

LIVING OUT OUR OBLATE CALLING IN THE 21TH CENTURY

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Keynote speaker on Tuesday 12th Sept 2023

at 5th World Congress of Benedictine Oblates

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".¹ 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.

¹ «*Cette règle, c'est un précis du christianisme, un docte et mystérieux abrégé de toute la doctrine de l'Évangile, de toutes les institutions des saints Pères, de tous les conseils de perfection*» (J.-B. BOSSUET, *Panegyrique de Saint Benoît*, in *Oeuvres complètes de Bossuet*, ed. F. Lachat, Paris 1863, Vol. XII: *Panegyriques et Oraisons funèbres*, pp. 155-165, p. 165).

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.² 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.

² Saint Augustine wrote: «*Bonum est amare pacem, et ipsum amare est habere. (...) Habete igitur pacem, fratres. Si vultis ad illam trahere ceteros, primi illam habete, primi illam tenete* – It's a good thing to love peace, and loving it is having it. (...) "If you want to draw others to peace, you must first have it yourselves, first hold on to it yourselves." (AUGUSTIN, *Sermon* 357,2.3).

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".³ 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"⁴, 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".⁵ The same "kiss of peace" offered to guests who come to the monastery is the result of prayer done together,⁶ 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,⁷ 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."⁸

³ RB, Prol. 17; Sal 33,15.

⁴ «*Pacem falsam non dare*» (RB 4,25).

⁵ RB 4,73.

⁶ Cf. RB 53,4-5.

⁷ Cf. RB 65,11.

⁸ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogues* II,15. A similar episode – again told by Gregory the Great – concerns a ferocious Goth named Zalla. (*Ibidem*, II,31)

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*".⁹ 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.",¹⁰ but also - for example - in those concerning the anticipation of mutual esteem,¹¹ the rendering of a diligent service to the sick,¹² washing the hands and feet of guests who come to the monastery, above all the poor and pilgrims, in whom Christ himself is welcomed.¹³

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

⁹ T. MERTON, *Hidden Ground of Love: Letters*, selected and edited by W. H. Shannon, New York 1985, p. 294.

¹⁰ RB 4,8. This exhortation, placed next to some of the Ten Commandments intentionally replaces the most reductive: "Honour your father and mother". Cf. also 53,2.

¹¹ Cf. RB 63,10.13-14; 63,17 e 72,4 (These last two are quotes from Rm 12,10).

¹² Cf. RB 36,4.

¹³ Cf. RB 53,12-15.

same inviolable dignity in any historical epoch, and no one can feel authorized by circumstances to deny this belief or not act accordingly."¹⁴

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".¹⁵

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".¹⁶ 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."¹⁷

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

¹⁴ FRANCIS, Es. Ap. *Fratelli tutti*, n. 213.

¹⁵ RB 53,15. Cf. anche RB 4,14-19; 31,9; 36,2-3; 53,1.15; 66,3-4.

¹⁶ BENEDICT XVI, INAUGURAL SESSION OF THE FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE BISHOPS OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN (13 May 2007), 3: AAS 99 (2007), 450.

¹⁷ FRANCIS, Es. Ap. *Fratelli tutti*, n. 198

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".¹⁸

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".¹⁹

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

¹⁸ A. GIOVAGNOLI, in *AVVENIRE* from 22 February 2018.

¹⁹ FRANCIS, Es. Ap. *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 188.

disobedient brother again, that he might learn to have more faith and more humility." .²⁰

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.²¹

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".²² The brothers, too, must bear with the greatest patience the physical and moral illnesses of one another.²³ The elderly, then, must love the young and the latter must, in turn, respect the elderly.²⁴

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,"²⁵ 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." .²⁶

²⁰ GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogues* II,28-29.

²¹ Cf. Mt 6,25-34. Consider also from the Old Testament, the episode of prophet Elijah and the widow of Zarephath of Sidon, narrated in 1K 34,9-16.

²² RB 2,31-32.

²³ Cf. RB 72,5.

²⁴ Cf. RB 4,70-71.

²⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Speech given at Montecassino*, 18 May 1979, in AAS 71 (1979) 623.

²⁶ RB 2,18-21 *passim*. Even from an ethnic point of view - as we learn from Gregory the Great - in the monastery of Saint Benedict not only those who were heirs of Romanism were welcomed, but also those who came from the ranks of the barbarian invaders. See the episode of the Goth (cf. GREGORY THE GREAT, *Dialogues* II,3 and 6). This is an attestation of universal openness in line with the evangelical dictate.

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."²⁷ 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."²⁸

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."²⁹

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 dià, "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"

²⁷ FRANCIS, Exhort. ap. *Evangelii gaudium*, n. 237.

²⁸ FRANCIS, Encyclical letter, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 215.

²⁹ FRANCIS, Encyclical letter, *Fratelli tutti*, n. 198.

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".³⁰ 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."³¹

³⁰ M. MAGATTI, Nuova stagione delle persone, in *Avvenire* from 1 August 2023, p. 1.

³¹ BENEDICT XVI, *Pastoral Visit to Lamezia Terme and to Serra San Bruno*. Gathering with the people of Serra San Bruno (9 October 2011).

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" .³²

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".³³For 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,³⁴ 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."³⁵

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 council³⁶ - 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

³² FRANCIS, Speech to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the institution of the bishops' synod, 17th October 2015.

³³ IDEM, Gathering with the Jesuits of Canada, 29 July 2022, at A. Spadaro, *Camminare insieme* (Walking together). Francis in conversation with the Jesuits of Canada, in *La Civiltà Cattolica*, notebook n. 4133 del 3/17 September 2022, p. 348.

³⁴ That of Christianity being assimilated to a "road" or a "Way" is typical of the first generations of Christians, who considered living their Christian faith as a way of following Jesus and bearing witness to him to the world. We find an indication of this, for example, in the Acts of the Apostles(cf. 9,2; 19,9.23; 22,4; 24,14.22).

³⁵ T. HALIK, *Thirty-Three Theses on the Church in a Time of Epochal Change*, in *La Rivista del Clero Italiano* magazine 12/2022 (CIII) p. 841.

³⁶Cf. RB 3, concretely, the warning: «We said that all the brothers should be called to council because the Lord often reveals to a young person what is best» (v. 3).

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."³⁷

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*),³⁸ it contains nothing excessive.

In organizing the life of the monastic community, in fact, St. Benedict -hopes "not to plan anything burdensome or unbearable".³⁹ The abbot himself,

³⁷ M. G. Lepori, Synodality of communion, Conference held at the OCSO General Chapter, Assisi 10 February 2022, cit. in M. G. Girolimetto, Synodality, spiritual art. A monastic view, in La Rivista del Clero Italiano magazine, 12 December 2022 (CIII) pp. 880-881.

³⁸ «...discretione praecipua...» (Ibidem, II,36).

³⁹ RB, Prol. 46

"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",⁴⁰ keeping "in mind the weakness of the needy and not the ill-will of the envious".⁴¹ 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".⁴²

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".⁴³ 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".⁴⁴

In this sense, silence is also the "father of prayer": "Where silence breathes, prayer speaks".⁴⁵ 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.

⁴⁰ RB 64,19.

⁴¹ RB 55,21.

⁴² RB 34,1-5.

⁴³ GUIDO II, *Meditations I*, in *Sources Chrétiennes* 163, p. 129.

⁴⁴ VINCENZO DE' PAOLI, *Correspondance, entretiens*, éd. P. Coste, t. 10, Paris 1923, p. 96.

⁴⁵ PAUL VI, Address to the Benedictine monks in the Sacro Speco of Subiaco, 8 September 1971, in *AAS* 63 (1971) p. 746.

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, took 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."⁴⁶

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. (...)

⁴⁶ GREGORY THE GREAT, Dialogues II,20.

One must admire the simplicity of such a project, and at the same time its universality." ⁴⁷

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'⁴⁸.

⁴⁹

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".⁵⁰ 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, time⁵¹ 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.⁵²

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 ⁵³-- 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

⁴⁷ JOHN PAUL II, Homily at Mass celebrated in Norcia, 23 March 1980.

⁴⁸ J. MALÈGUE, *Pierres noires. Les classes moyennes du Salut*, Paris 1958.

⁴⁹ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et exultate*, n. 7.

⁵⁰ Cf. RB 31,10.

⁵¹ We take the liberty of referring you to our volume on time in Benedictine monastic life: D. OGLIARI, *Time and Space*. At Saint Benedict's School, Noci (Bari) 2012.

⁵² Cf. J. MOURoux, *The mystery of time*, Brescia 1965, p. 96; cf. also O. CULLMANN, *Christ and time*, Bologna 1975, pp. 85ss.

⁵³ Cf. J. MOURoux, *op. cit.*, pp. 78ss.

to become prey to frenzy and scattering, and to pursue a sober, unified and happy existence.⁵⁴

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."⁵⁵

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

⁵⁴ «In the house of God let no one be disturbed or saddened» (RB 31,19). See also episode of Goto: GREGORIO MAGNO, Dialogues II,6.

⁵⁵ A. GRÜN – F. RUPPERT, Pray and work, Brescia 2004, p. 35.

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."⁵⁶

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»⁵⁷. 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!

⁵⁶ T. HALIK, art. cit., p. 840.

⁵⁷ A. MACINTYRE, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed., London 1981, p. 263.