

ISSUE

03

DECEMBER

2021

Oblate Newsletter

Benedictine Sisters of Virginia



this issue:

Summer Retreats

Oblates & Novices

The Yard Sale!

Monastic Profession

Opportunities

The Value of Community

By Rose De Rango, OblSB

Early in the COVID-19 pandemic, Kathy Adams started a new initiative around Oblate Small Groups. The Small Groups were started at a time when there was still a lot of unknowns about the COVID-19 virus and most people were staying very close to home. In this environment, Kathy suggested forming Oblate Small Groups that would meet via ZOOM – a safe way to meet. Groups could spread across deaneries because location was not a limiting factor. Several weekly meeting dates and times were suggested. Groups formed primarily around the most convenient meeting time for those that were interested. The Bristow monastery graciously provided the Oblate ZOOM account the groups could use.

With that, groups started meeting weekly. As time went on, progress was being made with the virus. Vaccines were approved and distributed. More knowledge was being discovered and disseminated about the virus. Slowly, some semblance of normal life started. Most small groups continued to meet but scaled back to meeting once or twice a month.

I have been a member of an Oblate Small Group from the beginning. The membership of the group has evolved, but there is still a core group of 4 of us that continue to meet faithfully twice a month via ZOOM. What this experience has taught me is the power and value of community.

First of all, continuing to meet steadily for almost 18 months has demonstrated the commitment each of us has to the group. We have had relatively few absences at any of our meetings, despite the fact that all members have busy lives and commitments. What this has illustrated to me is that community doesn't just happen. You have to work at it – just like anything in life that is worth having. All of us in the group have worked at showing up for each meeting, being present and participating.

The group rotates who will facilitate the meeting, so each one of us has a turn deciding the topic for the meeting and leading the meeting. This format has worked for us. At some point, each member has to at least think about a discussion topic and materials. Then they present that topic to the group and lead discussion. I believe this format has fostered the participation and sharing each member brings to the meeting. A comment often made by a member of the group is that she always learns something from our group or there is something she can always take away. In many ways that also supports the building of community. You go where you are fed.

Through the discussion and sharing in the meetings, a trust has been formed. In our discussions there have been areas that we disagree on or do not share the same views, but we have enough respect for each other that we have learned to considerately and thoughtfully discuss things with each other.

I have never met the other members of my Oblate Small Group in person but I feel like I know them. If, or when, I some day meet them in person, I would feel comfortable with them right from the start! Yes, meeting virtually is not perfect and in person is better, but when that is your only option it works and you can even learn the value of community. Contact your dean for information on how to join a small group.

Summer Retreats

Knowing Who You Are

By Matt Cundiff, OblSB

The Bedford Deanery met for their summer retreat at Resurrection Catholic Church in Moneta, Virginia on July the 9th. The oblate summer retreat was entitled “Knowing Who You Are” and was led by Sister Kathy Persson. The day-long retreat included morning and evening prayer, a free book “sale”, a salad to share lunch, and ended with an opportunity to participate in Reconciliation and afternoon Mass. As a busy father of five, I always look forward to retreats. They are a time to step away from the day to day and refocus on my Benedictine promises.

Sr. Kathy began her presentation by reminding the oblates of Jesus’ own questions to his disciples; “Who do others say I am?” and “Who do you say I am?” We then moved into a reflection of several different questions. Who we say we are, who others say we are, who we are as Benedictines, and ultimately who God says we are. Our answers to these questions led us to discussions of self-knowledge and what it means to become whole and holy. The first session ended with Sr. Kathy speaking about how *The Rule of St. Benedict helps with self-knowledge, its emphasis on obedience and “listening with the ear of your heart”*.

Lunch for our day-long retreat consisted of a colorful array of all kinds of salads, cool drinks and sweet deserts. Oblates were able to partake in community fellowship as we enjoyed our lunch. Our second session began with a deeper dive into how we as oblates can become whole and holy. The importance of prayer and introspection was touched on, as well as the role of moral courage when making choices. Sr. Kathy ended her retreat speaking about “heart wounds” and charged us as Benedictine Oblates to bring hope into the world so we could help heal the hearts around us. It was a refreshing and enlightening day. One that helped me to better know who I am in my own eyes but more importantly, who I am in the eyes of God. We are so blessed to have teachers and healers like Sr. Kathy to lead such great retreats!

Community Binds Us Together

By Rose De Rango, OblSB

On July 10, 2021, the Richmond Deanery had their summer retreat at Mary Mother of the Church Abbey in Goochland, Virginia. The day was sunny and warm, as most days in July are in Virginia. But it made for a pleasant backdrop to our summer retreat. The theme of the retreat was “Being Benedictine Oblate of the Monastery of St. Benedict, Bristow, Virginia.”

We started the day with Morning Prayer honoring the Feast of St. Benedict. We then watched some short videos of Sister Joan Chittister talking on St. Benedict’s Rule. Sister Joan said that the Rule is “meant to lead us to the continual consciousness of God.” The Rule helps us to do this by “welding the inner and outer life.” She then discussed the Six Pillars of Benedictism, values that enable living a Benedictine life. The Six Pillars are:

- Community
- Holy Leisure
- Work
- Stewardship
- Humility
- Peace

Summer Retreats Continued

In discussing Community, Sister Joan said that human community is the cement that binds us together. She stressed that it is the little things we do that count. After the videos, there was time for reflection and discussion on several questions around Benedictine Spirituality and The Benedictine Path. Some of the questions were:

- What is the role the ongoing process of conversion plays in our life in community?
- What is the role of prayer in our life?
- How does the Benedictine calling affect our relationship to community?

Our Dean, Annie McEntee, then presented a history of the Monastery of St. Benedict. In reviewing the history, I couldn't help but compare and contrast today's challenges in the world with the challenges in the time of St. Benedict. The world of St. Benedict definitely had more challenges, strife and uncertainty than we are facing today. One statement that struck me was: "History at its gravest moments produces a cavalry of saints."

Midday Prayer and a delicious potluck lunch, provided with contributions from all attending, then followed. Sharing a meal together allowed time to relax and converse with others attending the retreat. After lunch there was a witness talk, reflection on Being Benedictine, and then Closing Prayer. It was a peaceful ending to a productive day in exploring the Benedictine Tradition in our lives.



The Richmond Deanery Retreat

Would it be a Benedictine Retreat without books?



Celebrating Oblates and Novices

JOYOUS CELEBRATION

By Kathy Frick. OblSB

For the first time since early spring 2019, Oblates gathered at Saint Benedict Monastery to celebrate new Oblates and Novices. While covid protocols did limit the number of people who could participate in the September 11, 2021, Oblation Ceremony, it represented an opportunity for our Oblate community to be together.

Sister Joanna Burley presided over the Ceremony, her first opportunity to do so since her election as Prioress in 2019. Diane Butler shared a reflection on her journey to becoming a Benedictine Oblate. Oblate Directors Sister Andrea Westkamp and Kathy Frick recounted numerous Oblate anniversaries.

Sherri Given and Diane Butler made their Act of Oblation and David Corey and Joyce Andrew were received as Novices. A special part of celebration was the formal Commissioning of Debby Townsend as Dean of the Bristow Deanery.

After the conclusion of the ceremony the participants shared a picnic lunch on the Monastery patio. Everyone is hopeful that the 2022 Oblation Ceremony will return to its usual May date.



Prioress Joanna Burley invites Diane Butler and Sherri Given to make oblation.



Commissioning Debby Townsend by Kathy Frick & Sr. Andrea Westkamp.



Prioress Joanna Burley; Oblates Diane Butler & Sherri Given; Dean Debby Townsend; Novices David Corey, Patty Mason-Goggin & Joyce Andrew.

The “Getting Ready to Move” Yard Sale!

History – at Bargain Prices

By Kathy Frick, OblSB

Everyone knows the angst of moving – What to keep? What to discard? The Sisters have been conducting a “Tidy Town” campaign to pare down unneeded items in preparation for their move into the new monastery. Those efforts culminated in a giant yard sale on October 16. There was something for everyone –

Out of reading material? Three tables held enough paperback books to fill a small bookmobile.

Several tables of kitchenware held treasures dating decades past –An extra-large metal pitcher conjured images of small uniformed boys sitting at table while a Sister poured milk into their cups. Numerous dainty glass desert bowls would have been perfect for feast day and holiday treats.

A table labeled “Old Stuff” displayed cigar boxes, a vintage sewing kit, a pair of metal roller skates, and a few items that could have used tags to identify them.

Religious items – crosses, medals, small pictures – sold as quickly as they were displayed.

Dozens of framed pictures, large and small, with subjects ranging from vintage religious images to bold modern art offered abundant choices. Prospective buyers were invited to “make an offer” and the Sisters were very flexible, eager to have the pictures find new homes.

One young couple debated over the three prie dieu before selecting one as a gift for the husband’s father who is setting up a private prayer space.

Several shoppers browsed a collection of old trunks before choosing one to take home. The trunks are relics from the time when the Sisters would pack their belongings into a trunk each fall as they headed out for a mission assignment. When they returned after the schools recessed for the summer, the trunks were stored away in the trunk room until needed the next school season.

And there were some items that you just knew had a backstory – a dozen or so boxed collector plates and a table filled with beautifully dressed porcelain dolls.

Watching buyers with their newly-acquired treasures had you wondering what their future might hold – a man carried away a huge stewpot that clearly had spent years of use feeding large numbers of people. Did it date from when the number of Sisters was much larger or even further back to when the Sisters cooked for the monastery farm workers? Was the delighted new owner a professional chef, a volunteer for a soup kitchen, or king of his home kitchen? Another young man proudly displayed an original painting of giraffes against a bright orange and yellow African landscape. Originally brought from Tanzania by Sister Denise, it would be interesting to see where this bit of history will now reside. The future of the skeletons of two ironing boards was fairly easy to predict – they remained huddled together at the end of one of the tables, ignored and even scorned.

The sale displays were carefully choreographed and the volunteers were busy throughout the day. Among the volunteers were: Oblates Rita Albright, Angela Algire, Carrie Cirbee, David Corey, Natalie Daniels, Bessie & Mike Fleming, Kathy Frick, Linda Gulden, Colleen Hernandez, Meg Kermon, Kathleen Landry, Annie McEntee, Linda Malone, John Oliver, Gillian Quintana, Dave & Sue Riley, Carol Semon, and Debby Townsend.

More Yard Sale Reflections

Richmond Oblates Pitching In

By Annie McEntee, OblSB

We heard that the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia were going to hold a yard sale in anticipation of their move to the new monastery, so Natalie Daniels and I made plans to make the journey north from Richmond to Bristow. We arrived Friday afternoon finding a joyful but tired group of sisters and volunteers who had already completed the arrangement of sale items on the front lawn. After our warm greeting, we freshened up and joined the sisters for evening prayer and supper.

Bright and early Saturday we joined the sisters for morning prayer before the Sale began at 8 a.m. Natalie staffed a table while I joined Sr. Charlotte Lange and Sr. Trinidad in welcoming visitors. Soon tables began to clear as items were scooped up. There was a joyful cheer in the air as we helped visitors with their newfound treasures. Before we knew it, our prioress was calling us to lunch. Somehow, we informally kept the tables staffed as we took turns eating. By 1:30 p.m. the clouds started rolling in and droplets began to fall, but that didn't stop Natalie who continued to help the very last customer purchase armloads of frames and prints. Finally, the heavens brought a natural end to our successful yard sale, giving us some much-needed rest before evening prayer and dinner.

Sunday, we rose early for morning prayer followed by 9 a.m. Mass and brunch. Our Oblate director, Sr. Andrea Westkamp, modeled the Rule for us as she fulfilled her kitchen server duty for the week. We met the sisters' new-live-in, Katherine, and promised to pray for her. Natalie and I left the monastery full from a wonderful brunch and renewed friendships. Natalie's parting words to me were, "Please let me know the next time you are going to the monastery because I would love to go with you."



Bedford Deanery sporting their new Benedictine hoodies! We may place another order in the spring, if there is enough interest!

The Perpetual Monastic Profession of Sister Kay Fitzgerald

Exhortation given by Sr. Joanna at the profession

Saturday, September 4, 2021

Philippians 4:4-8 Rule of Benedict Prologue 39-50 John 15:12-17

The Scripture readings you just heard were chosen by Kay – or perhaps, more accurately, God inspired them in Kay to be a testimony and a teaching about the two most important truths of the Christian life for Kay, and for all of us who are believers.

Two truths: Love and Faith.

Love is easy to understand. Faith...not so much!

In our 21st century world, faith is difficult. We humans have evolved in our understanding of the world and are very, very accustomed to being able to find the answers to every question. God gave us the gift of reason. We don't like not having answers; it's uncomfortable to not be able to quantify, identify, calibrate, derive, extract, order a thing...we don't like not being able to logically and scientifically find the reason for a thing.

God gave us the ability to reason. And the ability to reason is often the defining characteristic of what it means to be human.

But where does that leave faith?

The truth is, there are things in life that just make no sense. There are things that cannot be reasoned, that have no clear explanation. There are no answers for some questions, and no logic for some beliefs. And it is in just that space of unknowing that faith resides.

Faith says: I believe even though I don't understand.

Faith says: I walk even though I cannot see.

Faith says: I follow even though I don't know where the road leads.

Faith whispers: *there is a loving God. Just trust!*

Truth: Faith cannot be explained. Faith is a power beyond human comprehension. Faith makes us powerful beyond anything we can imagine. And faith opens the door to a joy that cannot be contained, a joy that's infectious and unbridled and wild and free. Faith welcomes the fire of the Holy Spirit, the generosity of Jesus, the deep peace of God.

Truth: Faith is essential if we are to truly live in this world.

With faith, we do not need to worry about anything. With faith, the peace of God will guard our hearts and minds. With faith, we can rejoice because we know that the Lord is always near.

The second truth: Love.

Jesus gave us a simple commandment: Love one another as I have loved you.

No qualifications. No quantifications. No exclusions or conditions or prerequisites or protocols. Simply this: love one another.

It takes a great deal of faith to simply love, because our model is Jesus himself who literally gave his life for us and who calls us to follow his example. Love one another: give up your life for another. Give up your time, your wants, your desires, your needs in favor of another's time, wants, desires, needs.

Love says: You are important.

Love says: You are of priceless worth.

Love says: I will care for you.

Love says: I will see Christ in you.

A Perpetual Monastic Profession Continued

Truth: Love is essential if we are to truly live in this world.

With love, we are friends of Jesus; we are co-workers; we understand what cannot be put into words: that there is a loving God who will fulfill our every desire. With love, we become Christ's light for the world.

This monastic way of life is an exercise of faith and love. Saint Benedict, in the Prologue to his Rule, calls it a school for the Lord's service. The monastic way of life is both a place to learn how to live as Christ taught us, and a place to practice that life. The monastic way of life, with its deliberate attention to faith, to love, to works of service and humility, to trust, to collaboration and cooperation, to forgiveness, to prayer, to community --- the monastic way of life is a place that models how the beautifully diverse world of peoples that God created can live together in peace.

And doesn't our world today need examples of how to live together in peace?

Kay, the voice of God has called to you throughout your life. And throughout your life you have responded in faith, and loved far beyond yourself. Your family and your friends are here as witnesses to that life of yours, and are witnesses no to your further response:

to the God who loves you
to the God who has never left you abandoned
to the God who draws you and will not let you go
to the God from whom you can never be separated
to the God who comes to you in the silence
to the God who calls you to follow
to the God of infinite possibility and wide open spaces.

Sister Joanna Burley, O.S.B., Prioress

Reflections from Rita Albright

Sr. Kay Fitzgerald's Perpetual Monastic Profession, on September 4, 2021, was serene and joyful. It had just the right pink flowers and prayers, including the *Suscipe* from Psalm 119. The Sisters processed into the chapel in statio, and the music included one of my favorite songs, "The God of All Grace."

But something very simple struck me throughout the beautiful ceremony. Sr. Kay's adult son and daughter-in-law watched everything from the front row. While often adult parents stand stoic and proud as their children marry, enter religious life, or are ordained, this was just the opposite. Sister Kay, wearing her Benedictine ring, acknowledged her son during the Sign of Peace. The entire evolving story of this family and their gift seemed complete. Congratulations to Sister, her family, and friends.

Opportunities!

AMERICAN BENEDICTINE ACADEMY ESSAY CONTEST

Each convention year, the ABA sponsors an essay contest exploring topics related to the Benedictine tradition and charism. This contest is aimed at inspiring writing among newer community members and is open to monastics and oblates who have made their first profession or oblation within the past 10 years.

In keeping with the upcoming ABA conference theme of “Give Me a Word...” we are seeking essays that explore how God speaks in monastic tradition, the Rule of Benedict, and everyday monastic life, and what word (wisdom) Benedictine life has to share with the world today. Your essay should be 3000–3200 words in length and incorporate a variety of published or archival sources and personal experience.

Requirements for Participation:

The contest is open to professed members and oblates up to 10 years after first profession or oblation. Submit a double-spaced essay of 3,000–3,200 words in a Word document. Your essay should contain no identifying information. In your accompanying email please include your name, community, date of first profession or oblation, and mailing address.

Send to:

Sister Colleen Maura McGrane, O.S.B., Contest Committee Chair at: colleenmaura@gmail.com

Deadline: March 31, 2022. Winners will be notified by May 15, 2022.

Prize:

A two-year membership in the American Benedictine Academy, waiver of registration and hospitality fees for the 2022 ABA convention, a book of interest for monastics/oblates, and the possibility of having one's essay published in a relevant publication.

Benedictine Heritage Journey to Italy

You are invited to join us on a once in a lifetime pilgrimage to Italy, 11 Days, October 12-22, 2022. This trip includes visits to the Franciscan sites at Assisi, the Benedictine sites at Nurcia, Subiaco, and Montecassino, as well as, the major religious and historic sites in Rome. The full package price, including airfare from Dulles (IAD), is \$5,699.00 per person with double occupancy in a room. A limited number of single occupancy rooms are available at \$595.00. Under the Spiritual Direction of Sister Andrea Westkamp, OSB. Contact John Kowalski, Obl.SB at jk6872@gmail.com_or Rita Zimmermann, Obl.SB at rzimmermann.obl.sb@gmail.com with questions. The following link has the itinerary and registration:

<https://www.gocatholictravel.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Zimmermann-Kowalski-2022-Brochure-1.pdf>