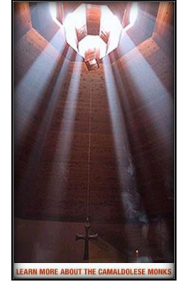




Speak Lord. *Your servant is listening.*

Newsletter of the Benedictine Camaldolese Oblates of
Australia, New Zealand and Mumbai
September 2016



Chaplain's Message Fr Michael Mifsud Oblate OSB Cam

Dear Fellow Oblates and Friends of the Australian and New Zealand Oblate Family, I have just returned a week ago from my six week visit to Queensland-Yes very sunny and warm compared to cold, wet, misty and snowy Warburton in Victoria. Here at my Hermitage early spring's intimations have appeared; golden wattles, honey eaters and jonquils and daffodils - And some sun and blue skies. The time away [a sort of rains retreat] was a very wholesome and healing experience indeed. I have come back feeling a new person; not quite sure who! It is no doubt thanks to the many people, situations, natural beauties of Creation I encountered and generally different ambience I experienced. This included lots of time alone, especially in my first week in July and early August, walking along beaches and in coastal forests, such as at Noosa and Mooloolabah after early morning meditation and lectio divina and lots of meditating with others such as Sue, Glen and Maureen at Kenilworth "Abbey". I also had a week's quiet retreat at O'Reilly's in the McPherson Ranges, where after morning mediation and prayer I would walk in the magnificent sub-tropical rainforest listening on ipod to 'Spirit in the Desert', by Rowan Williams [for the fifth time, and always learning more]. Thanks to all the wonderful, warm hospitality I experienced from oblates and friends and the healing effects of nature and longer periods of silence and meditation, my health and general well-being have greatly improved. It has taught me again paraphrasing what St Francis of Assisi said, 'Do few things and do them well; take your time; go slowly'. I also had my first Zen lessons in Brush Painting from Zen Teacher,



Glen Wolter. In fact I lived two-and-a-half weeks with two Zen teachers, the other being Sue .Of course as usual I attended the Wednesday evening Zen sessions with their local group plus a deeply meditative Zen Day in Brisbane, where Anglican priests Cecily and Merv Landers [Specialist Doctors] also double up as

Roshis. Wherever I went I had time in prayer and meditation with oblates and meditation retreat days which either I facilitated or attended. We were very happy to receive Carol McGoldrick as an oblate at our Oblate Day in Brisbane at Jo Jackman's home where some seven of us gathered with Sr Carmel, amongst those already mentioned earlier I also spent a prayerful time of sharing with Margret Stinson at Buderim who is quiet unwell and would love our prayers, as would Sharon

who also could not attend. All in all, I am immensely impressed by the depth of faith, maturity and spiritual commitment of our Oblate Family, particularly as I have recently experienced it in Queensland. I would like to take this opportunity to say the same of our community in general, but particularly about our Oblate Council and co-ordinator and associates. They have been exemplary in their dedicated work regarding the upcoming two national retreats to be led by Prior Cyprian Consiglio. They serve and work hard for us all and I am sure their efforts will bear much fruit now and in the future development of our Community. We are blessed to have them as we are to have such wonderfully capable, open and deeply committed leaders such as Cyprian, Daniel and Alessandro in Italy. Our Camaldolese Charism is I believe providential for our times, not only for us who

belong to this worldwide community, but for all who are seeking a deeper spiritual life based on a deep, ancient, contemplative, Wisdom Tradition open to adaptation and ongoing renewal in dialogue with the Word and the World.

The Battle of Prayer The Catechism of the Catholic Church

Facing difficulties in prayer: The habitual difficulty in prayer is distraction. It can affect words and their meaning in vocal prayer; it can concern, more profoundly, him to whom we are praying, in vocal prayer (liturgical or personal), meditation, and contemplative prayer. To set about hunting down distractions would be to fall into their trap, when all that is necessary is to turn back to our heart: for a distraction reveals to us what we are attached to, and this humble awareness before the Lord should awaken our preferential love for him and lead us resolutely to offer him our heart to be purified. Therein lies the battle, the choice of which master to serve.

In positive terms, the battle against the possessive and dominating self requires vigilance, sobriety of heart. When Jesus insists on vigilance, he always relates it to himself, to his coming on the last day and every day: today. The bridegroom comes in the middle of the night; the light that must not be extinguished is that of faith: *Come, my heart says, seek his face!*

Another difficulty, especially for those who sincerely want to pray, is dryness. Dryness belongs to contemplative prayer when the heart is separated from God, with no taste for thoughts, memories, and feelings, even spiritual ones. This is the moment of sheer faith clinging faithfully to Jesus in his agony and in his tomb. *Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if dies, it bears much fruit.* If dryness is due to the lack of roots, because the word has fallen on rocky soil, the battle requires conversion.

Facing temptations in prayer: The most common yet most hidden temptation is our lack of faith. It expresses itself less by declared incredulity than by our actual preferences. When we begin to pray, a thousand labors or cares thought to be urgent vie for priority; once again, it is the moment of truth for the heart: what is its real love? Sometimes we turn to the Lord as a last resort, but do we really believe he is? Sometimes we enlist the Lord as an ally, but our heart remains presumptuous. In each case, our lack of faith reveals that we do not yet share in the disposition of a humble heart: *Apart from me, you can do nothing.*

Another temptation, to which presumption opens the gate, is acedia. The spiritual writers understand by this a form of depression due to lax ascetical practice, decreasing vigilance, carelessness of heart. *The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.* The greater the height, the harder the fall. Painful as discouragement is, it is the reverse of presumption. The humble are not surprised by their distress; it leads them to trust more, to hold fast in constancy.

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'No news is good news for the contemplative life Andrew Hede Oblate OSB Cam

I trace my news dependence to mid-1964 when *The Australian* first appeared. It was my final year at school and that revolutionary newspaper provided all the stimulating national and international news an enquiring mind could desire. Like many of my boarding-school classmates, I was instantly hooked.

After school, I had a forced break from news when I spent four years in a monastic seminary where newspapers and TV were banned. I continually felt deprived of news. Occasionally, however, I managed to indulge my news habit with snippets from the outdated local papers we used to wrap kitchen waste.

After leaving monastic life, I quickly resumed my dependence on news. Throughout my working career I made sure I thoroughly read at least one newspaper every day. I justified this in terms of my

needing to stay current for my university teaching job. I conveniently ignored the fact that I was teaching Psychology and not Current Affairs or Politics.

Around the same time, I also developed a daily 2-hour TV-news habit, comprising an hour of commercial news and current affairs followed by a matching hour on the ABC. Again, I believed, 'news currency' was absolutely necessary for my job!

My retirement a few years ago prompted me to reflect on my then clearly evident craving for news. The excessive amount of time it consumed was not my main concern. Rather, I realised that daily news fostered a constant state of mental 'busyness'.

I realised that the modern human's obsession with always having to know 'what's going on' fills our mind with trivia. This in turn clouds our ability to experience what is happening in the only moment we actually have in our life, the present one.

Ironically, my post-graduate courses at the end of my career featured mindfulness and what I termed '*total calm*', a mindfulness-based technique for stress management using existential separation of one's '*supra-self*' from the endless extraneous and possibly damaging chatter within one's own mind.

Four decades after my seminary days, I had re-discovered meditation and was practising Christian Meditation twice daily in search of inner stillness (*hesychia*). But I came to see that my news-focussed mind was preventing me from being truly still.

What would it be like, I wondered, to lead a 'no-news' life. Could I liberate myself from my reliance on information, on daily news input that was no longer relevant let alone important in my life (if it ever was)? If I were serious about embracing the contemplative life, I realised, I had to go 'cold turkey' on news.

I chose the London Olympics in 2012 as my final news indulgence. I even delayed a move interstate to commence an eremitical existence at the Benedictine Monastery on the outskirts of Sydney. After turning off the TV broadcast of the closing ceremony and carefully checking the latest medal tallies in my last-ever newspaper, I set off on my new life without news arriving on 15 August, a spiritually auspicious date.

As it happened, my dependence on TV news was solved by the removalists. They broke the aerial connection on the TV while moving my furniture into

my new hermitage. I never got around to having it fixed and I've never missed TV news since. However, my reliance on print news proved much harder to overcome.

I noticed that I had acquired an uncanny capacity for unintentionally processing news headlines under all conditions. In driving past a newsagency, for example, I found it impossible to avoid absorbing the displayed headlines. By the time I registered that the words on a poster related to news and before I could switch them off, my brain had already fully processed them and repackaged them as 'mindchatter'.

In my previous life as a research psychologist, I might have found this phenomenon a topic worthy of study. Now it became a challenge for ongoing mental control. Amazingly, after repeated failures over 12 months, I found I could walk into a newsagency to buy a greeting card without registering any news headlines on posters, newspapers or magazines. Similarly, I learnt to ignore the many news prompts I regularly encountered on the internet.

Is my 'no-news' life any better? I certainly don't miss being 'current' and my family have come to accept that it's okay for me not to be 'with it' anymore. They recently reminded me that I had to vote but four weeks after doing so, I still don't know who our Prime Minister is and I'm content with that.

My 'no-news' existence has relieved me of much superfluous mental baggage. Importantly, it has freed-up the mind space I need for my contemplative life as a hermit in pursuit of Christ through *hesychia*.

Benedict: from the valley to the high plateau

Fr Cyprian Consiglio OSB Cam

I probably shouldn't say (or write) this in public, but I feel like we Camaldolese, especially we American Camaldolese, have always had a sort of ambivalent relationship with the Benedictine Confederation to which we belong now since 1964 (as one untimely born, as St. Paul might say) though we have been under the Rule since our origins. This is also in spite of the fact that we are the oldest surviving Benedictine reform and congregation. (We are, I was told, the only congregation who dared to add extra

initials to the sacred OSB—OSB Cam., indeed!) And because of that ambivalence, I feel like we only have a kind of grudging respect for the great Saint Benedict, patriarch of Western monasticism. Since my time as prior, while recognizing the uniqueness of the Camaldolese charism and particularly of a Camaldolese hermitage such as New Camaldoli, I have tried to emphasize the universal evangelical monastic values that are embedded in Benedict's Rule for Monks, and use those underlying values to understand why our Holy Father Romuald left us securely with the Benedictine container to hold our Camaldolese energy.

There were several pivotal moments in the life of Saint Benedict. The way Saint Gregory the Great lays it out, one significant one was when Benedict left the remote Anio Valley where he had lived as a hermit for three years in the sacro speco near Subiaco and also had his first experiences as an abbot, and moved up to Monte Cassino, a plateau that can be seen from very far away. Some would suggest that this move from the valley to the high plateau had a symbolic character. As Pope Emeritus Benedict wrote, in his wonderful essay on his namesake, a hidden monastic life has its own reason for existence (its own *raison d'être*); but a monastery, a monastic community, has another one, a more public purpose both for and in the life of the Church, and for and in society, the purpose of giving "visibility to the faith as a force of life." As Abbot Jeremy Driscoll says, this is our evangelization as monks—our life itself is an evangelizing word. And that's what the Rule is, and the Benedictine heritage in general: faith as a full force of life: "I believe this and so I live like this."

Take a quick look at the late fifth/early sixth centuries: the Roman Empire had officially come to an end when Romulus, the last emperor, was deposed in 476 by the barbarian leader, Odoacer, who himself was later overthrown by Theodoric the king of the Ostrogoths. And now Benedict (who is born around 478) is watching the collapse of the entire Roman civilization as the barbarian tribes begin to dismember an empire that was "already seriously weakened from within by misgovernment and oppressive taxation, and scourged by famine and pestilence." In Gaul, the northern provinces are being sacked by barbarian invaders; the Vandals are spreading pillage and terror in Africa; Italy is prey to the Goths, the Huns and the Vandals. Monastic life in various forms is holding on, extant throughout Italy and other parts of Europe, including a

widespread hermit tradition. Fortunately the breakdown of order in society and all the pillage and destruction didn't destroy monastic life. On the contrary, what it tended to do instead was draw monks out of their isolation and drew them to band together more in communities. There were still lots of hermits, but this is when more communal (cenobitic) life grew in popularity. It's not much different 50 years after Benedict's death when Gregory the Great is writing his *Life* and setting up Saint Benedict as a model. The Roman Empire was in the last stages of collapsing by then, the Emperor had abdicated, Rome was infected with famine and pestilence, floods and earthquakes, and the Greeks and barbarians were invading.

In some way Pope Benedict did something similar to what Pope Gregory the Great did in his "Life of Benedict" in the *Dialogues*: he set Benedict up as a paradigm, someone with a solution for what he saw as troubled times in Europe. Pope Benedict's memory of course is such that he speaks with the authority of someone having had a front row seat in history. He is speaking of Europe only recently emerged from "a century that was deeply wounded by two world wars and the collapse of the great ideologies, [which were] now revealed as tragic utopias." He wrote, "Europe today is in search of its own identity. Of course, in order to create new and lasting unity, political, economic, and juridical instruments are important; but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal that draws on the Christian roots of the continent." Without this "vital sap," he says—without ethical and spiritual renewal—we are exposed to the danger of succumbing to the ancient temptation of seeking to redeem ourselves by ourselves.

The ancient temptation of seeking to redeem ourselves by ourselves... This is the problem with ideologies and even of philosophies: they can give a rational outline of what we think should be, but in some way, just like the Law itself, as St. Paul rails against it, philosophies and ideologies do not have any power. As Etienne Gilson wrote about Saint Augustine and his being influenced by the Neo-Platonist Plotinus, for instance, we shouldn't confuse adhesion with conversion; that is, adhesion to a philosophy versus conversion to spiritual renewal. "That Plotinus should advise us to rise above sense, to rule our passions, and to adhere to God, that is all well and good! But will Plotinus give us the strength to follow this excellent advice?" And

he appeals to Romans 7: We do not do what we want but what we hate—in this case, we do not always, we can't always follow what we think is the right thing to do, the way to live; we can't count on our ideologies and philosophies to save us. There has to be something more to give us the strength. And so we heard the famous phrase from John 15 as our Gospel passage today: 'Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in me, neither can you unless you abide in me.' And so St. Paul says, Who will save me? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!

And so for Benedict: the experience of God came first; without an experience of God we may have the knowledge but we do not have the strength. Philosophers and ideologues rationally figure things out and then hope to climb that ladder to union with God or some other utopia. But monastic life isn't based on an ideology or a philosophy. We start out with union with God and then try to make sense of it; but even more importantly we build a life around that experience of the Divine, to protect it, to nurture it, to deepen that experience, then to pass it on and share it. What Robert Taft says about ritual applies here: Our life is ideology and experience in action. Our philosophy is the way we live. I think of the desert fathers; their response to a query might very well be, "Come and live with me, see what I do, see how I live."

From the valley of Anio to the high plateau... "Benedict's spirituality was not an interiority [that was] removed from reality. In the midst of all the anxiety and confusion of his day, [Benedict] lived under God's gaze and in this very way never lost sight of the duties of daily life" and the duties of the human person with his or her very practical needs. Seeing God, Benedict understood the reality of the human person and humanity's mission. That's why he said that his monastery was a "school of charity." One place where I respectfully disagree with the great Thomas Merton: during that last conference he gave in Bangkok, Merton told a story about a Tibetan lama who escaped his country to save his life. Before leaving, when still faced with the decision of whether or not to go, he sent a message to an abbot friend, asking: "What do we do?" The answer that came back was: "From now on, Brother, everyone stands on his own feet." That doesn't completely work for me. If he meant that we cannot rely on social, political, or economic forces to shore us up, that's fine. But if there is anything we have to

model in the name of Jesus it's that—just as the monks gathered in communities as the Roman Empire collapsed and offered an alternative society—from now on we have to take care of each other.

And so, what are we facing now in 2016, and what is our response, our solution; what is the alternative that we are proposing? In the face of domestic and foreign terrorism—from Columbine and Sandy Hook through 9/11 and ISIS; in a day and age of "Black Lives Matter" and policemen being gunned down; in a political arena that is as ideologically polarized as anything we've ever seen and an election cycle that one Republican senator described the other day as "a dumpster fire"; with a global immigration crisis due to warring states... Political, economic, and juridical instruments are important; but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal. That's the vital sap. We sons of Benedict and Romuald have been placed on a high plateau, a city built on a hill, responding to the call of the Gospel and being an evangelizing word by how we live individually and communally, offering an example of faith as a full force of life.

Diary

Marie Gundersen Oblate OSB Cam

2015: My inner state of peace has not been affected by external events this year. Experiences and thoughts are no longer creating a nervous reaction in the energy centre of the solar plexus.

In July this year my home of 12 years in Valla Beach sold and I moved to Lismore. In May I had been diagnosed with invasive breast cancer and shortly afterwards the buyers turned up.

Neither the unexpected news of cancer nor the move to a different environment had any impact on this state of peace and tranquillity.

To be able to rest in this centre of peace in the midst of all the changes and hectic pace was very affirming of God's grace; the gift of peace that is not of this world...

29 May 2015: 'Upon waking at dawn, still with my eyes closed, I find myself looking at a picture some distance away of a man standing in the opening of a stone grotto with outstretched arms.

'It is dark inside the grotto, but the cross shaped figure is clearly visible by the bright light surrounding him. I did not take my eyes off him but could see another heavenly realm above the grotto. The sky around this scene was black like the night.

'While I am looking at this scene the Christ figure starts moving and walks out of the grotto facing me. – The image then fades and is gone...'It was clear to me that this inner vision was a divine 'gift' and not a product of my own mind. What I witnessed seemed to be the risen Christ in the tomb entering the world...

3 August 2016: No sign of cancer having spread. – Thank you for prayers, cards and well wishes, and your visit last year, Paul Durkin.

Year of Consecrated Life Anthony Sharpe Oblate OSB Cam

The year itself passed me by almost completely and it was only the other day when I was visiting the Catholic bookshop in Canberra that I came across Prayer Book For the Year of Consecrated Life: October 2014 – November 2015, by Donal Anthony Foley. I'd like to share various parts of the book which I think are particularly important for all of us.

Pope Francis announced that the year 2015 would be dedicated to consecrated life, and specifically its mission and identity...He said, religious persons are called upon to follow the Lord in a special way: they are men and women who can awaken the world.

Cardinal Joao Braz De Aviz said: We believe that the Second Vatican Council has been a breath of the Spirit not only for the whole Church but, perhaps especially, for the consecrated life.



He said the first objective of this Year would be to make a grateful remembrance of the recent past, the second will be to embrace the future with hope, the third to be living the present with passion: a passion that requires love, true friendship and profound communion. Further, it will focus on the beauty of following Christ in an evangelical sense, in the various types of religious vocations.

The emergence of lay movements and communities does not mean that the religious orders and congregations have become irrelevant...There will always be a need for religious orders and congregations to give witness to the importance of the evangelical counsels for the Church, that is the ideals of poverty, chastity and obedience, in line with two thousand years of Catholic tradition...It is also important that they give witness to the whole Church—a Church in which every Christian is called to be perfect as the heavenly Father is perfect—that such an ideal of perfection is possible and attainable in the modern world. Although ordinary Catholics are not specifically called to live these counsels in the fullest sense, nevertheless they are meant to live their spirit insofar as this is compatible with their state of life.

In St Matthew's Gospel, towards the end of Jesus's earthly ministry, he warned his disciples about the danger of riches. This was after he had spoken to the rich young man who kept the commandments but was unwilling to give up his wealth and follow Jesus unreservedly. This prompted St Peter to ask what the reward would be for those disciples who had left everything and followed him. In reply, Jesus promised them thrones in his heavenly kingdom, before saying, And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life.

So here we have a sense that in Christ's future community, the Church, some of his disciples would give up everything to follow him, and thus be richly rewarded. This is what the consecrated life is essentially about—a special following of Christ, a special dedication or consecration to him, above and beyond that required of ordinary Christians.
