

ISSUE

09

SUMMER

2025

# Oblate Newsletter

## Benedictine Sisters of Virginia



this issue:

Heather Soto

Nigerian Water

Illumination Reflections

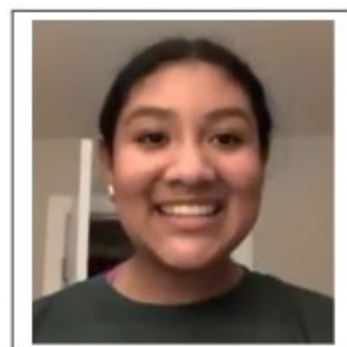
Oblation Reflection

Changes at Bedford

Poetry like a Benedictine

Richmond Retreat

### **Oblate Sponsorship Project Update: Heather Soto Scholarship Saint Gertrude High School Annie McEntee, OblSB Richmond Deanery**



As you know, we Benedictine Oblates have been asked to sponsor Heather now and, in the years ahead at Saint Gertrude High School, a ministry of the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia.

Heather successfully completed her sophomore year at Saint Gertrude, achieving a 3.6 GPA. She participates in after school activities such as softball, Book Club, and the World Language Club.

Thank you for your many donations. We collected enough to pay for Heather's junior year tuition. Over the next year we will continue to gather donations for Heather's senior year. She relates that she is exploring colleges over the summer!

Donations may be made by check payable to Saint Elizabeth Catholic Church with Heather Soto in the memo section. Send donations to Saint Elizabeth Catholic Church, 1301 Victor Street, Richmond, Virginia 23222.

# There is Free Water in Nigeria!

Linda Mingos, Richmond Deanery

A man knelt down to say “thank you for taking the suffering of water away from us.”

A year ago, in a casual conversation, Kent Onah, an oblate from Nigeria, shared his dream with me of being able to provide water to his neighbors for free. In this first world country, it is difficult to imagine what life would be like without the ease of simply turning on a faucet for a drink of water. Who among us stops to consider what life would be like if we could not put our clothes in a wash machine or step into a hot shower each day? Temporary interruptions to our water supply cause us temporary inconvenience, but the gift and freedom of having running water in our homes is returned to us quickly.

As I listened to Kent share his dream, I wondered how he could possibly bring his dream to reality, given the barrier of a declining economy in his country. Would it be possible, and if it was possible, would he accept help from our oblate community?

That conversation occurred more than a year ago. Since then, in each of our deaneries, pictures and stories sent by Kent, were shared with oblates via PowerPoint. We saw pictures of mothers, young women and teens, carrying large containers of water weighing as much as thirty pounds. We heard stories of how common it is for these individuals to walk as far as forty-five minutes, twice a day, every day, to gather water for their families. We heard stories about the disruption that the need to gather water created on the education of children. We heard stories of individuals being denied water when they reached their destination, or of being extorted financially and in other ways, in return for the water they received.

On December 27 th , 2024, a priest blessed the water tanks and faucets on Kent’s property and the unbelievable happened. People in Kent’s neighborhood received the gift of water! “Is this REAL, in Nigeria of today somebody can fetch water FREE?” was a comment Kent heard from one of his neighbors. Kent also shared that, “A group of women and families from neighboring communities came to pray for me and to say thank you for giving them free water.” The most moving comment for me personally was when Kent shared that man knelt down to say “thank you for taking the suffering of water away from us.” When I picture in my mind, a man so moved to be relieved of suffering simply by having access to free water that he falls to his knees, I can scarcely imagine the suffering he endures on a daily basis.



## Free Water continued

In her commentary on the Rule of Benedict, Chapter 71, Mutual Obedience, Sister Joan Chittister states: “Monastic spirituality says that we are to honor one another. We are to listen to one another. We are to reach across boundaries and differences in this fragmented world and see in our differences distinctions of great merit that can mend a competitive, uncaring, and foolish world.”

In our world that is filled with divisiveness, conflict, and suffering, our Benedictine community was offered the tremendous gift of being able to reach across the boundaries of race, culture, economics, and geographical distance, to honor our Nigerian neighbors. We were given the choice to offer them Benedictine hospitality that would relieve the suffering of the community members of a fellow oblate, by providing one of life’s greatest necessities-fresh water.

I am grateful to have been given that opportunity, and I am so very proud to be part of a community that listened to the needs of our fellow human beings and embraced this water project. Hear the words of joy and gratitude expressed by the youth in Kent’s community, “This is the best thing that happened in this community.”

How blessed are the people in Kent’s community because of this water project! How blessed are we to have been able to help Kent bring some caring and less suffering into this foolish world!

As I reflect on this project, I am reminded of the connectedness of all people. This is portrayed beautifully in the painting created by Kent which is titled: ***You Are Not Alone***. Additional paintings by Kent can be viewed on his Facebook page: Onah Kent.



**You Are Not Alone, 44 X 49 inches, Oil on Canvas**

## A Note From Kent Onah:

I use this opportunity to extend my gratitude and appreciation to the Oblate Directors, Linda Mingos, Annie McEntee and the entire oblate community for supporting my water project and funding it to completion. Me, my family, and my community extend our heart felt gratitude to all who contributed financially and otherwise to the success of my water project. I'm glad to inform you that it is completed and it is working now. We are dispensing 14,000 to 16,000 litres of water daily to the general public, excluding outlets connected to different neighbours that is equally dispensing water daily into their homes. Each day I thank God and pray for you all, as I see joy and happiness in the faces of the numerous persons who benefit from my free water project.

God bless and keep you all.

Kent Onah





# Richmond Deanery's 2024-25 Reflections

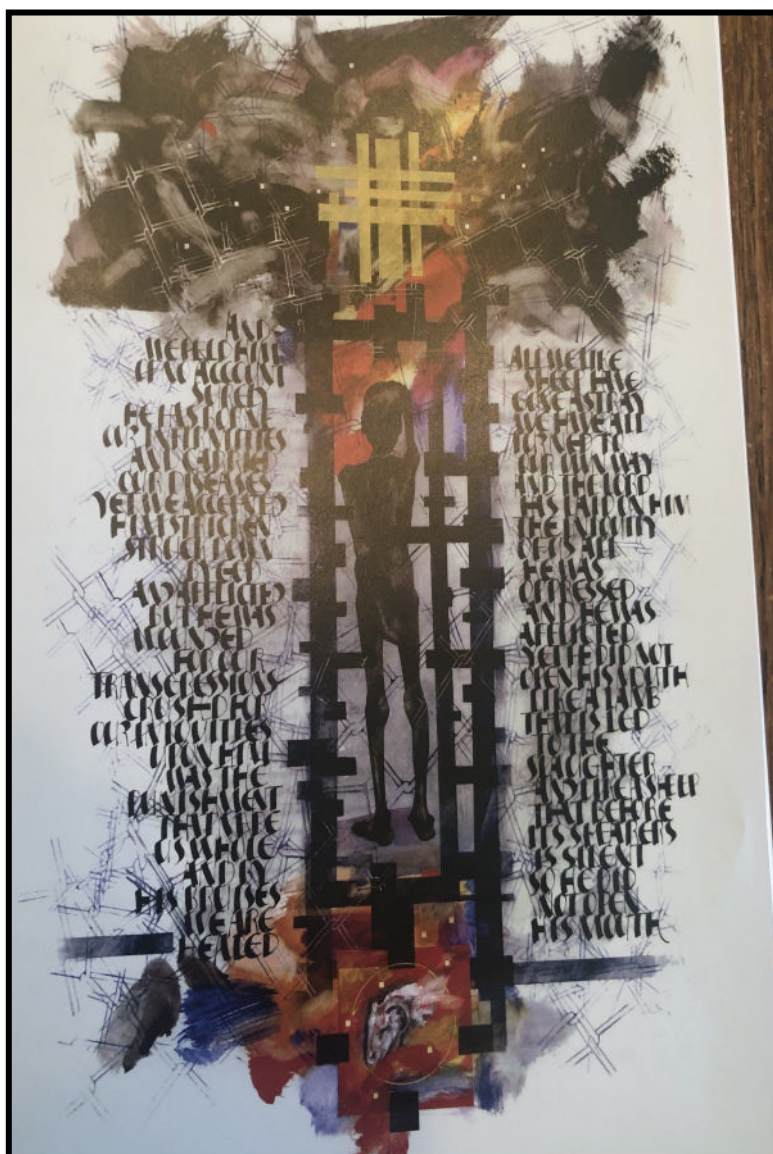
Bob Roettger, 1st year Novice

Last year our Richmond Deanery had chosen to reflect on scripture passages with illuminations from the Saint John's Bible using volume II of Illuminating Ministry. Here are two of my recent reflections written in preparation to share at our Oblate gatherings. This Visio reflection is based on Isaiah 53:2-10, the "Suffering Servant" and accompanying illustration from The Saint John's Bible.

We are the suffering servants but Christ is with us and in us. He was in there too, through the will of his Father. In the illustration, from the underworld up, we see the slaughtered Lamb (gold circle) with red blood and fire all around. A cooling stroke of blue cannot put out the fire. The servant is in this space because of sin, but is supported by a purple base that keeps one from falling into the abyss. Purple signifies Advent and Lent, a time of contrition, penance and preparation for greater events. Repentance gives us hope.

But the words of Isaiah are dark and crushing in. They are the outside noise we have to shut out. Jesus would ask this cup to pass (words) but it took action, through the Cross, to fulfill the will of his Father. So, likewise, we retreat to our cell and pray in solitude to seek the way for us. The answer comes as the servant, hand on head, looks up and sees that Jesus, through His cross, is the way for us to accomplish God's will. We have to endure suffering by accepting our cross, symbolized by the red pouring down on us. This is the way to everlasting life. But the blood of the cross is also God's Divine Mercy and with trust in Jesus, comes the forgiveness of our sins.

So we repent and believe in the Gospel. At the top of the illustration we see a dark, messy world. The gray is the lamb's wool, which has been sheared from the silent Lamb as bloodstains appear. There are the three crosses of Calvary. And like Jesus, we can live according to God's will through our prayers and deeds with the guidance of the Spirit (Dove) who rises above the crosses, confirming this truth and with its left wing, tinged in purple, points the way that leads us from darkness to light.



## Reflection #2 from Richmond 2024-25

This Visio reflection is based on Acts 1:8, and the accompanying illustration, “To the Ends of the Earth” from The Saint John’s Bible. I first looked at this illustration a few minutes before evening prayer. The antiphon for that evening prayer was: “The message goes forth to all the world. God’s word, to the ends of the earth!”

A coincidence? Probably not! There is a message here! The evening prayer continued with...

*Psalm 2: “Kings stand against God. High above the earth God laughs in mockery. Kings come to your senses, serve the Lord with joy, tremble in awe. How much better to find shelter in God”.*

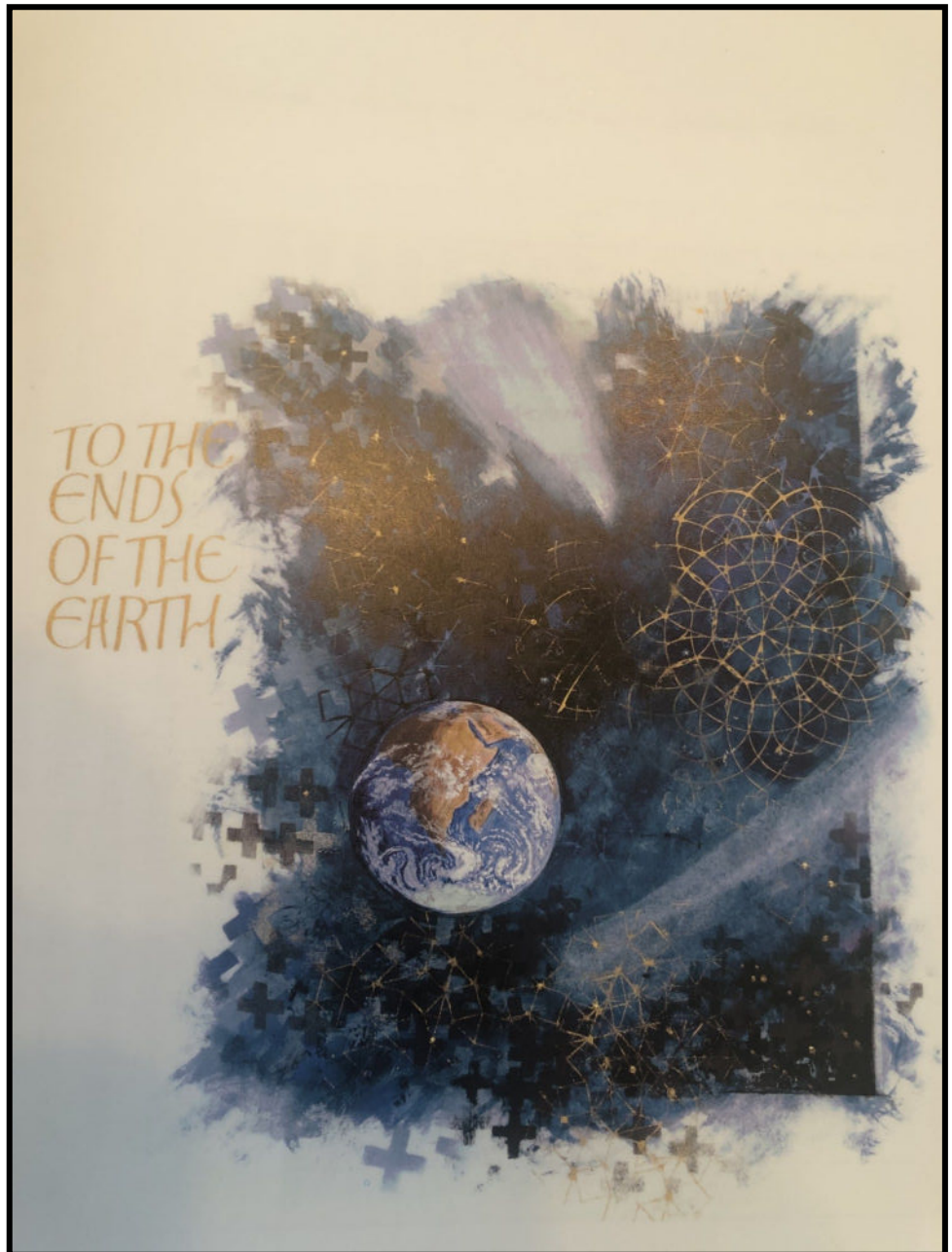
*Psalm 34: “God’s angel defends the faithful, guards them on every side. Live in awe of God, you will want for nothing”.*

*Psalm 47: “All peoples shout your joy to God. For God most high is awesome, great King of all the earth. God rules over nations, high on the sacred throne. All the powers on earth belong to God on high. Citizens of heaven rejoice”!*

Through this illustration, God gives us a snapshot of what he sees, our world and His World.

Facing out from the globe are Africa and the Middle East whose conflicts remind us of the many places in the world whose kings stand against God. The light swooshes represent the community of angels as they watch over us and perform God’s will. The multi-colored crosses around the perimeter are the diversified peoples of the earth, who await their entrance into Heaven represented by the golden spheres surrounding the earth.

In tying the Evening Prayer to the illustration, God’s message to us is: Find shelter in God. Live in awe of God and we will want for nothing and become citizens of heaven – the ultimate community!



## Reflection from the 2025 Oblation Ceremony

John Kowalski, Bedford Deanery

We have just heard from chapter 4 of the Rule “the love of Christ must come before all else”. What’s the best way to grow into a life in which that is the case that is “the love of Christ must come before all else in my life, in your life?” Two quotes from the Rule come to my mind, in the prologue we read by “Never departing from these instructions but faithfully observing them until death” and in chapter 4 “the workshop in which we work faithfully at all of these tasks is the enclosure of the monastery and stability in the community”. The Rule and the Monastery Today, I would like to acknowledge and thank those individuals who have inspired me as I began and continue on this journey guided by the Rule and as an oblate of this monastery.

After she retired from her business, my wife Val wanted to find a community in which she could grow in the Christian way of life. She spent time at three different lay communities that meet in the Roanoke area but came away feeling that none of them were a good fit for her. Fellow oblate Suzanne Galligher suggested she check out the Benedictines who meet in Bedford. I remember when she came home from her first meeting very excited that she may have found the community that she was looking for. Shortly after that first meeting Val was no longer able to drive because of health issues. She volunteered me to drive her to Bedford and asked that I stay with her during the meetings. To make a long story short, we finished the inquiry year and asked to be received as novices. In April of 2012 Val was ready to ask to be received as an oblate, I was not sure and thought I needed another year as a novice. Val informed me that I was ready and that we were going to make our oblations together in May of 2012. Val sensed things then that I did not, she died on Epiphany, January 6 of 2013. So, thank you Val for your encouragement then and your continuing prayers today.

Benedict states in chapter 3 that “God often reveals to the younger what is best” and in chapter 27 “that the superior ought to use every opportunity to send senectae, namely, mature and wise members, to support the wavering one”. Every time I have attended a gathering of sisters, oblates and novices here at the monastery and at our Bedford deanery meetings I come away having learned so much and been inspired by the wisdom, insights, and commitment of those individuals who have been on this Benedictine journey for a long time (the senectae) or short time (the younger). So, thank you to everyone here and in the Bedford deanery for helping me on my journey and thank you to St. Benedict for reminding me that everyone has something valuable to contribute to this community.

When reading and meditating on Scripture, the Rule, or some other writings I, and I am sure all of you, often end up focusing on a particular phrase or sentence. Recently that has been the case for me as I think about the story of Benedict and Scholastica’s last meeting. When Benedict told Scholastica that he would not lengthen their annual meeting past its usual time, Scholastica bowed her head in prayer and God sent a violent storm so that they were forced to spend the night together continuing their discussion. When the storm came up Benedict said to Scholastica “God forgive you sister, what have you done?” Scholastica’s response has stuck with me and helped me through some difficult and stressful interpersonal situations.

She said to Benedict: “When I appealed to you, you would not listen to me. So, I turned to my God and He heard my prayer.” So, thank you St. Scholastica for that insight into God’s provident love.

Finally, congratulations and welcome to our new novices and oblates. You have made a wise decision to affiliate yourself with this particular monastic community.



# A Changing of the Guard at the Bedford Deanery

Donna Reynolds, Bedford Deanery

This year has been one of transition, reflection, and celebration for the Bedford Deanery. Rita Zimmermann announced her plans to retire as Dean in early 2024. The members of the deanery met in July 2024 to discern the future of the deanery including how each of the members could support its work. Each deanery member was also asked to submit in writing up to three names of individuals who would be qualified to serve as dean. A summary of the discernment discussion and the list of names were submitted to the Oblate Directors. The Prioress, in consultation with the Oblate Directors, appointed John Kowalski as the new dean beginning in May 2025. Exemplifying Benedictine stability, Rita worked in partnership with John to ensure a smooth transition. Her final acts as Dean were in keeping with her entire leadership of the Bedford Deanery: competent, caring, dedicated. As one long-time oblate stated, "without Rita there wouldn't be a Bedford Deanery."

Rita was tapped for a leadership role even before she had made her oblation. Her stewardship of the Deanery began on the day of her oblation in October of 2007. For the next 18 years, she led the group and did so with great faith, skill, and diplomacy—and Benedictine humility. Rita served without title for the first 13 years of her leadership. It was not until January of 2020 that she was formally commissioned as Dean.

Under Rita's guidance, the Bedford Deanery grew from a handful of inquirers to a group of more than two dozen oblates. She is a tireless evangelist for the Benedictine way, demonstrating by her conversion of life the value of the Rule, the spiritual benefits of community, stability, prayer, and study. Rita increased her flock, and with her talent for delegating encouraged every participant to play a role in the group's success and to develop their leadership potential. As one oblate said, "Rita has a gift for inviting you to participate."

On May 17, 2025, the Bedford Deanery held a retirement ceremony and celebration for Rita. We were honored to have Prioress Sister Andrea, Sister Kathy, Sister Charlotte, and Kathy Frick in attendance, a testimony to the strong bonds Rita has formed with the monastery community and their recognition of her contributions. During morning prayer, oblate Sherri Given offered a thoughtful and moving blessing over Rita, which was joined by all.



Afterward, Sister Kathy and oblates Joann Berrier and Becky Porterfield spoke of Rita's personal and spiritual gifts and her long service to the Bedford oblate community. Joann shared her experiences as a long-time member, recounting how in 2006, as a newcomer to Virginia, she attended her first meeting. She didn't know much about Benedictine spirituality or the roles of oblates, but she immediately felt at home. Under Rita's direction, the group was so well organized that Joann didn't learn until much later that it was newly formed.



## Changing of the Guard Continued

Becky Porterfield's experiences of Rita's gifts and guidance are unique. Becky shared that Rita, as Faith Formation Coordinator at Holy Name of Mary Church, was instrumental in her journey back to faith and the Church. After Rita's retirement from Holy Name of Mary, Becky assumed the position Rita had held and was mentored by Rita in the role. Later, under Rita's gentle prodding, Becky joined the Bedford Deanery and made her oblation. Of the experience she said, "And it has been [in the Bedford Deanery] that I have had more spiritual growth in the last six years than in...all my life."

She added, "I feel like Rita Zimmermann changed the course of my life. She taught me how to see God in the everyday craziness of my life, and she showed me through example how important it was to have the personal relationship with God, one that I had never known. That was something that felt somewhat unattainable for me."

Both Joann and Becky stressed that while handling the many responsibilities of deanship, Rita was also working full-time, serving as a spiritual director (she was a 2009 graduate of the Spiritual Direction Institute), managing family duties, planning pilgrimages, hiking, and gardening. As Becky explained, "[At Holy Name of Mary] Rita helped people from baptisms to funerals, planned liturgies, visited the sick, welcomed people to her home, she went above and beyond to be a light to people wherever she could. I can't think of anything more Benedictine than the giving of yourself to serve the faith community of your parish, and she has been a wonderful model of that."

The group presented Rita with gifts in appreciation of her leadership, and Rita's husband Phil made a surprise and very welcome appearance. As Joann Berrier said, "There is no way, not enough words to express our gratitude for what Rita has done—her tireless efforts are known only to her and God. And maybe Phil." The celebration culminated in



refreshments that were a fitting example of Benedictine hospitality, including a cake featuring the monastery logo (thank you Colleen Hernandez).

As Joann Berrier summed it up, "Each one of us appreciates Rita's generosity, time, care, attention, guidance, and her dedication to helping us to grow spiritually. She has made a world of difference in our lives."



## A Reflection on the Benedictine Path & Listening

Linda Mingos, Richmond Deanery

(Written during the winter, for those of you longing for the cold!)

### Poetry on a Winter's Evening

**My God to thee I dedicate  
this simple work of mine  
And also with it heart and soul,  
to be forever thine.  
No other motive will I have,  
than by it thee to praise.  
And stir up my poor frozen soul  
by love itself to raise  
O I desire neither tongue nor pen,  
but to extol God's praise.**

by Gertrude More, OSB\*  
written in 1658, original manuscript in Bodleian Library, Oxford, England)

On a cold winter's evening, a meditative poem may be just the thing to add to a cup of tea and a warm fire. Ordinary speech rarely equips us to name our deep longing to make sense of life or to connect unrelated people and events, much as baptismal waters do, by the deeper currents of God's spirit. The mysteries of life, sorrowful and joyful, deserve to be remembered, given voice and shared. Poets point the way forward and invite us to "swim in the deep end of the pool".

Gertrude More was a feisty Benedictine Sister and poet, well known in the 17th century for speaking her own mind, claiming spiritual freedom in her relationship with God, and passionately embracing the Benedictine way. Gertrude's great great grandfather was St. Thomas More, educated at Oxford. His spiritual freedom before God would not allow him to acquiesce to the demands of King Henry VIII. We know the price he paid for his Christian integrity.

As I visited cousins in Oxford last summer, I thought of many of the university's great souls. I walked past the pub of C.S. Lewis and his friend J.R.R. Tolkien and their literary circle, the Inklings. It was Tolkien who helped bring Lewis into the arms of Christ. I noted plaques in churches, Catholic and Protestant, that gave testimony to lives well lived and people who suffered mightily for their commitment to their faith. I was moved to see a priest walking among Muslim people, stopping to listen carefully and respond gently. In an age that is harshly secular, to listen with the ear of the heart gives a poetry of mercy all its own.

**Most glorious Father in whose School,  
I live and hope to die,  
God grant I may observe the Rule  
for in that all doth lie.  
For no perfection can be named,  
which us it not teach.**

(Gertrude More, OSB)

## Richmond Deanery's Retreat

### Annie McEntee, Obl.S.B., Richmond Deanery

#### Your Benedictine Voice

#### A Retreat with Katherine Frick, Obl. S.B.

The Oblates of the Benedictine Sisters of Virginia Richmond Deanery gathered at the Lake House at Saint Michael Catholic Church for a day of reflection with Oblate Director Katherine Frick. The title of the retreat was Your Benedictine Voice. Kathy's guidelines began with a path for finding our Benedictine Voice through developing confidence, ability, willingness to express ourselves authentically, and speaking up for what we believe in. Kathy stressed self-awareness, overcoming barriers, developing communication skills, and being true to ourselves, essentially learning to trust our inner selves.

We reflected on admonitions and serving roles outlined in the Rule of Benedict. Kathy stressed the importance of building a community of trust, pointing out Benedict's instruction for monks to disarm themselves before they sleep at night. We reflected on the hospitality of the monastery porter who Benedict describes as sensible, always available, and knows how to take a message. We discovered how the qualities of the monastery cellarer may guide our actions in our micro communities.

Kathy left us with homework. Here are a few of her challenges: What will it take for me to put aside my knife of fear I may hold in my heart so I can truly trust in and live the Gospel and Benedictine way of life?



If we are all created in the image and likeness of God, and if, as porters of our personal monastery we are to greet all as Christ arriving at our door, what does that actually mean as we go through our daily lives in our country today?

Benedict says the cellarer is going to be held accountable to God for his action in the performance of his duties. The only other position with such a warning is the Abbot in Chapter 2 ("the Qualities of the Abbot"). What does this mean for us as the Abbot and cellarer of our own interior monastery?



## Upcoming Events

### Upcoming Events

- **Regional Oblate Meeting, October 4th  
St. Anslem's Abbey in Washington, D.C.**
- **Education Day, October 11th  
St. Benedict Monastery**