

OBLATE LETTER

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ONE of the primary qualifications St. Benedict sets forth for a vocation to the monastic life – and hence to the life of an oblate – is whether the candidate truly seeks God. At first glance this might strike one as odd: why else would a person be approaching a religious community? Why else would one seek to live the life of religion? And thereby hangs a tale.

In one sense we human beings never seek anything but God. We were designed to do so. We were made in such a fashion that there is at the center of our being a longing and a hunger that can be filled and satisfied by nothing less than, nothing other than, God. We are by nature God-seeking creatures -- as St. Augustine reminds us: "Thou hast made us for Thyself, O Lord, and our hearts will find no rest until they rest in Thee." There is no escape from this God-hunger; it is designed into us, is part of the very fabric of our being.

It is this hunger, whether we recognize it or not, that lies behind everything that we want, everything that we do. In seeking to satisfy any desire of the heart – even sinful ones – it is our hunger for God that drives us. And this is where the real difficulty lies – and this is why St. Benedict insists on examining whether we truly seek God. For while the hunger for God lies at the base and root of all our desires, that hunger – like the hunger for food – can be subverted by lesser things, by junk food, by junk "gods" or idols – false gods whom we, in our uninformed desire, gobble down in a desperate and vain attempt to allay the hunger pangs. Thus, while we all seek God, not all of us seek Him truly, but settle instead for false gods that do not and cannot truly satisfy the God-hunger at the center of our souls. For many these false gods are the usual trinity of idols – power, money, sex.

It is instructive to notice how much of our activity and striving is oriented toward one or more of these goals. And none of these is inherently evil or wrong, when used properly and as means toward a good end. (Note for example how often people quote the phrase "money is the root of all evil." But the actual words go to the real heart of the matter: "The love of money is the root of all evil." Money in itself is one thing; but money loved, coveted, worshipped, is an idol.) The nature of this sinful trinity of idols is the nature of every idol: instead of satisfying a healthy hunger, it only increases the hunger for more of itself -- like junk food. This is why idols are dangerous – they enslave us rather than free us, they demand ever more worship and service from us, until we become their slaves. We go to them to satisfy a thirst, and instead we become more desperately thirsty – like survivors on a raft in the ocean desperate for drinking water, who foolishly think to slake their thirst with salt water. What they truly need to seek is pure water – not the falsely attractive water that lies at hand, whose final effect, after a momentary gratification, is a more desperate thirst and a quicker death. That is the nature of idols.

All those lesser gods we grasp in our desperation have one goal: to enslave us to themselves – to make us so addicted to their charm that we no longer seek to satisfy our true hunger for the living God. Unlike an idol, the true and living God does not enslave, but he does make one hungry for more of himself and can satisfy that hunger – and that of course is why He made us, that we might feed on Love, grow in Love – the God of love whose service is not slavery but perfect freedom.

And so St. Benedict's admonition to the future monastic or oblate is that he or she be examined (and of course examine themselves) for the presence in their lives of the idols, these false gods. He does not require that you begin completely liberated from these false idols – the greatest of which is usually one's Self – but that you see through them and beyond them to the true goal your heart hungers for, and are conscious of them as obstacles on the way that need to be subdued and overcome by the weapons of the monastic life: obedience, poverty, and chastity. Note how each of these weapons is directed against a particular idol: obedience against the love of power, poverty against the love of money, and chastity against the idol of sex.

Each of these deserves looking at, but for most of those seeking the monastic life as a monk or oblate (indeed, for most human beings!), the primary idol is usually self-centeredness – the desire to be in control, to be the center of your world, to manipulate others so they will serve your needs, wishes and expectations. Thus the great virtue for St. Benedict in the battle against idols is the bright weapon of obedience.

Within the monastic community this makes itself felt through the daily horarium (our time is not our own), the need to be conscious of our brother's needs and to serve them (my own needs are always secondary), the tasks and works given by the abbot to each monk (one does not choose one's tasks). For the oblate living usually alone, this can be more challenging, and that is why each oblate must have a personalized set of Oblate Observances, examined and approved by the Abbot. Thus the Oblate can examine himself daily against an objective standard of obedience.

It can be helpful for the Oblate to consult occasionally with the Abbot or Oblate Master to review those observances that are particularly challenging and that often fail to be observed. It is thus that an Oblate's obedience can be maintained and fine-tuned. Sometimes an observance needs to be adjusted; sometimes it's just a matter of one's weakness and needing to strive more wholeheartedly toward truly seeking God. The destruction of the idols that stand between us and God is a life-long task for the oblate and for every Christian. The oblate has the advantage of a rule of life and a monastic director to assist in this liberation from idolatry and in drawing nearer to the Love who alone can satisfy our hungry hearts. Truly he has made us for himself, and our hearts will find no rest until they rest in him. §