Benedict has wisdom to offer, wherever one is at in the season of the year or in the season of life. In recent scripture readings, we have been hearing about the planting season—about seeds and planting, weeds and growth and harvesting. These readings led me to the Rule where Benedict says, “the monastics should have specified periods for manual labor, as well as for prayerful reading” (RB 48:1) and “When they live by the labor of their hands, as our fathers and the apostles did, then they are really monastics. Yet, all things are to be done with moderation on account of the fainthearted” (RB 48:8-9).

Early monastics had the understanding that work was necessary for life. Cassian, who precedes Benedict, sees work as an antidote to acedia, spiritual weariness. For early monastics, a purely contemplative life without some kind of work is a pretense. Barring illness or other inability to work, all are to be engaged in some manual work every day. In the Rule, we read that from Easter until the first of October, in consideration of the summer heat, work was transferred to the morning hours. After that, Benedict would have them do prayer and study. After the noon meal, they can have a siesta or they can do further study and prayer.

Benedict’s exhortation to moderation urged me this summer to take time out of the office and engage in some physical activity. The physical activity of choice became gardening. During the past four months, my evening and weekend energies have gone west from the office to the gardens.

Gardening can be a contemplative environment in which to listen to what the Great Gardener can teach about the soil of my being. Beginning in April, seeds were planted and nurtured indoors until the earth was warm enough to receive them. Raspberries required severe pruning. Rhubarb needed to be weeded. Pulverized egg shells and ‘soil enhancer’ brought in by a dairy farmer were used to enrich the soil. The practice of “greatest patience” with our sisters and brothers to which Benedict refers in RB 72:4-5 also needs to be exercised in this growing process as it takes months before the broccoli produce their crowns or the tomato plants offer their red fruit. In silence and darkness, this growth takes place.

The practice of humility is exercised when working with humus, when lowering oneself to work in the dirt of the earth. It is a matter of facing what is, rather than what one would like it to be. There are mosquitos who like to do their feasting in the evening and the persistence of weeds that set up housekeeping wherever a cleared patch of earth can be found. Much as one prefers that the weeds be eradicated by summer’s end, that will not happen here any more than it does in daily life. There are ‘weeds’ we would like to remove from our thought or behavior patterns. Only through steady work can any progress be made. The seed has to allow its outer shell to be softened and broken open in order to become a fruit-bearing plant. Unpleasant weeds need to be faced for healthy growth to take place. In gardening, as in life, transformation is a process.

Community resources were used to set up the irrigation system to supplement the rain. A vehicle was provided to haul away the unwanted canes, weeds and rocks. Honeybees from the nearby hives diligently carried on their pollinating tasks. An oblate and a young man doing community service assisted with the weeding. Community members and others assisted with harvesting. Sunshine and gentle rains and earthworms all added their part.

When it is time to harvest, there is no individual claim to success, only a time of gratitude to God. As Saint Paul says, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Therefore, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who causes the growth...for we are God’s co-workers” (1 Cor 3: 6-7, 9). May our patch of earth be open to the growth God desires to do in and through us!

Laureen Virnig, OSB

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From the Desk of the Prioress

After the reading from Proverbs 2: 1-9 at evening prayer of July 11, Sister Susan offered the following reflection. What was said here to Novice Bridgette is also applicable to those who follow the Rule of Benedict in the oblate way of life.

The praise of God continues in this Benedictine community as we gather this evening to witness the first profession of Novice Bridgette Powers. We have just sung the hymn by Sister Delores Dufner:

"Transforming Light of future years, empower us now to run the race, our hearts expanded to proclaim that all is gift and all is grace."

As Novice Bridgette takes this significant step on her Benedictine monastic journey and assumes her community name as Sister Bridgette, she is empowered by the gift of God’s grace. Her discernment during her novitiate year has led her to this moment when she is ready to make her first monastic profession. This means she is ready to make a public declaration that she freely chooses to walk the way of St. Benedict in this community, to seek God and serve God’s people.

In the reading from Proverbs, the wisdom of God presents an active agenda for those who seek to follow God. There is a rigorous path to follow that first requires a childlike relationship, that is, an openness to be guided along the path that leads to deeper knowledge and understanding of self and God. In the reading from the Book of Proverbs, “treasure up my commandments within you” is a call that invites us to cherish the Word of God. Response to this invitation fills our hearts with the peace and joy of a deep and loving relationship with God that will not crumble in times of trial and weariness.

Proverbs and the Rule of Benedict encourage us to attune our ears to wisdom and compassion in order to truly hear and seek God and earnestly ask for insight to understand. This formative process results in the discovery of a unique and personal encounter with God that leads to praise, thanksgiving and a joyful friendship with the Creator, Redeemer and Sanctifier of our lives. As the strength of this relationship with God grows, the path to follow becomes unmistakable and the vision takes on a perspective from God’s viewpoint. The challenge is to keep up the openness and continue to “treasure up my commandments within you” and thus, stay on the path, searching for God where God will be found.

St. Benedict emphasizes that the monastic community is a vital part of seeking God. Together we link our lives with one another and offer the support, encouragement and witness to the values of the Benedictine monastic way of life and our relationship to God. We owe each other fidelity to our profession to serve one another and help one another to live our monastic commitment without growing weary.

Bridgette, as you make your profession of stability, fidelity to the monastic life, and obedience before the community, God and all the saints, we stand with you in love and prayer as we seek God together, always blessed by the gift of God’s grace.

Installation of Prioress

Prioress S. Susan Rudolph receives the cross from her predecessor, S. Michaela Hedican

Jana Preble and Kate Meyer served coffee at the noon meal

L to r: (standing) Ann O’Connor, Sue Meers, Betty Nystrom, Rosie Imgrund; (seated) Charles Preble, Cheryl Larson

Hospitality at the reception! L to r: DeAnn Kautzmann, Patricia Giesen, Lynda Gradert, Tracy Rittmueller; (not present for photo: Mary Baier, Nina Holiday-Lynch)

Marie and Adam James served wine at the noon meal
The 2017 NAABOD (North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors) conference at St. Scholastica’s Monastery in Duluth, Minn., inspired and informed me. There were oblates and directors from monasteries across the country, a director and two oblates from the Bahamas and an oblate from Canada.

We attended three keynote presentations on the topic of the conference: “Benedictine Values & Practices: Tools for Living, Tools for Life.” Our presenters were S. Theresa Schumacher, OSB, and S. Mary Reuter, OSB, from Saint Benedict’s Monastery and Rene McGraw, OSB, from St. John’s Abbey.

The presenters were outstanding. We wrote a current version of the story of St. Scholastica inspired by art, explored finding God in the daily activities of our lives and encountered a philosophical approach to Benedictine living.

The striking thing for me about the conference was how everyone is working with the declining numbers of religious and increasing number of oblates. For example, at Our Lady of Guadalupe Monastery in Phoenix, there are two sisters. There is a retreat center and a thrift store, all staffed by volunteers, mostly oblates. The Sunday Mass is so filled, they have to live-stream it out into a conference room. The sisters’ plan is to let the oblates take over the monastery when the sisters are no longer able to care for it. S. Linda Campbell, OSB, told me a high school senior is in the process of becoming an oblate.

There are a couple of lay people who are oblate directors. One has been an oblate director for 11 years. Both women that I met are capable, prayerful people. This will probably be the reality at more monasteries in the future. Based on my experience, the future of oblates is in good hands, whether those are lay or religious.

I could write a lot more about the Benedictines whom I met and got to know. It was exciting to hear about other monasteries, their communities and ministries. We have such a rich life as oblates and I feel we all share a common bond. I’m grateful to be a part of our community. I can tell you we have a great oblate program and I’m looking forward to continuing to help develop it.

Lynda Gradert, ObISB, Minneapolis, Minn.

“Come and Learn” Event

A second “Come and Learn about the Oblate Way of Life” event took place on Saturday, May 20, at Saint Benedict’s Monastery. This time, eight guests joined the eight oblates hosting the informal coffee, scones and conversation and heard about living life as a Benedictine oblate.

Lynda Gradert led the group in prayer and gave an overview of the morning. Sister Michaela Hedican, OSB, prioress, welcomed our guests. Ann O’Connor, Bob Lesniewski, Marge Lundeen, John Sweeney and Mary Baier shared personal experiences of living the oblate way of life. Sister Laureen Virnig, OSB, described the process of becoming an oblate and our relationship with the Benedictine Sisters and this monastery. Tom Merten and Paul Dieser were the welcoming hand of hospitality as guests arrived.

Another “Come and Learn about the Oblate Way of Life” event is planned for April 2018.

Oblates are an extension of Saint Benedict’s Monastery.

They bring the teaching and practices of Benedict to the situations where they live and work to the extent they are able.

Oblates communicate the Benedictine charism through living the oblate way of life which is the Christian way of life.
Praying with Icons

On the lovely spring Sunday of May 19, oblates, sisters and guests gathered to hear a presentation by oblate Elna Goodspeed on “Praying with Icons.” Elna has been studying, praying with and writing icons for the past eight years.

Elna began by giving a brief history of icons. According to Orthodox tradition, the evangelist Luke is given credit for the first icon of the Theotokos—the Greek word for Mother of God, God-bearer, Christ-Carrier. Icons were venerated in the catacombs at a time when early Christians were being persecuted.

In the following years, icons were recognized by both East and West for their technical perfection, as well as for prayer. Travelers passing through Constantinople and other cities brought back icons to the West as gifts for royalty, for churches and other purposes.

By the 11th and 12th centuries, when monasteries kept in contact with Byzantine monasteries, there was an exchange of ideas between the artists and the arts which led to a change in styles and westernizing some of the icons in the East.

Renaissance art became a favorite of the West; as western elements were introduced, the Orthodox Canons were pretty much ignored by the 13th century. Churches in the West were drawn to Gothic art, and by the 14th century, western art started to prefer realistic images. Around the time of Reformation, 1517, there was a period where some of the churches decided to totally throw out art and focus on scripture.

By the 18th century, icons were falling out of favor in Russia. Peter the Great turned to the West for the 3D style of painting, including shadows and highlights. In the West, devotional art took the form of altar pieces, sculpture, art prints and small objects, like Jesus dolls with their own crib.

In the 5th and 6th centuries, iconoclasts who were somewhat influenced by Muslim and Jewish forces and other political forces did not believe in creating images of God. The Christians knew what Jesus looked like from the icons; they knew he was a man. The iconoclasts felt it was wrong and so they damaged or destroyed numerous icons.

In the western church, icons are very close to being a sacrament because of the prayer, preparation and writing of them.

Using icons that she had written, Elna explained terms and the symbolism of colors used on the icons. Icons are painted on a non-resinous board like bass, poplar and birch. The board she showed came from Serbia. In preparation, the board is covered with five layers of gesso; then a layer of cotton or linen fabric, which stabilizes it so it doesn’t crack if it gets really cold, followed by another five layers of gesso over it. [Gesso is made of crushed marble, French chalk, a white pigment and glued together with ox gall and glycerin; it is heated and poured over the board in a thin layer]. Animal, vegetable and mineral—all elements are represented. For the iconographer, it is a new start, a clean slate for our Christian journey.

As writing an icon moves from darkness to light, the light of Christ starts to show through. In some cases, the whiteness of the board will show through, which is a good thing. The paint may be acrylic paint or egg tempera.

Some items she noted on the icons:

- A mordorla, an Italian word for almond, appears as two circles that come together and intersect. It expresses Christ’s divinity and glory; it also indicates there is something deeper that cannot be pictured or captured in words.
- The Orthodox crucifix does not have a crown of thorns, but a halo; two nails hold the feet separately; hands are spread out like they are hands in giving.
- Gold lines indicate there has been a transformation in the person; usually it is Christ and Mary if she is in heaven.
- Often there are angels on the cross appearing like balls of fire; they are burning with love for God.
- Mary’s cloak is to be red; dress can be blue or green because those are the colors of humanity. On icons related to the Incarnation, she may be in purple, the color of royalty.
- In Rublev’s icon of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is in green; green is the color in the Eastern Orthodox Church for Pentecost.
- There are two healing icons; one is called, “Mother of God, Quick to Hear.” The original one has been in processions and attributed to miracles. This icon draws us in as Mary seems to be looking both inward and outward. With her hand, Mary seems to be offering Jesus to us and at the same time saying, “Come closer; pay attention to my Son.” The other healing icon is of Saint Raphael, who is mentioned in the book of Tobit where he cured Sarah and Tobit. Elna shared that these two icons were healing for her during the time her husband was ill and they knew he would never get well.

When writing icons, the writer does lectio on the subject being done; one cannot write something without thinking about it. In the western church, icons are very close to being a sacrament because of what goes into it.

The presentation ended with suggesting a way to prepare for praying with icons by being attentive to one’s breathing or praying short prayers, such as the Jesus prayer. When praying with icons, one may just gaze at the icon, say one’s own prayer or look at it to see what one notices while paying attention to what the icon may be saying to the one who gazes on it.
I, Jenni Lilledahl, grew up in a quiet, Lutheran household in Coon Rapids, Minn. I enjoyed participating in my church youth group and decided I wanted to attend a faith-based college, so chose Augsburg College in Minneapolis. After working in public relations for seven years, I jumped off the corporate ladder to pursue a dream in comedy. It was in those improv classes that I met my love and future husband, John Sweeney. Now, as owners of the Brave New Workshop Comedy Theatre, my focus is helping students become their best selves through the practice of improvisation. The year John and I were married, I also lost my sister to cancer. This inspired me to later become a co-founder of Gilda’s Club Twin Cities, a cancer support organization, which John and I helped open in 2014. My most important job, however, is being mother to our two wonderful boys, William (14) and Michael (11). I am walking the oblate journey at a time in my life when I am yearning for more connection to God. I am grateful to begin again each day and that God’s listening ear is always with me along the way.

My name is Gloria (Liz) Kuebelbeck and I live in Edina, Minn. I am the mother of three grown sons, the grandmother of nine wonderful grandchildren and the lucky wife of a very good man. About four years ago, that very good man and I joined Christ the King Church in south Minneapolis where there is an active group of oblates. As I got to know these holy people and learned more about the oblate way of life, I knew that I wanted to be a part of that community. Another influence in my decision is my sister-in-law, Sister Mary Rachel, who is a nun at St. Benedict’s. She and my husband have always been close, and that closeness has been extended to me and our children.

My goal in becoming an oblate was and continues to be to seek a closer relationship with God. This is an ongoing journey with no earthly end. The Rule of Benedict is a timeless spiritual guide, and the interpretation of that Rule by Joan Chittister to help understand how it applies to our current times, is integral to my journey. While I have made progress, thanks to the oblate way of life and Christ into our daily lives.

in 1983. I was working as a youth minister for 3 parishes in southeastern Minnesota and taking courses in pastoral ministry at the University of St. Thomas, when I met Carol Rennie, OSB. Thirty-three years later, when I became an oblate candidate at Saint Benedict’s monastery, because I was already practicing Lectio Divina, daily prayer, moderation and silence, I didn’t anticipate that joining myself to this community would so deeply alter the character of my daily life. I was familiar with Benedictine practices but didn’t understand the essential role of community in formation. “Blessed Among Us” (Give Us This Day) for St. Benedict’s Day says, “For centuries, [Benedict’s] monasteries offered the witness of an alternative society governed by the spirit of Christ.” This year of formation has initiated me as a beginner into this society. I am grateful for each of you, who show me how to be a citizen of the Kingdom of God, governed by the Spirit of Christ, and am overjoyed to express my commitment to the Benedictine way of life within this community.

I am John Sweeney, born in Madison, Wis. My formative years were spent amongst seven rambunctious Irish Catholic siblings and two hard-working and faithful parents. After graduating from St. Norbert College in Wisconsin, I made my way to the Twin Cities, where I was blessed to meet the love of my life and now wife of almost 20 years, Jenni Lilledahl (also a current oblate candidate). In 1997, we became the proud owners of the Brave New Workshop Comedy Theatre in Minneapolis. We have been blessed with two boys, William (14) and Michael (11), who are the joy of our lives. My connection to the monastery started in 1986 as I was led to Ireland on a SJU/CSB program by another rambunctious Irish soul, Sister Kristin Malloy. The oblate journey has brought wonderful blessings, insights and joy to my life and I am grateful to be connected with a group of women who provide simple instruction and strong, glaring examples of how to weave the Rule, the Benedictine way of life and Christ into our daily lives.

Hello, I am Marie James. I live in Aitkin, Minn., where I am a high school science teacher. I have been teaching for the last seven years. I enjoy watching my students learn and explore the wonders of the world. As well as teaching science, I also am in charge of junior high faith formation at our parish. I got married two years ago to my amazing husband. Adam works as a forester for the MN DNR. Currently, we live in an apartment in town, but we own a lake lot that we plan to build on next summer. During the summer, I spend a lot of time at our lot swimming, kayaking and gardening. I also enjoy reading, traveling, camping, quilting, walking and playing games. I decided to become a Benedictine oblate because I grew up spending time with the sisters at St. Ben’s (my great aunt is Sr. Mary David Olheiser) and want to continue that connection with my own future children. Right now, Adam and I are beginning the process of adoption. Please keep us in your prayers.
Two years ago, I lost my voice. It wasn't for the first time. On several occasions over the years, laryngitis or a sore throat temporarily took away both my capacity and desire to speak, but what happened two years ago was different. One result of toxic chemotherapy in the wake of colon cancer was the loss of my ability to swallow anything that wasn’t pureed or to speak above a whisper for an extended period of time. This condition lasted about two months. This, together with the death of my husband in the midst of this traumatic time, resulted in a forced silence broken only by the need to respond to the occasional telephone call or knock at the door.

One gift of this period was a new perspective on my own ways of communicating. While on the one hand, it was frightening and frustrating not to be able to talk; on the other, it was a relief. Freed of the motivation and the need to put every thought or feeling into words, I fell naturally into silence, the desired mode of the contemplative I once again found myself to be.

During Lent this year, I decided to revisit the subject of silence, to read and reflect on its nature and meaning in the contemplative life. In a rich collection of books, I encountered profound understanding of and experience with the deepest silence in which we may encounter the mysterious, hidden God beyond words.

The Rule of Benedict encourages inner silence as a means of listening for God’s invitations and whisperings, as well as to what others in the community have to say. Michael Casey, OCSO, in "The Undivided Heart," states that silence is “the result of a well-ordered personality, quit of the compulsion to communicate, to express itself, to engage others in conversation or to terminate an awkward pause. It is the characteristic of one who speaks for a reason, rather than out of an inner need to give voice (RB 7.60-61). Authentic silence results from wholeness and contentment; it comes from within, it cannot be imposed successfully from without.”

While many of us have had silence imposed upon us for reasons such as our gender, race, age or station in life, the kind of silence I sought during Lent was that which signaled the release from that compulsion to communicate of which Casey speaks. I explored the relationship between silence, listening and obedience, a quintessentially Benedictine connection. As we know, the same word for “to listen” in both Latin and Greek also means “to obey.” To listen deeply is to obey, to respond with trust to how and where God is leading us. Discernment ensures that what we hear is of God. Of course, there are many more ways in which we may listen for God’s whisperings and invitations in addition to silence. Nevertheless, going deeply into silence as a spiritual practice can become a way of life in which noise fades into the background and we begin to hear our own hearts beating in time with the rhythm of the universe.

As those who practice Centering Prayer, other forms of contemplation or who have made silent retreats well know, finding exterior silence—once we turn off our cell phones—isn’t much of a challenge compared to interior silence. The inner voices of memory or judgment or the to-do list that awaits our attention crowd out the deep, interior silence that we seek, and lying beneath those voices are “the big noises of the soul” that are unleashed when we seek true silence. Speaking of new vocations to the Carthusians, Prior Dymas de Lassus remarked in Robert Cardinal Sarah’s profound book, “The Power of Silence”: “Someone who fears silence will not remain with us.”

Haven’t we all observed something of that fear within ourselves, which keeps us from completing our Lectio Divina with contemplative prayer or disciplining ourselves to observe periods of silence when we might be resting in God’s presence? We are prone to fill our lives with distractions rather than doing the hard work of self-emptying at such a level that we may truly encounter the silent voice and presence of God within us. In “The Twelve Degrees of Silence,” Marie-Aimee de Jesus describes ever-deeper encounters with the noisy self until there is only silence with God, what we, formed in the monastic tradition, truly desire. This little gem of a book by the nineteenth century Carmelite invites us to ever-deepening contemplative practice. Benedictine Br. David Steindl-Rast in “The Way of Silence: Engaging the Sacred in Daily Life” reminds us that silence is not absence, but presence, and that “any encounter with mystery is hidden in silence.”

For these and others who have shared their deep practices of entering into that mystery, I am grateful. For the disease that took my voice for a season, I give thanks that, through suffering, I was called again to that inner well of silence from which we draw our being.

"Silence is not absence, but presence... any encounter with mystery is hidden in silence."

Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB
Recommitment as an Oblate of Saint Benedict

I renew my commitment to the Oblate way of life as an Oblate of Saint Benedict’s Monastery, Saint Joseph, Minnesota, and promise again to serve God and all people according to the Rule of Benedict.

Since I am unable to be present for Oblate Renewal Day, I am submitting my recommitment to the prioress for her blessing.

Date ____________________________ Name ____________________________

Prayer Intentions

Please remember the following in your prayers:

- Joseph Engerski, father of Gae Skaeger, OblSB, died May 27, 2017
- Kathleen Kalinowski, OSB, died June 2, 2017
- Marjorie Goodrow, OblSB, died June 30, 2017
- Margo Bischof, OSB, died July 3, 2017
- Dalene Schindler, OSB, died July 7, 2017
- Lucille Hendrickson, OblSB, sister of Dorothy Hebert, OblSB, died July 17, 2017
- Harold Melton, father of Lynn Valek, OblSB, died on August 2, 2017

For oblates Mary Donahue, Phillippa Lindquist and Florianna Theisen who are receiving treatment for cancer

Happy Birthday!

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If you would like your birthday added to the list or if the date is incorrect, please contact lvirnig@csbsju.edu or call (320) 363-7144. You may also write: Oblate Director, 104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN 56374.

Oblate News 7
Upcoming Oblate Events

Oblate Renewal Day: September 16, 2017

The Divine Presence is Everywhere:
Fostering and Nurturing Awareness

Presenter: Joseph Feders, OSB | 9 a.m. - 3:45 p.m.

Oblate Sunday: November 19, 2017

My Neighbor is Muslim: Where Do I Stand?

Presenter: Mara Faulkner, OSB | 1:15 - 2:30 p.m.

By helping adult immigrants learn the English language, S. Mara Faulkner has come to know a number of Muslim women and men, most of them Somali, and by co-leading a workshop called “My Neighbor Is Muslim,” she has gained a basic knowledge of the Islam religion. Her personal experience and newly acquired knowledge challenge many stereotypes and rumors, leading her to this question: To what attitudes and actions does the Gospel call us as we stand with our Muslim neighbors?

The schedule for all oblate Sundays is: 10:30 a.m. Eucharist followed by brunch. The presentation takes place from 1:15 - 2:30 p.m. in Rosamond A. If you plan to be at the monastery for brunch, please call (320) 363-7144 or e-mail Oblate Office at lvirnig@csbsju.edu by Thursday, November 16, 2017.

Oblate Sunday: January 21, 2018

Presenter: Kathleen Cahalan | 1:15 - 2:30 p.m.
Topic: to be announced.

EMAIL NOTICE

If you have e-mail and have not been receiving messages from the Oblate Office, it is likely that we do not have your current e-mail address. If you wish to receive messages, please send your current e-address.

Oblate Inquirers

Persons who have been inquiring about becoming oblates and are seriously considering becoming an oblate candidate, please contact Sister Laureen at lvirnig@csbsju.edu or call (320)-363-7144 or write to Oblate Director, 104 Chapel Lane, St. Joseph, MN 56374.