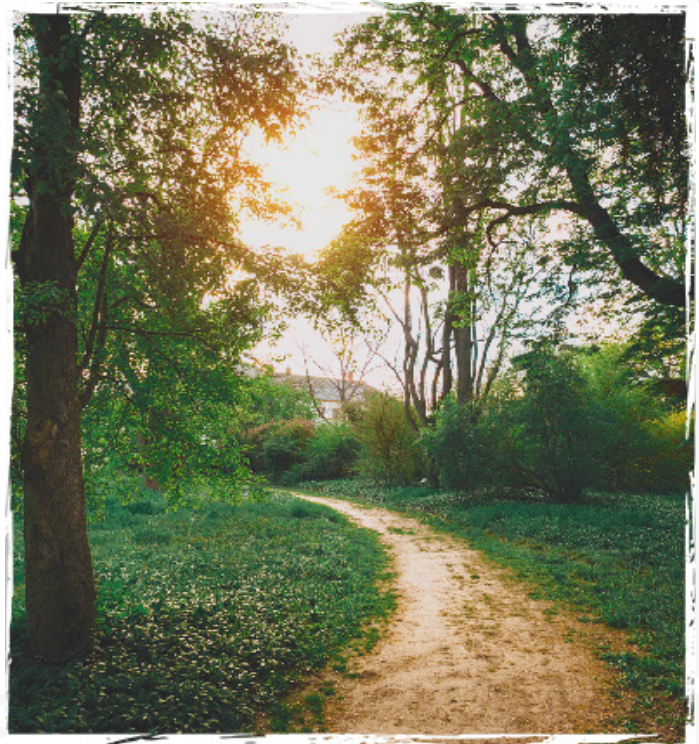
sending short daily messages to parents and caretakers.

Sharing in 2020 made us aware of the wealth we shared among meditators/educators on this continent. There was no competition, no selfishness, nor ego in our team. It was clear from day one that together we achieved more, together we listened and learned more, together we grew stronger and together we could give more. And furthermore, we found that working together was much more enjoyable.

Then, in 2021, seeing that the pandemic continued, we realized that we needed to do more. Thus, the idea of creating a website for Teachers and Parents was born. We sought to create a gentle, calming website which would offer a more contemplative approach to raising and teaching children through meditation. The website, launched February 22nd of this year, is the child of our wonderful Latin-American team! Please pray that it will be a blessing for teachers and families on our side of the world.

LATIN AMERICAN OBLATE RETREAT 2021, by Mary Meyer

Oblate Co-Ordinator for Paraguay



On Saturday, October 9 and Sunday, October 10, the annual Latin American Oblate retreat “The Oblate Way” was conducted via zoom, for Oblates and seekers by

three organizers: the NOC from Argentina, Colombia and Paraguay. There were thirty participants; 16 of whom walk the Oblate path, and the others were either meditating in the Latin American Oblate weekly group or seekers. The retreat was based on Father Laurence's three talks at the International Oblate Retreat held in July, in which we covered Obedience, Stability and Conversion.

Each day began with Lauds and meditation and a gentle movement session as preparation for the main talks. The readings and moments of prayer were guided by different Oblates of the Latin American community and Father Patricio Lynch led the contemplative Eucharist on Saturday evening.

Also there was a space to share at the end of each day before the final prayers, the flow of the entire retreat was very contemplative and gentle. And it was beautiful to see how Father Laurence's wisdom reached each of them in a very personal way.

OBITUARY

JANE LYS AND JANET PRICE (NZ)

Oblates of the WCCM,
Jo Ward (NZ Oblate Coordinator)

It is with sadness that we, the WCCM oblate community of New Zealand, inform the wider WCCM oblate community of the deaths of Jane Lys (18th January - aged 93) and Janet Price (1st March - aged 90). Both women joined the community when it was relatively small, Jane in 2007 and Janet in 2005. Both led meditation groups for many years and both attended the first NZ School Retreat held at Hiruhirama in 2010.



Jane is second from the left and Janet third from the right.

When Jane Lys discovered meditation and then the oblate community, like many of us, she felt she had come "home." Father Laurence received her final

oblation at the 2011 NZCCM retreat in Hamilton. There she recounted the story of being under the care of nuns during the second World War (in the UK) - "One of them said to me - I was aged eight - that she thought I might have a vocation. Now at age 80, I think I have found it!"

Jane was a committed oblate. The daily spiritual practices of meditation, praying the Office and reading Joan Chittister's commentary on the Rule were dear to her heart and diligently adhered to. She was a mentor to several and a friend to us all. One of our kuias (wise women) and a gem of our community. She led a meditation group in her church and also went to the local women's prison fortnightly to lead meditation there. Her commitment to meditation did not end there. Not only did she lead a meditation group in her parish but she began to go to the woman's prison every fortnight and lead a meditation group there. I recall her saying how much she loved those women and no doubt they in turn loved her. This continued for a number of years till she was near 90. She also participated in our first national school retreat in 2010, no mean feat at 82. May she rest in peace.

Janet Price was another kuia. She made her final oblation in 2007. She lived in Motueka and was our only oblate there until 3 years ago when she was joined by two postulants. She eagerly mentored them, grateful to have company of others on the oblate path living nearby. Janet led a meditation group at her local church for years and was a sought after spiritual director. She would turn up to every retreat and even got to one at the Abbey of Monte Oliveto Maggiore. However last year she pulled out of the NZCCM retreat in Hamilton due to a fall when she badly broke her wrist. We miss her gentle and wise ways.

We are grateful for the gift Jane and Janet have been to our community, for who they are and all they have given. They now rest in peace.

MARY ORTH-PALLAVICINI

by Mary Kelly Robison (US Oblate Coordinator)

A true senpecta of our US and international Oblate community, Mary Orth-Pallavicini died on October 8th, 2021, in New York City, at age 98. Hoping to reflect something of the facets of her life with us, I have asked other online Oblate meditators to share some personal

reflections about Mary: “Mary was the embodiment of our Oblate vow of stability. She was ALWAYS at our Tuesday morning Oblate cell meditation. She was ALWAYS at our monthly Oblate cell meeting. Even as her strength began to fail, she was still ALWAYS there. She would tell us that we gave her strength. I wonder if she knew how much she gave us by simply being present.” (Anne Singley)



I will go to otherwhere and other when -
To where the dark is light and time is not.
I want to walk where no path is again
to listen to the soundless sounds.
Being is there whence springs
the spark of living things
and there I shall become.

Mary Orth-Pallavicini
1923 - 2021

(Poem by Mary Oth-Pallavicini)

“Mary gave and continues to give me courage as a mother, a faith-keeper and a WCCM meditator. Mary helped me to see that the Christian life has many

aspects. I am reminded of a comment by Joan Chittister on Chapter 14 of the Rule: ‘We all need heroes... someone in our lives who brings courage. We all need to get to know how the Christian life looks at its best, at its most difficult, at its most joyous.’” (Val Latona)

“Mary seemed always to speak from a place of silence. As a mediator half her age, I was blessed to see in her the kind of desire that decades of meditation can engender—to seek presence and stillness, and to trust that God is in the silence within us, even when life doesn’t feel still.” (Matt Reeves)

“Mary’s wisdom passed on to me was that my roles in the world and living the life of an oblate need not be in conflict. One holds and enriches the other. Mary taught me to let go of the struggle to ‘find the right answer’. She taught me the way of stability on the oblate path, to the way of unknowing.” (Ruth Greenbaum)

“Mary touched the Holy Spirit habitually and manifested that Spirit in her daily life. She has passed that precious legacy on to her children for them to pass on as well. She became the “teaching body” of Christ. I recognize Mary’s beauty as the suffering of the beloved one, in the painful experiences of her daily life and those of her family. Nothing human was hidden from her and everything human was asked of her or her family and friends. It was in these moments she put on Christ completely.” (George Strohmeier)

Finally, I recall simple words that Mary spoke to us from the silence during moments of our Oblate lectio: ‘Just being here is communication’. And, “It is a joy for me to be here with you; to know the world together.”

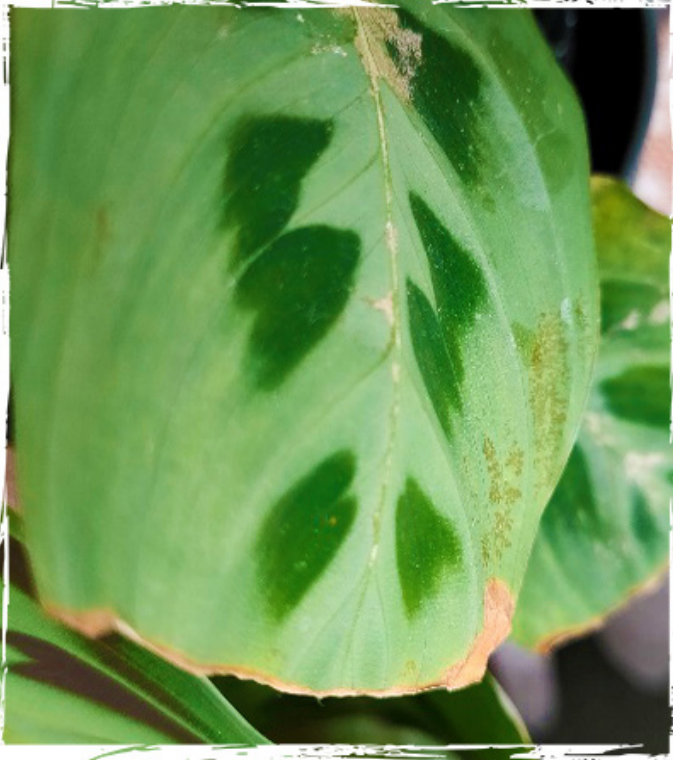
POEMS AND REFLECTIONS

THE PRAYER PLANT

by Rosie Dell, New Zealand Oblate

I tend to move house fairly often so my gardening efforts are usually confined to pots. More recently this has turned to indoor plants. Last year I was browsing at the plant centre with a friend who insisted I buy this one. While not sharing my faith, she seemed to enjoy that it was called a Prayer Plant, pronouncing it ‘Pray – er’. I felt morally obliged to make the purchase, in defence of prayer, however it was a very unsatisfactory addition to my collection. This picture is of how it currently looks, but imagine what it looked like for its first full year with

me, when all of its leaves were like this, below, – small, pallid and brown at the edges. Following a suggestion found online I actually trimmed the brown edges with scissors, but as you can see, they returned anyway.



I wasn't very impressed with what seemed to be a physical manifestation of 'unanswered prayer'. It's not in my nature to discard the 'least of them' so I just let it be, unlovely as it was. In a way it suited me as I was experiencing a dry unsettled time over the winter months. I felt unable to do those things which I knew would nourish me. The smallness of the small town I live in was hitting home. I was tired from working two half time 'jobs', each of which easily extend beyond the available hours. My edges were dry and brown, even if a little hidden from others.

Following good advice for plant lovers, I bought some 'Thrive' house plant fertilizer and duly fed all my plants at the first signs of longer days. At the same time I began again to discern and choose those spiritual disciplines that actively feed me, a movement which coincided with a refreshing of the interpretation of a suitable daily office. Over the next weeks my prayer plant and my prayer life 'thrived'. I noticed many new leaves emerging, first as tightly rolled 'scrolls' and then opening out barely in time for the next scroll to appear. Soon the new leaves obscured the old pale, dirty brown-edged originals. I was pleased with how the plant was turning out and loved to check in on it each day.

The bigger learning came a bit later, after I had fully accepted my previously unloved plant, glad I had nurtured it and had (admittedly only a little) faith in its potential. Just recently I observed that the new leaves just kept getting bigger. The new leaves are many times the size of the original disappointments. The new leaves are lush and verdant. The whole plant is extending beyond its allocated space on the table by the window.

I felt that God was using the Prayer Plant to show me that dry times are part of life. That it is natural to have a time when nothing much seems to be happening, only to find out that what was happening was unseen, or that transformation was taking place below the surface only to emerge later. That what emerges might be more than what was before. I was thankful that I knew what would feed and nourish my spirit, and that I knew it would take time before there was anything to 'see'. I am reminded of what we teach beginning meditators, that we mightn't detect any results, or benefits from meditation in the short term, (although we may), but over time something does happen.

A book I have been reading lately reinforces the benefit of returning to the writing of John Main regularly – because it feeds my spirit! The downside is that I have to take it almost a sentence at a time in order for it to sink in. I'll finish with this, from Moment of Christ «I think that what we have to understand is that returning to our centre, discovering our own centre, is the first task and the first responsibility of every life that is to become fully human». My journey with the contrary Prayer Plant echoes this journey – the continual journey – of discovering my own centre, of discovering it may be more than what I imagined and re-discovering that all this journeying is part of being human, fully human, fully alive.

POEM

by Anne-Marie Doecke
Oblate from Queensland Australia

Leaf suspended in mid-air
attached to a gossamer thread
in the early morning breeze
still able to dance in the heat
of a summer's day to come
your fragility and ours noted
caught in the in-between what was
a future to be revealed

we hang without knowing
when we'll fall or how
into the ground of being



SIMON
a poem by Barbara Hoar
Oblate from Australia



Simon was an ordinary man,
Just one of the crowd.
He was no hero, no saint looking to
suffer for God.

He was singled out,
Handed a huge, heavy weight.
Told to; made to carry
a cumbersome block of wood.

For what?
He knew not.

He'd just been minding his own business.
Going about his life.
He was no hero, no saint looking to
Suffer for God.

Simon was forced to carry the load.
Walk that long path.
Not understanding why he had been chosen
for the task.

Beside him, dragging Himself up the path
with Simon;
A bleeding, tortured, suffering man.

This man walks every step with Simon.
Suffering more than Simon;
Walking side by side.

Simon's load grows heavier,

More difficult to carry.

Still the one who has suffered more,
and who will continue to suffer, to suffer
worse pain, continued the walk with Simon.
Together they travelled.

I see them now,
one struggling with what seems an unfair,
unmanageable,
almost impossible burden to carry;
And the suffering, bruised and bleeding one
walking with him.
Suffering alongside him.

I am Simon; He is with me.

MY NICENEON CREED OF LIGHT
A Personal Credo by Argel Tuason
Oblate from the Philippines

I believe in one God, the motherly Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and
invisible.

I believe in the Christ who lives in me,
GOD FROM GOD,
LIGHT FROM LIGHT,
TRUE GOD FROM TRUE GOD.

I believe in the holy spirit – Shakti, Sophia,
Shekinah,
ruach elohim, the sacred breath,
the giver of life,
I am begotten, not made,
I am one in being with the divine.

Through Christ-in-me-all-around-me
all things are eternally being made, created and
manifested.

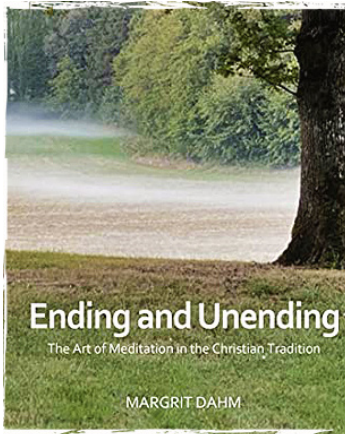
So it is. Salamaste.

Footnoate:

*Salamaste = Salamat, Tagalog word for
«Thank you» + Namaste*

ENDING AND UNENDING: The Art of Meditation in the Christian Tradition

A new poetry book by Margrit Dahm,
review by Stefan Reynolds



This is the second book of poems by Margrit Dahm about meditation that are treasured by the community. The first, 'Transforming the Moment', was published by Matthew James in 2016. Medio Media have published the new book. Laurence Freeman writes about the poems:

“It is with great pleasure and deep appreciation that I have read and enjoyed Margrit’s new collection of poems. They clearly express her sensitivity to both the inner and outer worlds and to the dimension of the Spirit which unites them. In these dark days of our civilisation, every voice that speaks truth from the heart and, as the apostle Paul says, “speaks the truth in love”, is a gift of hope.”

This collection of poems touches on topics of life, love, sadness, joy, oneness. Margrit Dahm’s simple, easy lines surprise us even as they uncover timeless truths often lost in layers of cluttered vision. To read these poems is to grow in our sense of wonder and trust in the transformative power of meditation.

*We learn to let go ...
Not much seems to change,
and yet it does:
the focus has shifted.*

My own feeling is that the poems are like a soft river flowing and soothing one into meditation. Or one can just read one at a time. They remind me of the still small voice that leads us gradually, through the ups and downs of life, into wisdom. Margrit shows us that this is a wisdom hard won but once won is never lost.

Here are two of my favourites (from p. 55 & p. 64 of the book)

INNER AND OUTER

Sounds of different thoughts
surround the sea of silence:

soon the trees will be green again

a deep peace is awakened,
awareness spreads throughout:

the daffodils have passed their prime

the bus fills up with people:

that which is passing mingles
with that which is timeless

HIS TOUCH

His touch is never heavy –
it is light and undeterred
by any lack of thoughtfulness.

It can be easily overlooked
and neglected if we let
ourselves be driven
by too much busyness.

But when we feel that
joyful spark once more
which can lighten every heart
and every burden,

we recognize that it is his
touch which brightens our day

Margrit sees meditation as a journey and each poem gives a little taste of what it is like to be on the way. In the Foreword of this book Margrit writes, “I hope that the small landmarks I have created here will send out a word of encouragement to those who might read them; they are meant to be markers which point the way when we embark on this journey the end of which will always be the realm of the unending grace and presence of God.” I highly recommend this book and am sure many will enjoy it.

It is available through various outlets and through the Medio Media website on this link:

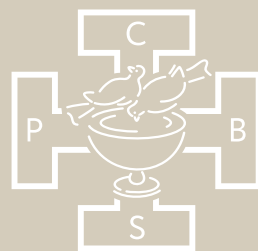
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