



THE MONASTERY AS THE SCHOOL OF AN OBLATE

Preparation for Contemplation and Mission

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Introduction

The title of this conference: "THE MONASTERY AS THE SCHOOL OF AN OBLATE: Preparation for Contemplation and Mission" is inspired by the Rule when St. Benedict concludes the Prologue saying "Therefore we intend to establish a school for the Lord's service" (RB. Prologue 45). Therefore the monastery or convent is the school for monks, nuns and oblates. While monks and nuns who are living there enjoy the school directly, oblates participate in it indirectly.

The topic implies: "The contribution of the monastery, or, what can a monastery offer to an oblate in the field of contemplation and in service to others (mission)?" In other words, "what does the oblate expect from the monastery when he/she aspires to participate in its way of life?"

In the discussion with the oblates of Sant'Anselmo for the preparation of this Congress, we looked at how the oblate views, and what the oblate expects from the monastery. We saw that the Oblate sees the Monastery as:

- . A place of spiritual life (prayer privately and communally)
- . A place of privacy, silence, calm, rest, peace [Pax Benedictina]
- . A place of unity in the Community
- . A place for the people of faith hope and love of God (hospitality)
- . A place where one can be transformed

These views and expectations of an oblate from the monastery presuppose the whole idea of the Benedictine motto: ORA, LABORA et LECTIO i.e. Prayer (contemplation, liturgy-Opus Dei), Work (service-mission) and Study (Divine Reading).

In this talk, I will try to show how a Benedictine contemplative life can be a mission or the mission of a contemplative life, and its impact on an oblate.

1. The Yin Yang of Missionary and Contemplative life

In the life of a monk or nun today one can see a tension or opposition between Missionary life and Contemplative life, cf. Martha and Mary:

"In the course of their journey he came to a village, and a woman named Martha welcomed him into her house. She had a sister called Mary, who sat down at the Lord's feet and listened to him speaking. Now Martha who was distracted with all the serving said, "Lord, do you not care that my sister is leaving me to do the serving all by myself? Please tell her to help me.' But the Lord answered: "Martha, Martha," he said, "you worry and fret about many things, and yet few are needed, indeed only one. It is Mary who has chosen the better part; it is not to be taken from her." (Luke 10:38-42).



These two phenomena seem to inhibit or even eliminate each other. However, they could both be seen as part of the natural movement in life, constantly re-balancing itself.

The life of Moses might be the best illustration of this balance and of the Benedictine motto. In the Christian tradition, the life of Moses has been seen as representing the different aspects of a Christian life. Moses lived 120 years divided into three parts:

- 40 years of study (socialization in his society) - Lectio
- 40 years away in the desert (his private life) - Ora
- 40 years as leader of his people (his service) - Labora

To some Biblical writers these were seen as stages of development. These three movements were seen to be an important commitment in life: study (Lectio), contemplation (Ora), leadership or service (Labora).

2. Contemplation and Mission Apostolate, Ministry

In the Benedictine contemplative tradition the communitarian and contemplative aspects are strongly emphasized. These aspects often lead naturally to various forms of ministry even to missionary work away from the Monastery.

I would like to highlight some aspects of the Monastic life, which show the inner connection between missionary life, and contemplative life or vice-versa. In fact, the way we understand these aspects will affect the way a monk or nun can understand his/her missionary outreach (ministry).

Vice versa, the way these are understood in our missionary, apostolate, ministry or outreach will affect the way in which these shape our monastic outlook and the expectations of the oblate.

3.0 Aspects of Monastic life: Contemplative life and Mission.

- . Remembering God's love [Contemplation]
- . Transformation of persons, communities, societies [Conversion]
- . Developing unity and community
- . Nourishing hope [a foretaste of heaven]
- . Prayer: petition and praise [Contemplation and Mission]

3.1 The Monastery as the place where God's love is received and made visible in society.

The whole concept of a monastery is a memorial to God's presence in our world, to God's commitment to our world.

The great deeds of God are remembered in: The Reading of Scripture; The Celebration of the



Liturgy: [Liturgy of the Hours, the Sacraments, Mass] and Pious Exercises etc.

The monastery as an Institution in society is already a missionary sign: it is very visible; it has a prominent place physically and socially. It is a monument to God's active presence [the Cross, the Sacred icons and images, mosaics, the Bible, Holy water, Medals, Candles, Rosaries etc].

Nowadays, monasteries are flooded with pilgrims coming to pray and visiting the external signs seen around like the relics of saints, sacred icons, etc. There are also tourists who come to admire the buildings, mosaics, and icons and even to admire a few monks or nuns as if they were in a museum or zoo!

The oblate is attracted first by the monastery [the visible sign], a dwelling place of God where he or she offers himself/herself.

Other obvious visible signs are the members themselves of the convent or monastery. St. Francis once asked his confrères to go out with him to preach. When his confrères realized that they had only walked around the village without preaching they doubted and asked him whether they had preached anything at all. St. Francis confirmed that they had already preached by the way they showed themselves to the people.

More than being attracted by these external signs, an oblate is attracted by the spiritual life of monks [life of prayer, communal and private] Scripture Reading (lectio), meditation, celebrating the liturgy, culpa, retreats, recollection, adoration etc., especially when he/she participates with the monks and nuns in reading and meditating of the Word of God, in chanting the breviary [Vigils, Lauds, Vespers] and celebrating the holy Mass and sacraments, taking part in the adoration and meditations.

The world today is full of noise, and the monastery is the peaceful island of quietness where one can contemplate God's love for the world. Consequently, the house of an oblate should reflect the monastery's edifice and atmosphere, [the cross, medals, rosary, sacred icons, the Bible, the Rule, Spiritual literature, the Breviary, Holy water etc.] Thus an oblate's family becomes a basic church, a replica of the monastery or convent.

The monastery is something visible, it is the sign of God's presence in the world. Those staying there should make God visible to the world. The monastery is a visible sign of the presence of God. But the real visible and living sign has to be the members (monks/nuns). Are they really the sign of God's love and of heaven or the living sign of hatred and hell? Do monks show externally that they are monks? How do the monastery and the monks' liturgical celebrations shape the oblate's vision of God? How does it shape also his vision of his missionary outreach?

3.2 The Monastery as the place where God's Spirit transforms people

When I speak of Transformation I mean also conversion. The dying and rising with Christ initiated in our baptism is the core of our personal Christian experience, cf the image of baptism and dying with Christ in the letter to the Romans is very powerful:

"You have been taught that when we were baptized in Christ Jesus we were baptized in his death; in other words, when we were baptized we went into the tomb with him and joined him



in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life.." (Rom. 6:1ff).

The whole of our life is transformation. Dying to oneself and being reborn.

The language of transformation appears here and there in the Bible:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds."
(Romans 12:2)

The monastery is the counter-sign of this world. Our life has to conform to the life of Jesus Christ.

"And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another."
(2Cor 3: 18)

The quoted text was often used in the old Church. "We are being transformed."

We read the Bible in order to be transformed and not only to be informed.

Also a journey: "they make their way from height to height." (Psalm. 84:7)

Conversion: - "...to give up your own will. The weapons of obedience. (RB Prologue 3)

- "Turn back to God" (RB: Prologue 38)

Transformation and renaissance (rebirth) are important images in the world today.

We have always to ask ourselves, "where are we, where are we going, what are we contributing to the world?"

The monastery has to be the place where God's Spirit transforms. Where one can see monastic life in a new life and where one is revitalized. To stay in the monastery without transformation, is to be like an iron bar soaked in water; it rusts and decomposes. Let us be transformed and transform the society and country in which we are living.

3.3 The Monastery as a place where people are brought together: the process of creating unity and community

Unity is for people to be together. Unity among the monks in the monastery and among the nuns in their convents is not just a practical theme; it is rather to make the common life possible and effective.

The world is full of joy of dividing and arranging people, according to tribes, countries, nations, clans, ethnic groups, clubs (members only), people of the same interest, political parties, families, etc. In the Bible Gen. 11 some people even took advantage of misusing the myth of Babel to divide people. That God willed division. This is to misread God's will.

Unity among people is at the heart of the dream of God for the world. Christ prayed to God for the unity "that all should be one" (John 17). The call of Christ is to enable us to see the world in a different way.

St. Paul faces the picture of the Church, which is divided into two groups of people. The Jews who are clean, pure, these are just people. And other people who are impure, unclean, these are the unjust, the pagans. Paul wants to eradicate this picture, which people took for granted.



He saw that Christ has overcome this division of Jews. "To bring all things together under Christ the Head" (Eph.1: 10). To live in peace. "Christ came to proclaim peace to all." (Eph.2: 11-22).

The Monastery shouldn't conform itself to this mentality of division. We are all called to unity. The one body united by love in Christ.

St. Benedict cites many occasions in the Rule that foster Unity and love in the community:

- Kitchen service: "Increases reward and fosters love" (RB 35:2) and "Serving one another in love" (RB 35:6)

- Distribution of goods according to needs: sharing (RB 34) [This is against private ownership against egoism and individualism.]

- The elderly and children are to be treated kindly and with consideration for their age and frailty (RB 37). [cf the retirement houses and the great care for children in Europe].

- Unity of meals and recreation RB 41. [cf the divisions in families owing to too much work, Macdonald's, Schools, TV, etc]

The monastery ought to be a place of privacy, silence, calm [Pax Benedictina], peace, place of unity, a place where one can be transformed. The Monastery is a place of the people of faith hope and love of God (hospitality). This is a big challenge to the world of terrorism, of division. The oblate or his family is expected to be united in love and to communicate it to other people.

3.4 The Monastery as the place of Hope

"Ecce quam bonum et quam jucundum habitare fratres in unum"

"How good and how pleasant it is when brothers live in unity" (Psalm 132).

This expresses something of the excitement of the experience of unity and love among brethren. It is a foretaste of heaven in the community. But if there is disunity and hate it can also be a foretaste of hell, that is, deprived of hope.

A number of communities experienced the heavenly life in the monastery e.g. the Qumran community.

In the celebration of Mass, (Eucharistic community) we experience that; see "Sanctus, Sanctus.." It is a foretaste of what God has prepared for us.

Hope for our Christian life is an acutely needed virtue. It is the centre of our faith, and therefore all the more also the centre of religious and monastic life. "Seek first the kingdom of God." (Mt. 6:33)

In the "Pater Noster" we pray "Your kingdom come, your will be done" i.e. may your dream be realized.

"Do not store up treasure for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust consume and thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven. where your treasure is, there



your heart will be also" (Mt 6: 19-21).

This chapter six of the gospel of Matthew is full of hope in the risen Christ, that the dream of God's creation has reached perfection. See also "Living hope..." (1Pt. 1:3-9).

We are invited to become people of hope. The monastery is the place where hope is nourished or fed. Many people have lost hope, discouraged. They find no meaning in life. St. Benedict dedicates chapter 66 of his Rule to the Porters of the Monastery, on how he should receive visitors (guests):

"The porter will need a room near the entrance so that visitors will always find him there to answer them. As soon as anyone knocks, or a poor man calls out, he replies "Thanks be to God" or "Your blessing, please = BENEDICITE!" then with all the gentleness that comes from the fear of God, he provides a prompt answer with the warmth of love." [RB 66:3-4]

Hence, when the burned-out people, the hopeless, the helpless, and the aimless people knock at the door of the monastery they should find somebody ready to receive them with kind words of hope like "WELCOME, HAIL MARY, PRAISED BE JESUS CHRIST" instead of waiting vainly for hours or if he sees someone he hears only discouraging words like those on the door of Hell in the Divine Comedy "ABANDON HOPE ALL YE WHO ENTER HERE" instead of "PEACE TO ALL WHO ENTER HERE." Is our monastery the sign of hope to others and ourselves? Is the house of an oblate the living sign of hope? Is it a foretaste (or anticipation) of heaven or a foretaste (or anticipation) of hell?

3.5 The Monastery as the place of Prayer

Facing our lives and our world we are faced with sorrow and joy: We have to acknowledge deeply the presence of sorrow in the world. However, we shouldn't allow sorrow to swallow joy. On the contrary, joy must be allowed to swallow up or triumph over sorrow. In Jesus' Resurrection we see how the joy of the Resurrection has swallowed death, and sorrow. I Cor. 15:

"Death is swallowed up in victory, Death, where is your victory? Death, where is your sting. So let us thank God for giving us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Cor. 15:55-57) One third of the Psalms are psalms of lamentation. Maybe they have been chosen to enable us express our sorrow before God.

But at the end of each psalm of lament there is praise.

Psalm 22 "My God, My God." but from v 23 "you who fear the Lord, praise him. glorify."

Lament is overcome by praise. Sorrow is swallowed up by joy.

RB 18 "Oh God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me. Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit." Even the Ora et Labora, is an invitation to sorrow and praise.

This is how the Monastery is present in God's world. The Missionary outreach of the Monastery brings this to the world, and brings back to the Monastery the miracles of trust and joy in the lives of the oblates and so many people together with their praise and sorrow.

Conclusion

Therefore, these points that will lead to a fruitful ministry should guide monastic life. The



world needs true missionaries, especially when monks and sisters are diminishing in quality and quantity. Oblates can be of great help in evangelization like a leaven among their own people.

Unity: ecumenism among different religions and fostering unity and love. To consolidate faith, by eradicating wrong concepts of God and bad values of culture and religion (witchcraft), which instils fear instead of hope and charity.

Oblates are needed by the monastery and by the world. Monks and nuns have to be aware of the presence of oblates. Oblates should also assist the monks by praying for vocations, and by offering encouragement.