



Editor's Note

Dear Oblates and Readers,

A warm welcome to our second *Valyermo Oblate Voices*! I had thought our first newsletter might be somewhat slim in content, but it was not; so many of you wrote from your hearts, sharing yourselves, and built that bridge of community. Sharing our writing, something so very personal and revealing of who we are, often requires a lot of courage, simply because it *is* so revealing. Most of us carry around a very harsh inner critic, a critic who continually chides us and tells us that what we are writing really isn't that good. Others are not nearly as judgmental of our written work as we are ourselves; they usually see the beauty in our thoughts and words that we the writers sometimes don't. We cannot truly integrate our Oblate community without contributions from all of you, as each one of you is a unique and valuable member of that community. So please consider ignoring that mean little inner critic for at least a short time and writing an autobiography, a poem, or a reflection to share. The different voices heard throughout the newsletter are what make it the very special document that it is.

Another path to continuing dialogue can be through response to what you read here. If you have a comment, question, or further thoughts on anything that another Oblate has shared, please send me that response. If some writer has caused you to look at something new, to think about something differently, to reflect on an experience, let us know. Letters back and forth to each other via the newsletter are another method for us to strengthen our ties. We can add a new section: Responses. Also, submit topics that you'd like to see discussed or addressed by other Oblates.

Many thanks to all who contributed to this newsletter, both as readers and writers, as you help create stronger personal bonds in our Oblate community. Please take the time to savor all the varied and interesting pieces here over the coming weeks; these unique expressions and honest sentiments from members of our groups are just one more instance of God manifesting His Spirit through others in our lives. Enjoy how very different they all are! Many thanks to Fathers Damien and Aelred, who support and encourage us in our endeavors. May God continue to bless all of us through our ties to St Andrew's Abbey, our love for Christ, and our reverence for the Rule of Benedict as we journey together through this world.

Mary Kauffman, Orange County Group, Editor
mjkauffman@aol.com

The Soul's Desire

My soul desires fulfillment;
it's not obtained from me but Thee.
My soul desires peace;
peace is found in Thee not me.
My soul desires love;
love is not love except through Thee.
Life is about Thee not me.

Bill Forti, Orange County



Becoming an Oblate
From Fr. Aelred Niespolo, OSB

The current process for becoming an oblate has changed in several ways. The reason behind the change is to make any potential oblate aware of what “oblation” really implies for one’s life within a Benedictine framework, specifically the framework of Saint Andrew’s Abbey. This is essentially the difference between a friend of the Abbey and an oblate of the Abbey- both are valuable to monastic life, both are necessary to St. Andrew’s, but an oblate decides, in a more direct way, to live out Benedictine principles and spirituality in the context of their daily life in the world. Both are ways to God. Both seek to find in the Abbey and in the spiritual life offered by Benedict a way to holiness. The way of the oblate is however more specific, and oriented towards incorporating certain spiritual practices into one’s daily life. The purpose, then, of any changes in the formation program is to firstly make someone who is interested in becoming an oblate aware of what that means in a very real sense, and, secondly, in the more formational part of the program (i.e. novitiate) to help the individual find concrete ways of living out Benedictine prayer and spirituality within the framework of their own lives in a more formal, and regularized, way.

Thus we now have a required introductory period of getting familiar with both the monastery and the kind of spirituality the monks of Valyermo offer within their Benedictine context. This period of familiarization ought to allow one to make a choice to enter, or not, the oblate novitiate. This desire is based on a call for a closer spiritual affinity to and for St. Andrew’s .and the way monastic life is lived there. During this phase—approximately one year in length—one visits the Abbey, perhaps attends an oblate group, and above all attends to what the Spirit is saying to his or her heart.

Following this is a two year novitiate in which the oblate novice, with the help of a sponsor (mentor), regularly attends oblate meetings, investigates the Rule, discusses with others in retreat workshops, or in private conversation, how the Rule can be applied to their particular way of life. How the Rule’s basic precepts can be incorporated into the daily life of a lay person. This incorporation is, of course, different for each person. While the initial phase of formation and inquiry can vary in length depending upon the relationship one has had with the Abbey, a two year novitiate is asked of everyone. It is the most important part of formation, and should not be treated lightly either by the oblate group or by the monastic community. This is a period of time asked of everyone. The starting time for the oblate novitiate is individually assessed and begun. There is no “official” starting time. It begins when the person who wishes to be an oblate, their spiritual consultant, and any other involved party (oblate group, friend etc.) feels they are ready—with the approval of the Oblate Director or someone assigned by the Oblate Director. This program will be more clearly developed and outlined in the near future.

As with any realistic program, especially a Benedictine program, these thoughts are presented as norms, and not hard and fast laws. These norms can be adjusted to special circumstances with the consultation of the Oblate Director. They can be modified to fit extraordinary situations. But it is important to remember that as a *norm*—a one year period of investigation is followed by a two year novitiate.



St. Andrew's Abbey
Oblates & Friends Sponsored Events

The months of October and November bring with them promised fun, excitement, and productivity at our beloved Abbey.

On October 3rd, we are all invited to assist the monks in beautifying the apple tree orchard area and making good use of the apples. Starting at 9:00 a.m. we will pick the apples, cut them into slices, and freeze them. These apples will be used on Work Day to bake desserts. Fr. Isaac has a recipe for a mouth watering Apple Crisp Pie. I will try to steal that from him! :) If anyone has a recipe for apple pies or any other type of apple dessert, please bring it along with you on Work Day or share it via email. Although it may sound like a labor intensive day, those of you who do not have the physical stamina to spend too many hours outdoors please don't be discouraged to join us. We need apple peelers and apple cutters... and a few motivational speakers to keep us going. The Conference Center has been reserved for this occasion. This will be a brown bag lunch event. Please bring your lunch and the Monastery will provide the drinks.

As you may recall, our last Abbey Work Day was a success. Not only did our labor benefit the monks and the monastery, but it was so much fun that those who attended and others who heard about it have been asking for a second work day. The good news is that it has finally arrived. Work Day #2 is set for Saturday, November 7th from 9:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. We are in the process of generating a list of jobs. For now, the kinds of jobs that have been mentioned are cooking activities, pulling weeds and landscaping, cleaning windows, and possibly repairing a fence. Once a comprehensive list is compiled it will be emailed to you. The goal is to generate a variety of jobs to accommodate the different skills our oblate and friend family possesses. In an effort to reduce cost for our dear monks, this will also be a "bring your own lunch event", possibly an organized pot-luck... more details on this are forthcoming. Unfortunately, there will be no overnight accommodations provided. Those of you wishing to spend the night can check with Cheryl at the Retreat House for room availability and current room fee schedule. Please remember that Oblate Sunday with Fr. Joseph is the following day.

I ask that you RSVP ASAP to let us know if you will be joining us on one or both of these Abbey events. Always remember that if you cannot be at the Abbey physically your spiritual presence through your prayers is equally as important, if not more.

Leticia Jaurequi Obl, O.S.B.

Contact information: Leticia Jaurequi ljaurequi@yahoo.com (661) 400-4960

Vivian Costi development@valyermo.com (661) 944-8959

Oblate Group News

New Oblate group forming.....

The Foothill Oblate Group has received a few inquiries recently and several people are interested in seeing the group become active again. If you live in any of the Foothill, West Pasadena or East Valley communities and are interested in having this group, please contact Joe Coffman at (626) 484-1470 or e-mail him at joeashby1@verizon.net.

From Karen Hudock, Antelope Valley

From one of our members, we share this: Much love and many thanks to all, monks, oblate brothers, sisters, and friends who've supported us in prayer since my husband's June 30 layoff from his job of 28 years. God has provided another position for him in the same company but in Lowell, MA. On 9/23 he plans to sign the contract accepting the offer. We should be moving over the next month. I thank and praise God that I go as an oblate of St. Andrew's Abbey! Pray that God will lead us to a new spiritual "home".

Peace to you all in our Holy Father Benedict,

Iris and Rex Houdyshel



We remember Patricia Feller, one of our deceased AV Oblate Members.

Finally, we remain so very thankful though all of us were affected by the recent arson fire in the Angeles National Forest (Station Fire). From unhealthful air to evacuations, nobody suffered loss of life, health, or home. Sadly though, some of us know someone who knew the two firefighters who died.

*From Beverly Ingram, **Apple Valley***

The Apple Valley Oblate group has changed our meeting date to the first Thursday of each month at 7:00PM. It is no longer 6:30. This is so that Roberta and Jean Marie can still meet with us and teach RCIA at our parish on Tuesdays.

There are two days this year that we will be meeting on our old second Tuesday dates. The first one is Nov. 5 because I have a marching band performance and my students need their band director. Unless there is an objection, we will meet on Tuesday Nov. 10 instead. Liz can come on Nov. 10, but will have difficulty making all of the Thursday meetings. The second conflict is Holy Thursday. We will meet on Tuesday April 13 instead. I am pleased with how well we sing the Tuesday Vespers music. Now we need to learn the Thursday music. Our next meeting is Thursday, Oct. 1. This day honors St. Therese of the Child Jesus. I am working on getting the music.

Here is a list of meeting dates to put on your calendar. All meetings are now at 7:00 PM. We are still meeting at the home of Anne and Steve Bremser: Thurs., Oct. 1, Tuesday, Nov. 10, Thurs., Dec. 3 2009.

For 2010: Thursdays - Jan. 7, Feb. 4, March 4, Tuesday, April 13, Thursdays - May 6, June 3, July 1, Aug 5, etc...

*From Ken Filipski, **Bakersfield***

We remember our deceased oblates Belia Felix and Linda Horne, both of whom died early in 2009.

*From Janice Daurio, **Camarillo***

We continue to gather on Fridays, about every 6 weeks or so, from 6:45 until 8:45 for any who are able to come. Last meeting we discussed the chapter on chastity in a book by Michael Casey: Strangers to the City. One of us, Patti Wall, reported enthusiastically on her visit to Benedictine nuns in Oregon this summer. Paul and I reported on Fr. Winance's funeral, which we attended. Fr. Winance had been my philosophy professor at Claremont from 1968 to 1972, and it was through Fr. Winance that I met Paul.

Although we in Camarillo live over 90 miles from the monastery, we do occasionally see Fr. Luke, Fr. Aelred, and Br. Patrick, who are at St. John's Seminary several days a week.

*From Eileen Prendergast, **Claremont***

The following is from Eileen:

I want to thank the many who continue to pray for my recovery during these many months. I have good news to report. Recent X-rays show cloudiness on the femur fracture. It is not enough for the doctor to call it healing but there are changes in progress. I call it cloudiness with a chance of healing. The next evaluation is at the end of October. Meanwhile, I can stand tall and walk with the walker. Generally I can get about for routine activities. The hip is healing slowly, so all is well. Thank you, Lord.



From Mary Kauffman, Orange County

We welcome Elizabeth Cadena as a new OC group member as we remember her father, Isabel Cadena, who passed away Aug. 13th. We are so glad to have you with us as an observer, Elizabeth!

A sharing from Oblate Jeanette Shelly:

After much prayer last month, I have been blessed with very rewarding work. I am working in clinics in the LA area, and Skid Row, caring for the poor and homeless. This has been a wonderful experience, and I don't even notice the commute! Amazing how God works in our lives.

Greg Peters has recently transferred his oblation from St. Vincent's in Pennsylvania to St. Andrew's. He is now an "official" oblate and joins us at our OC meetings. Greg is a priest of the Anglican Province of Rwanda and an assistant professor of medieval and spiritual theology. In addition to university teaching, he is Chaplain to Trinity House, a missional community of the Anglican Mission in the Americas. Information on the activities of Trinity House can be found at www.trinityhouselamirada.org.

Mary Schulte asks for prayers for a speedy recovery from a foot surgery that is taking a very, very long time to heal. She has just had the third of three casts removed and wears a walking boot while using a cane. On top of that, she is working full time with a huge case load of very needy people. She sees fractured families, the helpless aged, and mentally ill, in addition to the trust and probate litigation, where there can be a lot of angry and dysfunctional people as well (including the lawyers sometimes!). Mary says: *God is teaching me patience, and gratitude for simple things we take for granted, like a loving spouse, supportive friends, even a small bit of increased mobility, and, as I was laying in bed with the pain in my foot, I thought, well, this is what healing is all about, pain and small steps. And I reminded myself of the nails driven through our Lord's feet, and asked forgiveness for all my grumbling and mumbling. I've learned a whole lot of empathy for people who have accessibility issues on a permanent basis. Things like just opening a door to get into a store can be huge, or finding an open parking spot.*

From David Lyman, Pasadena

This year is our second go-round in reflecting on the Rule. Libbie Patterson has divided it into themes and, in approaching those, we ask: how am I personally being called and challenged by these readings at this time.

In September the theme was the Rule and we reflected on the Prologue and chapters 72 and 73. In October the theme is Obedience and we reflect of chapters 1,5,33,55,68, and 71.

We are ever mindful that the greatest gift that God gives us in the gift of a grateful heart.

From Vicky McCargar, San Fernando Valley

The SFV cell resumed after summer hiatus and picked up our study where we left off, with Chapter LVII of the Rule. Everyone found it interesting because, after all, we're all "artisans" of some kind, and it requires a careful balance between ego and talent when we're trying to serve God to the best of our ability. With travels, illness, business pressures and so on, our numbers were somewhat reduced, but we kept in touch via email over the summer and enjoyed catching up before the meeting. We're cheering on Bernadette Bonfiglio, an actress in our group, who won a part in a play and was in rehearsals. We were all glad to be back together.



Introducing...



Beverly Ingram, Apple Valley

While the doctors were struggling to turn me around so I could be born, all of the lights were out at Huntington Hospital in Pasadena. Then God gave me light and life. Symbolically speaking this theme and variations have repeated numerous times over the past fifty years. As God has been alluring me to come into a closer and closer union with him, I have struggled through many conversion experiences in darkness. Each time there was confusion followed by a greater understanding of who God is and who He created me to be.

The first encounter with God that I can remember was when I was three or four. The lady who lived in the house in front of us was Catholic. She had pretty statues of Jesus and Mary. My Dad would carry me around in her house and they would tell me about them. She gave me a few holy cards that I still have.

When I was four we moved to Arcadia and I lived in this house until I got married at age twenty. I failed Kindergarten. I did not think the way everyone else did, and did not know if I was right or left handed. I still don't, but they let me out. Because I was dyslexic and suffered from numerous food and environmental allergies, elementary school was hard for me. When I was in the 4th grade, I started the clarinet, but got a "C" in beginning band because I could not read music or English. My first band teacher was very surprised and proud that I am a middle school music teacher. Thanks be to God!

One of my grandmothers was a Christian Scientist and the other one was Baptist. I went to their churches a few times. My parents took me to the Presbyterian Sunday School for only a short time. I was sad that my neighbor friends had been baptized and got to go to church, but I didn't. I would go in my room or my "little house" under a tree in the back yard and pray and look at the pictures in my Children's Bibles. Jesus was there and became my friend. My parents would read me the bible stories when I asked them to. Although they did not go to church, they did teach me about God. Jesus forgave my sins and gave me new life.

When I was fourteen there was a bible study group that met across the street from my house. My friends and I made fun of their clapping and singing and praising God, but secretly I wanted to join them. One of my Dad's friends, who was Catholic, invited me to go there with his son. I went. I fell in love with God. I suddenly realized the difference between knowing about God and knowing God. I was "baptized in the holy spirit" three years before being baptized in water.



When I was sixteen, I was finally able to drive myself to church. A friend invited me to a youth concert at Arcadia Community Church. This church is where I was baptized, met my husband (who we discovered later was my paper boy when we were twelve), married my husband, and became a music minister and Sunday school teacher. My baptism was a lot like my birth. The lights did not go out, but my pastor held me under the water for so long that there was no doubt that I had died with Christ. My first breath was filled with great joy and new life.

In 1982 we moved to Hesperia because I had a job teaching band at Victor Valley Jr. High. We started going to Calvary Chapel. It was just not the same as our old church. I was very troubled by the number of churches in the phone book! They all thought they were right, but who really was? The next year, a truck ran a stop sign and hit my truck. My truck rolled over three times. I woke up in the back of an ambulance not remembering much of anything. A week later while I was recovering in bed, all of a sudden I re-experienced the sensations and events of the entire accident and screamed. I remembered my prayer right before I went unconscious. I confessed to God the sins that I had committed earlier that day and begged for forgiveness. I then told God that if he let me live that I would serve him for the rest of my life and search for the church where he would have me serve him.

I am very thankful that God let me live. I started studying church history to see who was right. I was still greatly troubled by the brokenness of the Body of Christ that was proudly displayed in the phone book. My study took me to the Catholic Church. I was impressed that they survived for 2000 years. I was not impressed by some things the church has done. Luther was right about a lot of stuff, but still the church survived. The Counterreformation and Vatican II seemed to fix a lot of my concerns. I remembered debating all of the very few doctrines that separated Protestants and Catholics with one of my best friends when I was in high school. We considered becoming nuns. She told me all the things you have to do to become Catholic. I said that if it is that complicated, then God must not want me to be Catholic. God's timing is everything. Ten years later after two years of RCIA class I finally became Catholic at the Easter Vigil of 1985. I was given another fresh start after a very intense conversion process. The phone book still troubles me. I long for all of us to be one. God did somehow need to use seven different denominations to bring me into a very intimate love relationship with Him. It amazes me how God uses seemingly bad things for good.

I have two grown children. Both were raised and confirmed in the Catholic Church. Both of them have loved God very much all of their lives. When I was only a little older than they are now, I became Catholic. Now both my kids still have a deep loving relationship with Christ and attend a non-denominational Church. To see them occasionally come to my church and cross their arms over their chest for a blessing in the communion line gives me unbearable pain. I must constantly remind myself that God is in control and that he really does know what he is doing.

I came to St. Andrew's as I was trying to make sense of my empty broken life and marriage. Years ago I read about the dark night of the soul and it made no sense. Finally I reached the point in my life that absolutely nothing mattered to me including God. There was complete darkness. I sensed that even God had gone. Finally God showed me a little flickering of light. At that point there was nothing left but God. Looking back now I realize that I was truly blessed I was to have that moment where I was so empty that it was, "no longer I, but Christ who lived within me." God has been healing my broken relationships, and teaching me to love all people and created things with His love. My friend, Anne Bremser, helped me a lot with finding God in all of this and invited me to the Abbey. The Rule of Benedict made sense out of my life and gave me hope.

I became an Oblate in 2007 because God called me and gave me the grace to say yes. It is easy to give yourself to God when there is not much left to even try to cling to. It is remarkable what God can do with our nothingness. Life is not about me, but about our union with God. God has used the Monks to help me mesh the ideas of the gospel with life in the outside world. The Word has become flesh and dwells within us. "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Oh, the struggles of being turned around to be born in into eternal life...



Reviews

Book Review: *Happy Are You Poor: The Simple Life and Spiritual Freedom*

Scholastica the Librarian, aka Vicky McCargar, San Fernando Valley

This book, by Father Thomas Dubay (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), is a thought-provoking exploration of the definition of gospel poverty (also known as apostolic or evangelical poverty) and how we are called to live it out in our lives. The Benedictine Oblate promise "as our state in life permits" is a familiar theme in this book. With all the economic uncertainty, downsizing, belt tightening and downright fear confronting us these days, the book is a good guide to how we might respond.

Book Review: *Catholic Matters*, by Richard John Neuhaus

Ken Filipski, Bakersfield

In April 2005 Pope John Paul II died and was succeeded by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who took the name Benedict XVI. In the several weeks involving the funeral and election of a new Pope, national and world news focused on the city of Rome. I remember being glued those days to the continuous coverage being broadcasted over the EWTN television network, one of whose anchors was Fr. Richard John Neuhaus. He kept a diary of the events which he witnessed and would post his entries daily on the internet. I would read these every night and ultimately bound them for myself because they provided such on-the-spot insight on the state and direction of the Church in the World.

Since then Fr. Neuhaus has expanded that diary into a fuller reflection on the condition of Christianity in the United States and in particular that of the Catholic Church. He begins with the entry he made on the day he arrived in Rome and knelt by the coffin of John Paul and ends with the days leading up to the election of Benedict. The heart of the book is a retrospective on the forty years that have elapsed since the Second Vatican Council and the debate that has followed as to the meaning of the Council. In this time Catholics have experienced what has seemed to be a revolution in their liturgy, a collapse of religious vocations, particularly among women religious, the surrender of their institutions of higher learning to a secularist agenda and sex scandals leading to paralyzing legal costs. Unsurprisingly, this has been attended by an enormous decline in Church attendance. All these and more are noted throughout the book, yet it is not an invitation to despair nor yet an unrealistic attempt to paint a panglossian picture of the state of the Church's life. It is rather an invitation to reflect on just what it means to be an American at the start of the 21st Century, a Christian in that context and a Catholic in particular.

The structure of the book is in the form of a journey. He details what the word 'Church' meant to him in his earliest years as the son of a Lutheran pastor in Canada, how it's meaning expanded and became more nuanced through his own seminary and pastoral years, and how it reached it's definitive form when he entered into full communion with the Catholic church in 1990. In his own words "when he became the Catholic he already was". This allows him to give extensive meditations on approaches to Christian doctrine, the question of authority, the history of the Christian experience, how faith lives in relation to the world and, finally, how the Christian story is to be proposed - in his view as the true story of the world. It also allows the reader to travel alongside and within what constitutes an eloquent and winsome historical memoir. Few Catholics can fail to identify in their own lives with the instances and issues Fr. Neuhaus raises. For a Catholic or anyone with an interest in things Christian this book is an invaluable map on the current state of the Church, a study on with what vibrancy and hope it faces the future, and a guide on how a Christian is to think and act in any age.



Book Review: *The Prodigal Son's Mother*, by Mary Rose Betten, Obl., OSB (Finishing Line Press)

Janice Daurio, Camarillo

The difference between my attitude toward prayer as a young person and my attitude toward prayer now (suffice it to say that no matter how generous the definition I am no longer a young person) is that when I was young I was sure I knew what prayer was and how to do it. Now whereas I still think I know what prayer is (minus the certainty; certainty has gone out of all categories!) I have no clear answer to the question of how to pray. Or perhaps it is better to say that I have no single specific answer, only a general one.

Prayer is whatever improves and is constitutive of a relationship with God. The best way to pray is whatever works. That is more easily said than done. (What isn't?) How do you measure success in prayer? You don't: you just pray and trust God. But one good hint is the pleasure you get from forgiving.

I have heard many homilies on the need to forgive, but have never heard a homily on how it is done. The philosopher Charles L. Griswold says that forgiveness includes giving up revenge and resentment. It is not done with a haughty sense of superiority but in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Also, "the forgiving person comes to see herself in a new light." (*Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration*.) But the message about what forgiveness is and how to do it is more effectively and happily received in an artwork than a philosophical treatise.

Enter Mary Rose Betten's two-part meditation drama, *The Prodigal Son's Mother* from Finishing Line Press (www.finishinglinepress.com). It is, in a poetic way, a little "how to" book on how to forgive. It can be categorized somewhat as private, devotional prayer and yet, because it is meant to be performed before an audience or congregation, also a public, liturgical prayer. It uses public performed prayer to put you in a desirable psychological space of interior dialogue with God. In the Catholic tradition, the arts have always been that privileged place where the Divine reaches down to the human. The arts bring us right up to the very doors of the sacred.

One traditional form of Catholic prayer is to put yourself in a biblical story—it is a powerful way to pray for many. Mary Rose's book puts you right there in the story of the Prodigal Son. It starts abruptly: *in medias res*. You are drawn into the Prodigal Son's life in the same way that you are drawn into the lives of people whose conversations you overhear, or as in a novel or a gripping movie: you are just there, present.

What strikes me the most is the way in which the Prodigal Son's ruining his life ruined many lives. No man is an island; his wickedness brings others down with him. The Prodigal Son's prodigality ruins the lives of those who love him—his own family and his old nurse. How this happens is deftly exhibited in the meditation dialogue parts. His indifference to his mother's loving devotion to him and his father's generosity to him is expertly drawn out. Indifference to the generosity of others – in other words, ingratitude – is a shocking kind of sinfulness, since it is so close to the description of what all sin is essentially, namely, our indifference to God's generosity to us.

It is delightful that prodigality refers correctly both to the actions of the Son and the actions of the Father. The Son is reckless in the amount of time and resources he lavishes on himself; the Father is reckless in the amount of time and resources he lavishes on his Son. Forgiveness in small-minded persons is measured and proportioned to what reason requires, but the Father's forgiveness is not measured or reasonable: "...huge forgiveness...forgiveness bigger than reason...forgiveness bigger than humanity." The Father's forgiveness is prodigal because he is focused not on forgiveness but on his Son, whom he loves recklessly and without measure.

The figure most often overlooked in the biblical account of the Prodigal Son is the elder brother; Mary Rose's story brings out the all-too-common revenge that those who have really been treated unjustly plot. It must be borne in mind that the elder son's jealousy of his younger brother's being favored is reasonable and just. It is never easy to forgive, but to forgive someone who had the time to reconsider is harder to forgive than someone whose injustice to you was done in a single passionate act. If formal justice is getting what you



deserve, then the older brother of the Prodigal Son has been denied formal justice. How to forgive in that case? You can meditate on that question on your own or use this drama to inspire an answer.

Mary Rose's account brings out the stark contrast between the elder son's response to the Prodigal Son's return and the Father's response. Her account gently invites the reader/hearer to notice how much responsibility we have to take for how others treat us. In short, her work is an invitation to the reader or hearer to work out for himself what forgiveness is. And your use of her book can be a prayer.

Mary Rose's book was chosen as July 2009's Finishing Line's Book of the Month.

Reflections

Scripture Reflections

Karen Hudock, Antelope Valley

"Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not to your own understanding, in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight." Proverbs 3:5-6

How central to a life lived with integrity, is this one passage of Holy Scripture? Recently, an AV Oblate shared this verse with me while in the midst of great upheaval and hope in her life. I too find myself frequently being buffeted in the storms of daily life. I trust that this is a common theme with mankind. With this verse from Proverbs, superimposed by last Sunday's Mass Readings (Is 35:4-7, James 2:1-5, and Mk 7:31-37), our wonderful God caused a deep gratitude within me. In the Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, He reminded me of some vital points of His instruction that have been so helpful over the years. To put those points in one sentence: Learning in the present heals one's past, while putting human relationships in Holy Perspective.

The basic themes from Sunday, September 6th, Readings:

Isaiah's point is: to have courage when feeling faint-hearted in your ***faithfulness to God***; stand firm, wait for His justice and do not be fearful when all or many seem to stand against you.

James' instruction in essence was: Do not treat others according to their outward appearances, showing favor towards those who are wealthy and disdain for those who are of lesser means; and I add, nor should it be the other way around. While wealth and poverty are neither good nor evil, those who show partiality on account of either, demonstrate their inability to be objective or to treat ***all*** with the respect that human dignity demands. In St. Mark's Gospel, the deaf mute is healed, in private, by Jesus "putting His fingers into the man's ears," "touching his tongue with spittle," followed by the words "be opened." Upon their return, Jesus ordered the people not to tell anyone about it, and of course, they proceeded to tell EVERYBODY about it. The more He tried to stop them, the more widespread the knowledge became. It is said that "Their amazement knew no bounds because 'He did all things well...'"---Jesus, the Man, was perfect even in the midst of many imperfect human relationships.

Learning in the present heals the past, while putting human relationships in Holy Perspective:

Many Church teachings, Saints, and contemporary authors have written about relationships. It seems to me that the Holy Bible writes only about relationships. One thing is clear: sin (offense/selfishness) may destroy (impenitence), limit (imperfect reconciliation), or bring relationships to holier heights (through God's Grace). All relationships have been ordained by God, and when conducted according to His ways, they will grow in perfection from the start, or over time through forgiveness (an ability which is a gift from God). It is through our willingness to be faithful in God's ways that we mature, and are enabled to work at building relationships that extend from here to eternity—especially with those of our household. It is also through these means that



disruptions (offenses/selfishness) from past relationships are recognized in God's balanced context, and are able to be restored through honest discussion and reconciliation, or when it may mean that a "proper limit" must be respected, or by being placed in God's mercifully just hands when the first two means are not possible. For as we read from St. Paul, in the end, the only thing that endures is love.

Scripture Reflection

Bill Forti, Orange County

I am the way, truth and life

How can I know the way, if I cannot see You?
How can I see You, while I am running away and hiding?
How can I see You when my eyes are blind with sin?
Why look to the world and not You.

How can I know the truth without You?
Can truth be found in the world?
Can the world be understood by studying a speck of its dust?
How can existence be understood by studying the world, a speck of its dust?

How can life be without you?
Can something come from nothing?
How can non-life create life?
Can art exist without the artist?

Venetian Memories

Mary Caputi, Orange County

My recent sojourn in northern Italy was meaningful to me on a number of levels. Work-wise, it was a professor's dream to be able to teach a course of my choosing at The University of Venice for one semester. How could a visiting appointment at a university housed in a centuries-old Venetian palazzo located on the Grand Canal not be an academic's delight? Taking a slow-moving boat to work and gazing out on the water as I taught are memories that I cherish, and form part of a teaching experience so different from my daily grind at home. The cordial nature of my colleagues and self-selecting nature of the students, who were well-trained in my field, added to the overall pleasantness of the experience. Yet it is above all the setting of Venice -- the backdrop of this beautiful, unique, mysterious city unlike any other I have known -- that remains with me most



now that I have returned to Southern California. Indeed, the singular splendors of Venice made my sojourn meaningful to me not only as an academic, but as an oblate of Saint Andrew's Abbey.

Because Venice is located at the crossroads of the eastern and western worlds, its architecture, city streets, artifacts, and leading industries bear the traces of the trade routes that helped make the city thrive. We see the imprimatur of the east in the onion-shaped domes on top of St. Mark's Cathedral, in the ornate, sculpted decoration that encircles the Doge's Palace, and in the colorful cloth and goes into the shawls, the scarves, and the pre-Lenten Carnival costumes that are sold year round. This hybrid quality of Venetian culture combines with its reputation as a city of leisure, artifice, and florid extravaganza: it is known as the location of mirages, of trickery, of cunning all in the name of sensual pleasure and earthly delight. People say that formerly in Venice, the season of Carnevale – an extended bacchanalian Mardi Gras that turned the town into one big party -- went on for nine months until Napoleon forced Venetians to sober up. It is also said that, during those pre-Lenten festivities, you could do anything to anyone so long as you were wearing a mask. And today, they say that Venetians expect you to lie; since all is chimera, they can't tell the difference between truth and fiction. Despite these colorful tales, however, I do not remember Venice as a den of iniquity, a culture devoted to decadence and *carpe deum*. What stays with me is the memory of a city devoted to beauty and the recognition of fleeting earthly pleasures in ways that can be conducive to a spiritual life.

For me, the spiritual qualities of Venice emanate not only from its stunning Baroque churches whose quiet bells can be heard nearly every quarter of an hour. Nor is it simply the majestic presence of San Giorgio, a Benedictine monastery that sits across from the Grand Canal, ever reminding me of my commitment to the Rule and my attachment to St. Andrew's Abbey. More than anything, it is the quiet of Venice brought on by the absence of automobiles that imbues it with a serene, mysterious quality so conducive to an inward journey. For although a fair amount of noise mars one's enjoyment of the town given the boats, the singing gondoliers, and the throngs of demanding tourists that crowd St. Mark's square, it is quite easy to find a smaller side street, a *calle*, that is utterly silent even at midday. These streets are often busy with people, and there may or may not be a tiny waterway generating boating activity of its own. Nevertheless, these streets are often silent in ways that remind me of the monks at Valyermo: engaged, busy, but peaceful. There is rarely any talking, and only occasional singing. Indeed, the quiet of Venice, combined with its beautiful architecture and narrow winding streets, often creates a peaceful atmosphere conducive to a rich internal life, since the absence of noise permits a more reflective state of mind. I found this to be especially true at night, when the lights reflect on the water and the city's mysterious ambiance reminded me of a John Singer Sargent painting. A quiet setting, mired in beauty and full of history, is indeed an ideal landscape in which to pursue the tenets of St. Benedict's rule while seated at a café or strolling the sidewalks. No automobiles, no noise, just the undulating waves of the canals that reflect the lights from the streets and the bridges.

Whereas for many the city of Venice is synonymous with decadence, opulence, and the overindulgence of sensuous pleasure, then, for me it proved the opposite. Quiet for me is so essential to the Benedictine mandate of listening, and Venice often reminded me to listen. Even the intermittent tinkling of remote church bells served this purpose, and I am grateful that my sojourn helped direct me toward the meaning of its former title, *la Serenissima Reppublica di Venezia*, "the most Serene Republic of Venice." Thanks to the Rule, to the monks at Valyermo, and to my fellow oblates, such serenity is still available to me today, in Seal Beach where I live. The Venetian empire claimed to enjoy such calm for over a millennium; with the help of St. Andrew's, I can experience it now, in the brief span of my life.



Rule Reflection

Lynn Dempsey, Camarillo

All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, who said: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt. 25:35). . . After the guests have been received they should be invited to pray. [Chapter 53]

Long ago we had a Christmas visitor. He was disturbed and disturbing and he came bearing gifts.

Author and Benedictine oblate Kathleen Norris calls the Incarnation "God's hospitality to us, a means of welcoming us not only as friends but as family. Christ will recognize us in the new creation," she writes "as he has already encountered us in this one." Benedictine hospitality with the Rule's mandate to welcome *all* as Christ is imbued with the sense of "all in all." What might otherwise devolve into an open door policy is rescued by the anchor of prayer which is to bind host and guest to common and sacred ground.

Prayer was not on my holiday list in 1983 when a disheveled skinny guy interrupted my last minute shopping in a Christian card shop on Christmas Eve. He rambled on about reconciling with his parents and when he said "suicide," I tore out a deposit slip from my checkbook and told him to come to dinner the next day. This was done with no thought, literally, foolishly, and with hindsight, grace. Driving home I forgot him.

He drove up our driveway the next morning while I was peeling potatoes. He asked to take a nap. I went to tell the family who were watching *It's a Wonderful Life*. Before I could explain, our daughter slipped past me but returned quickly, "Who is that man on our couch?" I said, "My friend Ron."

When Ron woke up, I introduced him to the family and gave him a copy of a favorite book, *The Little Prince* by Antoine de Saint Exupéry. Later he left "to run an errand," which my husband figured was a drug fix. By then I felt embarrassed by my impulsive invitation and scared of the guest: who was he? Dangerous? A serial ax murderer? When I suggested that we might ask him to leave, my husband insisted that we complete what I had begun. Later we gave the carving tools to Ron who carved the turkey like a surgeon.

At dinner Ron asked if we had a bible and I found one in a bedroom closet. He thumbed through it looking for a passage, and finding it, read to us about "true wisdom" as trust in God (Jer. 17: 5-11). Earlier he had told me that my husband was wiser than me and I should listen more to him. He left after dinner.

Who was he? I know and do not know. I even looked up the meaning of his name: "Ronald" means teacher, king or ruler with counsel. But who came to dinner that Christmas remains a mystery, one which leads me to listen to Jesus' question to his disciples: "Who do you say that I am?" Over the years I have learned to appreciate that we do not find God, who is already with us. Occasionally he gains our attention, with grace, always with surprise and, in Ron's case, enough grit to disturb us to grow beyond our shells. If we are to know and grow into the persons we were created to be, perhaps, like pearls, we need some sand thrown into our comfortable and secure lives.

Fear of the Lord is the first stage of wisdom. But our fears of others almost always are ego-driven. It's our choice whether to stay in our comfort zone and withdraw from an uncertain and scary world or open up to what Christ presents to us. We gave Ron a book and turkey. He brought to our table the gifts of scripture and prayer. Who was the host and who was the guest?

"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door I will come in to him and eat with him and he with me." As we enter upon the days of Advent, let us pray for the grace to welcome the strangers that Christ presents to us and to be invited ourselves to sit down at "a table prepared in the presence of our enemies" (Psalm 23).



Meditation

Frances Johansen, Orange County

I seek God, and yet am immersed in God. Perhaps rather than saying I seek God I should say that I seek to be open to God, sufficiently open to be aware of God's presence at all time. Who is God? What is God? Is something God's will? I do not know, yet I seek.

For me God is a presence, a conscious presence, omnipresent. God exists in all things, created all things, humans, soil, the earth, the creatures and plants, all things. God is present in all things, yet each is individual, unique, special, loved, cherished, but not controlled. Also, all things are connected in God. It is true that the butterfly in the Amazon can affect the weather on the other side of the world because of the connection in God. Watch a spider's web and you will see how this can be true.

God does not "let bad things happen" or even let good things happen. We have free will and are free to behave as we will, however, if we are sufficiently open to God, we have been given the ability to create, to manipulate, to affect our world.

People speak of the power of prayer and there are many scientific studies to prove that prayer, meditation, etc. are powerful tools which God has given us. It is my belief that such tools create energy, whether energy for good or for bad, it is created and that energy travels within the network that is God and helps to create results. Within that web which is God I believe that there is in reality no time and a multitude of universes.

Every choice we make, every thought we think, every emotion affects the entirety. Some people are able to be in tune with this vast web and they manage miracles. They are fully connected and are aware of the connection and are able to do amazing things. Others experience the connection only sporadically or rarely and still others are so extremely self-contained, self-conscious (as opposed to being other conscious or God conscious) that they never experience God.

Is God a being who is conscious of us? I believe so. I believe that God's approval comes, as Jesus told us, from loving God and from loving our neighbor as ourselves. But what we have not comprehended is that our neighbors are not only people but the earth itself and all that dwells on it and above it and in it. When we do not love our neighbor, when we do not love all that is God's creation, then we cause harm to the connections, we send out bad energy, we sin.

There are an extraordinarily few humans on this earth who have managed to live out this commandment – we sin again and again and again. We become angry, frustrated, we do not create; we manipulate, and thereby effect the connections in a way that is not pleasing to God.

How many people even notice the world around them on a regular basis? How many notice the glory of the early morning sun light on a tree or vine, the silence of the birds because a hawk has appeared, the silence of the middle of the night, how many step over a snail on the sidewalk rather than crushing it? How many even attempt to live simply, in tune with nature. How many attempt to see God in all things? Very, very few.

It is said that the wages of sin is death. We, all of us are sinning every day against God and thereby destroying our neighbors, whether is it through petty struggles with each other over minor issues or pouring poison in the form of insecticides onto the earth. We are reaching a critical point where we may have destroyed our world to an extent that is irretrievable, irreversible and that will result in death. We must take time, time for seeing all of our neighbors, even the ants that invade our homes, and cherishing those neighbors, find ways to live in harmony and peace with them, ways to be at peace with ourselves and with the world.

I believe that Jesus was the son of God, sent to teach us how to live without sinning and that we must continue to study his teachings and spend time in silence listening for God and, if we are lucky, we may hear God speaking to us.

