

EPIPHANY, 2014

The solemnity of the Epiphany usually falls on the first Sunday of January and so regularly coincides with our oblate Sunday, but this particular oblate Sunday is quite special because we will be having nearly a dozen men and women making their oblation right after this homily. This may be the most oblations we have ever had at any one time. I therefore want to reflect not only on today's feast but also on the oblate vocation.

In addition to the rather obvious point that the first reading, the responsorial psalm, and the Gospel all refer to gift-giving (with gifts of gold and frankincense being specifically named in both the reading from Isaiah and the Gospel), there is something else that these two readings and the psalm have in common: the theme of journeying. Addressing the city of Jerusalem itself, Isaiah says: "Raise your eyes and look about; they all gather and come to you: your sons come from afar, and your daughters in the arms of their nurses." Next came the responsorial psalm, which spoke of kings journeying from afar: from Tarshish and the Isles, from Arabia and Seba, and of course the Magi in the Gospel are said to have come "from the east" and then to have journeyed back home by a different route.

All of this is definitely related to Benedictine life, whether to monks and nuns living in monasteries or to oblates affiliated with a particular house. To be sure, a specific Benedictine vow is stability, which seems to imply remaining in one place, but there is much in St. Benedict's Rule that also speaks of movement, even rapid movement. Four times in the Prologue, Benedict uses the word "run," first of all when he quotes a verse from the Fourth Gospel ("*Run* while you have the light of life, that the darkness of death may not overtake you."), next when he urges us to "*run* [to the kingdom] by doing good deeds," thirdly when he says that we must "*run* and do

now what will profit us forever,” and finally when he assures us that “as we progress in this way of life and in faith, we shall *run* on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

All of these references to running are metaphors for ongoing conversion, for never standing still in one’s spiritual life, for always getting up again whenever we have fallen. But the really crucial point is that we are never meant to do this all by ourselves, which is just the opposite of the kind of running portrayed in a song some of you may have heard, “The Loneliness of the Long Distance Runner.” Its final stanza goes like this:

Run over stiles across fields,
 Turn to look at who’s on your heels.
 Way ahead of the field
 The line is getting nearer
 But do you want the glory that goes?
 You reach the final stretch,
 Ideals are just a trace,
 You feel like throwing the race,
 It’s all so futile

In that rather dispiriting, even depressing song, running is all about competition, getting ahead of others who are “on your heels,” only to realize that there’s not much point to such a race after all, for even if you win, you’re still all alone, perhaps more so than ever because of the envy of those whom you beat.

Quite the contrary is the kind of running that Benedictines are called to do, for it is marked by mutual support and is memorably summarized by St. Benedict's petition at the end of chapter 72 of his Rule, where he prays that Christ "bring us *all together* to everlasting life." A few years ago a woman in England wrote precisely of this when explaining why being an oblate meant so much to her. She said: "My first experience of the community was marked by the feeling of peace, tranquility and acceptance. I felt that I had come home.... My continued involvement with the community on the journey of aspiring novice and full oblate has been one of discovery with support and comfort, secure in the knowledge that there is mutual support, love and assistance because we are all on the same journey."¹ A rather similar comment was made by a woman who is an oblate of a monastery in Tucson, Arizona. In her words, "[My husband and I] live two miles from a community of Benedictine sisters who receive visitors with a clear, uncomplicated look into the eyes and an easy embrace. The sisters welcome the public to attend their sunlit, soprano liturgies, and their hospitality helps to heal the loneliness of many who must make their way in an isolating, individualistic culture.... With other oblates, I am made whole in Christ because my Benedictine hosts take me and love me as I am."²

I trust that our own oblates could say the same thing. I have certainly sensed the spirit of mutual support among you, in such signs as expressions of deep concern for those who have been ill or of obvious rejoicing that some among your group were able to attend the international congress in Rome several months ago. In the same way, I have been inspired by the various kinds of support you have given to our monastic community, including work on our grounds, in the sacristy, and in the library, as well as driving members of the monastic community to doctor's appointments or to airports. All of this enhances our understanding that we are indeed one body in Christ, to use a phrase of St. Paul from today's second reading. May all of us grow in this

sense of oneness, especially those oblates whom I now invite to come forward here before the lectern to recite your formula of oblation, which you will then sign at the altar and which will remain there during Mass as a fitting sign of your dedication to God and to the Benedictine way of life.

¹ Quoted by Benedict Gaughan, “Being Part of the Benedictine Family,” *The Oblate Life*, ed. Gervase Holdaway, OSB (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2008), 40.

² Rachel Srubas, “To Assemble an Oblate Collage,” in *The Oblate Life*, 52.