

International Congress of Oblates – 2023  
Expanding the Mission of the Monasteries We Serve  
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When we speak about expanding the Mission of the Monasteries we serve, we have to think and reflect on the basic elements of the monastic life of the communities we serve. In very simple terms, we can speak of the mission of Benedictine monasteries in a very few words, though these words are loaded with significant meaning. The words are prayer and reconciliation. It is always clear to think about prayer, but also reconciliation? What do we mean by that? There are so many people that come to monasteries to find some kind of healing and reconciliation in their lives: whether it be troubles in a family; misunderstandings between friends or neighbors; hurt feelings; long-lasting anger; break-ups in marriages; or simple feelings of failure in their lives, their work, their relationships, their families. The list could go on and on, but I think you are aware of the point I am making. We live in a world in which many people are divided, alienated from one another, and searching for peace, but having a difficult time trying to find the peace they seek, need and desire. Reconciliation is often the way to find the peace for which they are searching

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

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

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

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

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

and "who God is in relationship to me." Though that may sound very self-centered, self-serving, and selfish, there is a powerful element of truth therein. And so often, it is by our prayer that we grow into that relationship with God who continues to love us, and also help us to know our strengths and weaknesses.

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

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

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

Your final two questions have an answer from me, but I worry a bit that I may disappoint you with my response. Remember, I am a monk, and not a social worker. First, how may Oblates around the world unite to support one another in living the Benedictine charism beyond the Congress? I would suggest that you stay close to the monasteries of which you are

Oblates. Be known as someone to whom the monks or sisters can turn as true helpers, as people who stand with them as people of prayer and faith, as ambassadors of reconciliation. Inspire one another with the various involvements you may have in your monastery, your parish, among yourselves. Instead of thinking universal, think "local," that you can make a difference where you are. Second, "What is your "call to action" to Oblates around the world? I think it is important to distinguish between "doing" and "being " in the life of an Oblate. And what is more important? I think "being" is most important because it involves your personal growth as someone who is an extension of a monastic community – that means people see you as a person of faith dedicated to service for this monastic community . Your service flows out of your faith and your love of the community. As Oblates of communities, be people whose life resonates with reconciliation – wherever you are or whatever you are doing.

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