



“Communion in the Workplace”

by Norvene Vest

Brothers and sisters in Benedict, sisters and brothers in Christ, it is very good to be here with you today. As I have thought and prayed in anticipation of this gathering, the psalm phrase has been much in my mind and heart: “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain” (127/6:1). Clearly, the Lord has been at work building this “house” of oblates, this holy tent of a worldwide oblate movement, which we here today represent. In 1984, the Congress of Abbots in Rome sent a message to oblates throughout the world, acknowledging their “deep appreciation of the role of oblates,” and asking us to “continue steadfast in the way (we) have chosen, placing our trust in our Benedictine vocation.” Their message observed that oblates had been associated with Benedictine monasteries for many years and they looked forward to years of ongoing association. Yet the Abbots could hardly have anticipated the extraordinary growth in the oblate movement in the last twenty years.

A. An Emerging Oblate Movement

No firm worldwide figures are available, but the organizing committee for this Congress got information reporting at least 25,000 oblates today. In the United States alone, we have seen a dramatic rise in the number of oblates in the last 15 years (Vebeun).^{*} In my own monastery, St. Andrew’s Abbey in Valyermo, California, about 25 monks experienced an increase from about 250 oblates in 1985 to more than double that number (over 500 oblates) today. Similar reports have come to me from England and New Zealand, to name two. It is difficult to judge precisely the nature of the

[*Sources are cited in full in Endnotes, with author’s name & sometimes page # in text.]



increase because it was only after Vatican II that women's communities were permitted to have oblates and until recently, some monasteries only accepted priest oblates and/or lay persons from their own denomination. What is clear is a tremendous hunger and thirst among Christian laity throughout the world for affiliation with Benedictine monasteries, and that the nature of the desired affiliation is somewhat different today than it was in the past. Today, oblates seek to commit ourselves to sharing the essential spirituality of Benedictine life.

Who are we? What kind of house is this oblate movement? What is the Lord "up to" in building this house? Increasingly there is an awareness that oblates have a calling, "a monastic vocation—not, however, one that will be lived out in the monastery, but one to be lived outside the walls of the monastery" (Kulzer 6). Oblates see ourselves as Benedictines, in that we vow to live according to the Rule of St. Benedict, insofar as our state in life permits. We desire to live out the Benedictine charism, not as substitutes for monastics, whom we need and cherish, but as lay Christians who specifically make a commitment to live by Gospel values as a priority in our lives. We seek to make space in our lives for *lectio divina*, to practice some form of the divine office, to find regular periods of silence and reflection, and to prefer Christ in all things. Maria Aminti puts it,

"God who created the world is calling for (us). In the midst of our work, of our writings, in our everyday labor, in the midst of the pots, of the repairing locks, ...of the overdrawn accounts, of the gatherings where each one pretends....God sends us back into the fullness of our everyday reality...because it is there that He wants to put his tent, there He wants to be with us and for us."

God has been bringing about this astonishing increase in the number of oblates at a time when conventional monastic life seems to be declining. It is a perplexing trend, for it suggests that while traditional forms of monasticism are not growing in most places



– though they remain a stable center, something about the Benedictine charism is very important in this time. I have pondered this trend for several years, and it seems to me that God needs and wants and is supplying Benedictines outside of monasteries, in all the places where the world's business is being conducted. In shops and hospitals, there are oblates. At schools and farms, there are oblates. In government agencies and corporate boardrooms, in law offices and refugee camps, in logging operations and environmental lobbies – in all these places of the world's important decisions and actions, oblates are flourishing. Everywhere that crucial decisions are being made about the quality of life in our time – decisions about the environment, justice, the way money will be spent and received, war and peace – in all these places and decisions, oblates are to be found, committed to the Benedictine way of fidelity to the Gospel of Christ.

The image that comes to me as I reflect on this movement of the Holy Spirit is that of planting trees. In the United States we have a legend about a man we call Johnny Appleseed. This was a man who had a conviction about the need for apple trees; he felt apple trees should be planted everywhere to provide shade and food and good air and rich soil. So he put a sack over his shoulder, much like the shoulder pouches carried by the earliest deacons appointed in the Book of Acts to bring the bread to the widows and shut-ins (Acts 6:1-6). He began to walk and to plant seeds. For days and months and years he walked into wilderness lands, and when he found a likely spot for planting, he cleared away the weeds and brush by hand, planted his apple seeds in neat rows, and built a brush fence around the area to protect the seedlings. Traveling alone, he was befriended by Indians and accepted by wild animals. And over the years, he planted millions of seeds in the territory between our Great Lakes and major rivers south and west, creating a



blossoming and fruitful welcome for the settlers who would later make their homes there. To this day we reap that bounty.

This image of tree planting is not unique to the United States; it holds a power which transcends national boundaries. In Europe, a tale is told about a man who “planted hope” where the Alps thrust down into Provence. This man, Elzeard Bouffier, found a desolate area near an abandoned village of ruined houses, a broken chapel, and a dry stream where all life had vanished. Day by day and year by year, he would gather acorns until he had 100 perfect ones and then plant that batch in one area, before going on to another. He knew many of his plantings would not reach maturity, but he was convinced the land was dying for want of trees. Patiently he carried out this work for over forty years, and around his trees, life seemed naturally to spring up again, and the countryside today glows with health and prosperity.

A contemporary celebration of this tree image came last year with Wangari Muta Maathai’s winning of the Nobel Peace Prize for planting trees. This African woman, once a student at Mt. St. Scholastica (Benedictine) College in Kansas (USA) and now a member of Kenya’s Parliament, founded the Green Belt Movement, and her groups of women have planted over thirty million trees in Kenya to halt deforestation, create jobs, provide a sustainable source of firewood, and as a byproduct, prevent conflict and wars over natural resources. Maathai’s work has not been easy, as she has been arrested and beaten in the long years leading up to her current recognition. She attributes her resilience and perseverance to her deep spiritual sense of the sacredness of nature.

These planting images suggest to me what I believe God is doing today with oblates – walking abroad into all the places that need nourishment, slowly but persistently



tending the spaces that need softening and sheltering, planting where there is need for healing from brokenness. I sense that God is sowing and planting the Benedictine heart among men and women who live and work in sensitive and vulnerable places in our world today, sending oblates to bring Benedictine values just there.

And the challenge to us who have sensed that touch of God, that call, is whether we will prepare rich fruitful soil for that Benedictine seed, yielding thirty and sixty, and a hundredfold (Matt 13:1-23). Will we, in St. Paul's words to the Colossians, cited by Paolo Aminti this morning, "lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God"? (Col. 1:10) Shall we, as instruments of God's word, "accomplish that which God purposes, and succeed in the thing for which we are sent?" (Isa 55:11)

B. The Urgency of the Call

As Christians, we believe in a God who acts in human history. As oblates planted by God in the places of the world's business, the question we must answer is how we can best cooperate with God's presence and action in history. Latin American theologian Gustavo Gutierrez has powerfully named one of the primary responsibilities of the church as proclaiming and sheltering "the gift of the Kingdom of God in the heart of human history" (11). Gutierrez sees the means to this proclamation as "a clear and critical attitude regarding economic and socio-cultural issues" in the world around us. I am convinced that a powerful reason for growth in the Benedictine oblate movement is not just the hunger for more meaningful spiritual practice, but *is also* because of the thirst to understand more clearly what is going on in this bewilderingly complex world, and how to respond to it as Christians. I believe that Benedictine spirituality teaches us how to



form a clear and critical attitude rooted in faith and tradition which enables us to engage our troubled world in a way formed through our spiritual practice.

Others in this Congress will lay out more specifically than I can some of the ways our world cries out for peace and justice. But all of us are surely aware of the death-loving path along which the dominant spirit of our world seems to be pressing. As an American, I am painfully aware of the arrogance and violence which underlies a foreign policy that asserts our right to declare pre-emptive war on another country that happens to have the oil supplies requisite for our consumer life-style. Terrible imbalances have been created in the world due to centuries of colonial exploitation of natural resources only to feed the drive for profit and greed in multi-national corporations. Emissions of unhealthful gases create a “greenhouse effect” that threatens to choke earth’s very life, while lack of daily drinking water is at crisis proportions in many places in the world. The contemporary plague of AIDS grows worldwide, to the extent that Worldwatch Institute in 2002 reported the danger that a third of the adults in Botswana may die over the next decade, leaving whole villages of orphans (3).

The point of this brief litany is to remind us how urgent is the work of oblates called to live Gospel lives in today’s world, and how difficult it is to build both a loving and critical attitude toward such problems.

These intertwined issues can seem overwhelming, and indeed many persons feel helpless in the face of them. Others – and there are growing numbers of them in high and low places in the United States – are actively seeking an apocalyptic ending to history as we know it, confident they will be among the remnant to be saved. But the Benedictine way is in contrast to both of those responses. It forms an alternative way of responding to



today's urgent problems, containing both vision and practical tools for daily transformation of the world. What monastics of every age have shown us is that Gospel living by its nature is a challenge to the world's values, a challenge to what the culture thinks of itself. Yet the Benedictine way is not noisy, not a spirituality of extremes, embodying instead the moderate and enduring way of Jesus' daily faithfulness lived in simplicity in Nazareth. Holiness is seen not primarily as separation from the world but as nearness to God. Fidelity to the Gospel is not so much about renunciation of the world as about the work of its transformation.

The details of St. Benedict's *Rule* suggest awareness that monastics bring the world within them to the cloister, so the Rule's spirituality is focused on the discipline of *recognizing Christ within* the inevitable problems and conflicts of daily life. In *lectio divina*, Benedict teaches us how to encounter the living God afresh in scripture, however familiar a particular passage; and from that practice we gradually learn how to encounter the living God afresh in each unfolding page of our own life experience. The heart of Benedictine spirituality for oblates is recognizing and following Christ precisely in the midst of the world – which is a task requiring great courage, wisdom, and spiritual maturity. Benedictines learn not to follow the winds of worldly fads and crises, but to look for the places the Holy Spirit is already active – where the little green shoots of life are already emerging from God's seeds – and to join their strength and energy to those signs of life, even in the face of dying empires. As we know Benedict and Scholastica lived in the time of the collapse of Rome's mighty power, so too we know the lasting and life-giving results that emerged from their way of attending to and nurturing the green shoots of life that God revealed to them.



So, if we as Benedictine oblates are called to this urgent work in the world, what resources do we need? How can we best learn from the monasteries and ponder the *Rule* to gain strength for our call? I believe there are four crucial elements: (1) awareness of a sense of call, (2) groundedness in spiritual disciplines which are themselves rooted in God's love; (3) openness to ongoing and daily conversion of life; and (4) belonging in community with each other. I have already described what I mean by a sense of call, and I turn now to the remaining three elements.

C. Groundedness in Spiritual Disciplines

The second crucial Benedictine element that strengthens our work is spiritual discipline. As I pray with Benedict's *Rule*, I am astonished by his ability to hold in tension two elements of the Christian life which often are separated: (1) the need for our own disciplined efforts—the ascetical side; and (2) the ever-present reality of God's abundant love for us—the mystical side. For Benedict, these two ingredients are always in intimate relationship to each other. Our spiritual disciplines are motivated not by fear and guilt but by love and joy, and our reception of God's generous grace deepens our desire to remove all that separates us from that loving relationship. It is a remarkable integration, and a powerful resource for daily life.

As to the details of Benedictine spiritual disciplines, I need not spend much time here, since most of us are very familiar with the *Rule's* spiritual foundations – daily prayer and scripture; the essential relationship of silence and rest to communication and activity; regular nurture for body, mind and spirit; simplifying life as regards material things, time, and attention; and offering *everything* to God in confidence and trust. We rely especially on the monasteries to provide us with spaces of sabbath, where we can



renew our commitment to these foundational practices and be welcomed by hearts attuned to listening and prayer. After a period of formation as oblates, it is not that we do not know of our need for rhythms of spiritual practice; it is that we need the humility always to be willing to begin again with what we have forgotten.

It is our fidelity to spiritual practices which forms the stability within which our ongoing conversion can be fruitful. So let us now turn to ongoing conversion of life.

D. *Conversatio Morum Suorum*

At the heart of the capacity to stand as witness and challenge to our world is the mysterious commitment embodied in the Rule as *conversatio morum suorum* (RB 58: 17), so unusual a term in Latin that it is usually translated in English simply as something like “faithfulness to monastic life”. I understand it to mean offering myself to an ongoing process of inner conversion. In that promise, we express our willingness daily to surrender our cherished ideas and projects to the possibility that God will surprise us with something previously unimaginable. *Conversatio* is a way of speaking of the daily dying to self necessary to ongoing rebirth into Christ. American Benedictine Mary Forman expresses this as the discipline “of ‘unknowing’ what one thinks one knows, so as to be embraced by the surprise of the divine where one had not anticipated finding such” (2).

When we insist on controlling things, on keeping matters in a comfortable and familiar order, we limit the possible outcomes to what we can imagine. The great issues of our times require something quite new, quite beyond the existing models, quite beyond the perspectives we have always maintained. We sense our world is trembling in anticipation of great change, change which will no doubt include the loss of much we have known and loved, and yet which will also include the powerful purposes of the



living God. As oblates at work in the world in all of the many dimensions of its reality, we seek to prefer Christ while being deprived of our familiar ways of being in the world.

The losses entailed in ongoing conversion are painful. We learn to give up the quest for certainty and even coherence, acknowledging our own shadows and those of our cultures, recognizing whatever distorts, handicaps, and arrests us. Only when we live the pain of necessary losses are we free to be open to the newness God offers. And with that freedom, coupled with perception deepened by the serious practice of prayer, we learn to examine the place where we stand realistically, so that we can more clearly read the signs of our times, without trying either to minimize or exaggerate their importance (Ishpriya 4). And the serious practice of prayer also gradually deepens our trust that indeed, it is the living God who is presides in apparent chaos, bringing forth a pattern yet invisible to us. Prayer deepens our felt awareness that everything in creation exists only because it is continually willed into existence by the one God, so we learn to live confidently into continuing conversion.

In retrospect, we can see clearly the wisdom of choices Benedict and Scholastica made to help birth a new way of life in the midst of radical change. We see less clearly in our own times, but we can follow them as reliable guides to Gospel living. Through Benedictine spirituality, we learn a different view than the one that is taught in the centers of power, the one communicated in the world's media. Central to the Benedictine view, I believe, is the willingness to be marginalized, to give up on the world's ideas of success. God's successes may look very different than our own ideas. I think often of Benedict's insight near the end of his life that his beloved monastery at Monte Cassino would be destroyed: oh! consider the years of investment of love and labor in the building of the



community there! What must it have been like for him to see that it would probably all be lost?! And yet had Benedict's monks not needed to escape Monte Cassino and flee to Rome, they might never have placed the *Rule* into the hands of Pope Gregory, never have had the opportunity to see the spread of their cherished *Rule* into the monasteries of all Europe. In a similar way, I think that our own commitment to ongoing conversion of heart requires that we wean ourselves even from the fruits of our most earnest labors, even from the evident standards of success around us. Perhaps *conversatio* invites us to follow in the steps of another of Italy's famous sons, Dante Alighieri, as we awaken to the "dark wood" around us, acknowledge our need for a guide, and head downward into apparent hell, abandoning all hope that springs from illusory "certainties" about the world. (*The Divine Comedy*)

How then does ongoing conversion of heart help us to be engaged with God's action in history? For an answer to this question, let me draw on the insights of theologian Bernard Lonergan in a short article entitled "Healing and Creating in History". Reflecting on multinational corporations whose policies can create worldwide disaster, Lonergan asks why are they permitted to do so? He suggests that we must see *both* that multinational corporations operate on long accepted principles that have molded our economics and our society for centuries *and* that those principles are inadequate. Yet a new system needed for collective survival does not exist. Here, Lonergan offers, is the opportunity: "When survival requires a system that does not exist, then the need for creating is manifest" (59). The creative task is to find the answers, through many insights that come together slowly over time.



In any creative process, the flow of fresh insights emerges from a creative minority and gradually wins the allegiance of the many. Insights are new learnings that are born from concrete situations and questions. And they arise only if people free themselves from bias and have open minds. I believe Lonergan is speaking here of what we Benedictines know as ongoing conversion of heart. When we come to the tasks that confront us each day with genuinely open minds and hearts, we prepare ourselves to receive creative insights which address the concrete situation at hand, even as we contribute to a larger energy for movement toward a “new system needed for collective survival”.

Lonergan suggests that human development is of two different kinds. Creative activity occurs from below upwards, from experience to growing understanding, judgment, and finally fruitful courses of action. And healing activity occurs from above downwards, where “divine love orientates (humans) in the cosmos and expresses itself in (their) worship” (63). It is the healing action from above that enables us genuinely to welcome otherness rather than to defend against “the stranger,” for healing breaks the bonds of hatred. Yet just as creativity needs the spiritual energy of healing, so healing needs the embodiedness of creativity; both together are required for wholeness in a people no less than in an individual. And here I think Lonergan returns us to our earlier image of planting seeds: We oblate “seeds” cannot even begin our growth until planted by God, but God needs the fullness of our creative and unbiased responses in order to complete the divine purpose of planting us in the midst of history.

I outline these thoughts in some detail, because it is easy to become discouraged when we are specifically confronted with the troubles of which we are aware, feeling



perhaps that all we can do is so little compared to the need. Yet every renewal model with which I am acquainted today emphasizes that societal health must come from the bottom up, from the participation of people engaged in the concrete situation which needs reconciliation. The old way of organizing by force of will rather than generosity of heart, by the dominion of human leadership rather than by incremental and step-by-step participation and interconnectedness throughout the system or organism – the old way can no longer serve us, because its very structure contains the elements that are causing so many organizations in modern society to collapse from within.

Let us remember that Benedict's *conversatio* is always oriented toward awareness of Christ's presence in our midst, Christ's presence with its embracing desire to reconcile the world to God. In each act of inner conversion, we join Christ in helping all things become what they really are in the fullness of the Cosmic Christ. And Benedict suggests this happens slowly and surely, but steadily in the fidelity to our daily round! Here we find the essential spirit and strength of Benedictine work for oblates.

E. Community

Community is the last Benedictine element I'll discuss that offers strength for the urgent work of the world. Benedict's Rule calls those who live in community "the strong kind", perhaps because community life is strengthening. As American Benedictine Columba Stewart points out, for Benedict "community (is) not simply the place where one seeks God, but its vital means" (15). The particular community I want to emphasize is not the extended community through which an oblate is connected to a monastery, but is rather a segment of that larger community – perhaps like Benedict's groups of ten (RB 21). I am concerned here with a small group *community of oblates*, supported by



monastic guides, where intense and particular mutual formation can occur relating to each oblate's unique vocation to be a Benedictine presence in his or her workplace. In this case, the primary interaction is of oblates with one another for insights and shared wisdom. It has sometimes been the case as oblates, we have depended so much on monastics for our initial formation and we experience such a strong bond of reverence and respect for monastic wisdom, we have not been very interested in hearing from one another. Or possibly we have not known how to initiate conversations with each other about the genuine challenges and vulnerabilities involved in attempts to integrate our faith and work. For whatever reasons, we do not often enough engage each other in the serious and committed practice of Christian community as oblates. And yet, I am convinced that without the strengthening effect of such small and focused community experience, we are seriously limited in our capacity to do this work to which we are called.

Oblate community is a way for us to explore options in our vocational and other settings, identify strategies, and gain prayer support from those who share our commitments. The oblate calling I described earlier is largely uncharted territory – the call to be God's seeds of life within all the various occupational settings of our world. Each of us finds our way step-by-step as we attempt to assess the nature of brokenness in our specific work setting, to search out the ways God is already at work bringing forth new life, and to identify concrete opportunities to bring new insights into play. Our assigned authority within our given vocational settings varies greatly, and of course shapes the nature of the opportunities for wholeness we can generate; but I am convinced the authority of Christ gives us much more leverage than we normally believe we have.



The activation of our personal authority in our work settings, the authority of transformation, is made more difficult because we can never be fully certain of our assessments, and often we experience vulnerability and risk in the effort to bring sacred values into workplaces that seem determinedly secular. Frequently we are told directly or indirectly that “rocking the boat” is dangerous. But taking our oblate calling seriously means we notice those occasions when we are being “programmed” towards fear, and make a deliberate choice not to be afraid, but to consider *what we will be*: in the concrete situation, how will we stand up for what we believe, and what will sustain us in the face of verbal hostility or outright reprisal. This is very difficult work, yet my experience is the small oblate community group is uniquely able to help us bring concrete insights to birth and embody them effectively in our work.

Specifically, how might a small group of oblates constitute themselves as Benedictine Christian community? I envision a group of anywhere from four to ten persons who meet every two to four weeks for several hours together. The meeting begins with a time of silence and/or prayer to recollect why the group is gathered, and that they are gathered in Christ. There may be a brief check-in, during which each person says how they are doing, then and there. After check-in, the community shares a time of group *lectio divina*, noting especially how God is revealed to each person through the reading, and how that might touch each one’s ministry. The major portion of the meeting is spent in sharing, as each member of the group reports on his or her life, focusing especially on specific vocational concerns. The time may be equally divided, or one member may request a larger block in order to focus on a specific matter. The theme is always what God is calling each person to be or do in the particular place he or she has



been given, here and now. One person might choose to identify and name a conflict between values fundamental to faith and values experienced on the job, and the community might help him explore whether there is a way the two can be integrated, or to identify one or two steps he could take to bring a different perspective to the job definition. Many organizations today are seeking to integrate vision and values as ways to improve work environments, so as he acts, he may find more openness to alternative ways of thinking in his firm than he expected. Another person might report on difficulties encountered as she takes a step identified at the last meeting, and the community might help her explore ways to handle the difficulty. The role of community response is not primarily to give advice, but is rather deep listening to the focus person, attentive to how and where the Spirit of Christ is present and guiding the person's life. However, an important part of the sharing may include insights from others' own experience in similar situations, always speaking in the first person rather than presuming to suggest how things "should" be or to "fix" another's identified issue. Confidentiality and mutual respect are essential, as is the conviction of the Holy Spirit's presence bringing new insights to prayerful seekers. At the end of each person's report, the group asks how they can most effectively support and help. The goal is for all members increasingly to develop clear and critical attitudes rooted in faith and tradition which enable them to be agents of Christ's action in that segment of the world which is their own work environment. In every case the gathered community is seeking the reconciliation God desires in that place and time, endeavoring to help identify what the person can do to release Christ's healing power into the situation. The meeting closes in prayer, first praying for each member, acknowledging that God's strength is always given



in our need, and then closing with a short form of the daily office appropriate to the time of day.

What is the nature of Benedictine community in which such oblate groups are enfolded? Let's consider some essential qualities of Christian community which we seek to manifest in our small oblate groups, qualities which mark Benedictine community in particular. I see five such qualities: (1) a necessary rhythm of solitude and togetherness; (2) allowing community to emerge from conflict; (3) conscious and sustained choice to be in Benedictine community; (4) willingness to live in the uncontrollable; and (5) being centered in Christ. A first element is that we have *a balance of time alone and togetherness*, as our Lord Jesus sought solitude after active engagement with an extended community. Times of quiet, solitude and periodic honest conversation with a spiritual guide help us to know ourselves better, to notice when we are carrying unresolved bitterness or emotional turbulence, to address the roots of conflict in ourselves – in short, to educate our emotions so that we can come to community in freedom. Authentic conversation in community also brings us face to face with the concrete otherness of another, whose ideas or viewpoints may challenge our comfort, helping us to move toward a more encompassing compassion. The interaction in community is a wonderful way to gently deprive us of our familiar way of being in the world and to bring ourselves into the opportunity for ongoing conversion.

That is why a second quality of community necessarily is *allowing community to emerge from conflict*. If we live together in community without ever allowing genuine conflict to surface, probably we are living only at that superficial level mentioned by Maria Aminti in the passage I quoted earlier – “gatherings where each one pretends...”.



Community requires that we communicate at a level of vulnerability, in an environment of mutual respect, willing seriously to explore the authentic roots of conflict for their possible opening to a deeper level of understanding of the way Christ is present in the world. Shared and respectful conflict is a wonderful way to experience the birth of something new, perhaps even, in Lonergan's words, "the energy of a new system needed for our collective survival." But, in order for conflict to work its magic, we dare not run away. Community requires we hold fast to one another in agreement and disagreement, letting honest conflicts be the bearers of new life for us all.

Thus, a third quality of Benedictine community is *conscious and sustained choice*, in effect the promise of our stability. In truly joining community, we consent to give up our exclusive right to determine how things will go; we give away some of our freedom in conscious commitment and intention to others over time, knowing everyone can't be in control, and all of us will at some time be challenged to our core. This is the daily reaffirmation necessary in any lifelong commitment, an choice for others we make as Benedictine Christians because we believe that our personal holiness depends on the quality of our relations with others. Community is not really an option for our soul; it is a primary ingredient of our life in Christ. We trust God's healing to penetrate our life together, so that even painful losses and changes become the grist for vibrant new life.

And the daily renewed choice is intimately connected to the trust involved in the fourth element of community, which is *willingness to live in the uncontrollable*. Earlier we spoke of the essence of *conversatio* as daily surrendering our cherished ideas and projects to the possibility that God will surprise us with something previously unimaginable. Lecturer and contemplative sister Ishprya urges that we embrace the



quantum world-view which emphasizes the role of chaos in creation, giving up our “illusions of the possibility of revisioning,” relying instead on “those who can surf the seeming chaos to do so without restrictions and with maximum trust” (2). We seek God’s direction in this whole journey because we know that we need something which is beyond us, in order to live into wholeness. And we learn slowly, over time and with others, what it is to wait without seeing, to know God is continually at work in ways we cannot yet know and can only humbly await with attentiveness.

Finally, then, Benedictine community is *centered in* the realization that *Christ* dwells in our communal midst, no less than Christ dwells in our hearts as individuals. Christ-energy is present whenever a group gathers in faith, and this energy often brings a new insight or understanding which can only happen with the full participation of everyone present. Remember Jesus told us, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send the Spirit to you.” (John 16:7) So today our community is always founded in this expectancy of Christ’s Spirit present in our midst, ready to release a form of creativity and healing yet unforeseen among us.

In summary, these five qualities are essential to Benedictine community – (1) balance of time alone and togetherness; (2) allowing community to emerge from conflict; (3) conscious and sustained choice to be in community; (4) willingness to live in the uncontrollable; and (5) being centered in Christ. These qualities, taught and practiced by Benedictines over long centuries, have the power to strengthen us for our work as oblates in a world in desperate need, and also they can sustain and co-create the wider world. You may have noticed as I have described how small and intentional oblate communities



can function that there are marked parallels between the life of a small community and the nature of the work we are called to do in the world. I do not think it is an accident that the practice of Christian community is itself a microcosm of the larger world we seek to transform. When we find ourselves healing from old wounds, able to transcend what we thought were our fixed limits, reaching out in compassion where fear and distrust used to govern – then we have indeed begun to practice that transformation of the world which is our oblate calling.



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Note to translators: I intentionally use inclusive language, so please make sure that you translate the word "monastic" as clearly including both men and women, and that pronouns about God are gender-free. Thank you.