Spirituality



Benedictine Oblates from seven countries display a poster they created that depicts a vision for Oblate life in the future. Judith Valente is in the front row, right. (Provided photo)



by Sr. Joan Chittister

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Editor's note: *Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister delivered a keynote address at the Fourth International Oblate Congress, which took place Nov. 4-10 in Rome. The following is Chittister's address, "Let the call be heard." Read more about the conference at Global Sisters Report.*

The question of the day is a simple one but potentially life-changing one: The question is, why would anyone even bother to get attached to a Benedictine monastery? What is the purpose of doing something like that?

The truth is that both of us — both you and I, I as a vowed monastic, you, as committed Oblates — are in the process of discovering again in new and vibrant ways what it means to hold a charism in trust for the church.

First, the purpose of a charism — the purpose of the gifts given to us by the Spirit in order to maintain the spirit of Jesus in the church today — is not to horde it and hide it for ourselves. No, the purpose of a charism — the purpose of this charism we call Benedictinism — is to share it, to give it away! We do not come to a monastery to hold this great charism captive to some kind of ecclesiastical elitism, by the less than 1 percent of the Christian community who claims to own it.

And there are several ancient stories that indicate best, I think, both the purpose and the spirituality of what it means to be a Benedictine Oblate.

The first of those stories is from the tales of the desert monastics: One day Abbot Arsenius was asking an old Egyptian man for advice on something. Someone who saw this said to him: "Abba Arsenius, why is a person like you, who has such great knowledge of Greek and Latin, asking a peasant like this for advice?"

And Arsenius replied, "Indeed I have learned the knowledge of Latin and Greek, yet I have not learned even the alphabet of this peasant."

> Each of us — lay as well as religious — carries within us a piece of the truth — but only a piece.

Abba Arsenius knew what as religious communities, as church, and as people we have forgotten for centuries: Life is the world’s greatest spiritual director. And each of us learns from it. Each of us — lay as well as religious — carries within us a piece of the truth — but only a piece.

A measure of the wisdom toward which we all strive lies in learning the language of life around us, and, most of all perhaps, being willing to hear the wisdom, of the other. It is by absorbing the wisdom of others, The Rule of Benedict is clear, that we ourselves become wise. You from us, yes, but we from you, as well.

The second story comes from the tales of the Hasidim: A seeker traveled miles every week to learn from the holy one on the other side of the mountains. "What does the holy one preach about," some friends asked, "that would cause you to make such an arduous journey so often?"

"Preach? Why, the holy one never preaches to me at all," the seeker said.

"Well, then," the friends asked, "what rituals does the holy one do that are so important to your soul?" And the seeker answered: "The holy one doesn’t do any rituals for me whatsoever."

"Well, in that case," the friends persisted, "what potions are you given there that seem to make life holier for you?" And the seeker answered, "I'm not given any potions at all."

"But if the holy one doesn't preach to you, and the holy one doesn't do rituals for you, and the holy one doesn't provide you with potions, why do you go there?"

And the seeker said, "To watch the holy one build the fire."

> Clearly, the Zen masters know what we know: Witness, not theory, is the measure of the spirituality we profess.

That seeker knows what every truly spiritual seeker everywhere knows: there are some spiritual truths we come to understand only by seeing them in another — only

by doing what others do who have already gone before us and know the value of going this way. It is the link to holy tradition that keeps us on the path.

Finally, the Zen masters tell the story of the monk Tetsugen, the goal of whose life was the printing of 7,000 copies of the Buddha's sutras — till then only available in Chinese — in Japanese wood blocks. It was an enormous undertaking.

Tetsugen traveled the length and breadth of Japan to collect funds for this project. But after long years of begging — and just as he collected the last of the funds — the river Uji overflowed and thousands were left homeless. So Tetsugen spent all the money he'd collected to print the scriptures into Japanese on the homeless and began his fundraising again.

But the very year he managed to raise the money for the second time, an epidemic spread over the country. This time Tetsugen gave the money away to help the suffering.

Finally, once again, he set out on another fundraising journey and, twenty years later, sure enough, a coin at a time, he finally raised enough money for the third time to see his dream come true: the scriptures would finally be able to be printed in Japanese.

The printing blocks from that first edition of Buddhist sutras into Japanese are still on display at the Obaku monastery in Kyoto.

But the Japanese tell their children to this day that Tetsugen actually produced three editions of the sutra and that the first two editions– the care of the homeless, and the comfort of the suffering– are invisible but far superior to the third.

Vowed Benedictines and committed Oblates need one another.

Clearly, the Zen masters know what we know: Witness, not theory, is the measure of the spirituality we profess. What we do because of what we say we believe, is the real mark of genuine spirituality.

From the desert master who listened to the laity, to the seeker who recognized holiness of life in the faithful dailiness of the holy one, to Tetsugen who knew that no spiritual book is equal to one spiritual act, the link between deep spiritual

development and a profound spiritual life has been a constant.

The ancients are clear: there is a common bond between the carriers of the great spiritual traditions and seekers of the spiritual life in every age. One enlightens the other. One energizes the other. One empowers the other. The tradition enlightens the times, yes, but seekers re-energize a tradition, as well.

Point: Vowed Benedictines and committed Oblates need one another.

The questions then are simple ones: "Why do you exist as an oblate?" "Where did you come from?" "Who are you in this great Benedictine story?" "What must you do for the charism to thrive?"

Question 1: Why do you exist? is a question of purpose.

Lay-religious programs — by whatever name they've been called through time — Oblates, a Benedictine term as old as the sixth century; or confraters in medieval monasteries; lay preacher tertiaries of 13th century France; Franciscan, Dominican and Carmelite third orders of the later Middle Ages; or the Jesuit volunteers; or Maryknoll Lay Missioners of today.

Whatever they are called they are all meant to give new life, wider space, new depth and stretch to the charisms of the religious communities whose task it was to converge those gifts into one great flame so the rest of the world can see it and so themselves envision another way to be alive.

Question 2: Where do you come from? is a question of legitimacy that goes back to the roots of the church and the tradition itself.

Paul is very clear about it in Corinthians: "To each one," he teaches, "the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. … To one is given wisdom, to another knowledge, to one faith, to another healing, to one power, to another prophecy. … All these are the work of one and the same Spirit and given to each one as the Spirit determines for the sake of the body, the whole."

Those charisms are gifts given to each of us for the sake of the whole Christian community. And so they must be given away for the sake of the whole Christian community!

The day we keep our charism to ourselves — either as individuals or as religious communities — that very day the charism dies in us and the Holy Spirit goes seeking for softer sand through which to run.

Clearly, the spiritual channel of religious charisms or gifts is meant to be an unbroken one — through the keepers of the wells of those traditions, us, to you, the keepers of the byways of the world.

And it has clearly been forever thus.

Scripture itself is full of companionship models of spirituality: Ruth and Naomi, Judith and her maidservant, Elisha and Elija, Paul and Timothy. In every case it is the blend of differences, the meld of diverse gifts, that makes possible the final miracle of faith.

In every case, it is the listening, the learning, the loving attachment of their spirits that take two weaknesses and makes it strong.

In every case, these companions, who come from different perspectives in life and spirit, make it possible for themselves to do together what neither of them could possibly do alone.

> There are not some of us who embody the gifts of the Spirit and some of us who do not.

Thanks to Ruth, the Moabite, the foreigner, the outsider, Naomi, the Israelite, can return to Bethlehem. And so the line of David stays intact and Jesus is born to that line by — of all things — the foreigner, Ruth.

Thanks to the maidservant who risks her own life to accompany her, Judith can plot the end of the one who holds Israel under siege.

Thanks to the prophet Elija, Elisha is recognized — as the one who will carry on the prophetic work itself and gives it stage for its own message.

Together Benedictine monasteries and Benedictine oblates must do the same to liberate the oppressed today.

You and I must do that same thing for the voiceless of our own time. Thanks to Paul himself who recognized in Timothy's youth and his Greek ancestry the bridge Paul himself needed to preach Jesus to a whole new non-Jewish population, the work of the early church was able to thrive in regions far beyond the sound of Paul's own voice.

Now, we — you and I — must raise our voices together — where the Gospel is seldom heard. You in your world, we in ours.

Indeed, it was Jesus himself who said to many, everywhere and anywhere, come and see. And then sent them out together — no apostles in sight — to be the disciples of his own life.

Indeed, Oblate programs share a proud history, a broad scope. They also embody a bold theology: They demonstrate in a period of clericalism and a closed ecclesiology that the charisms of Jesus — all the gifts of which Paul speaks — are not for the keeping by a few.

They are not for the desert alone; they are to be given in the city as well.

There are not some of us who are holy and some of us who are not.

There are not some of us who embody the gifts of the Spirit and some of us who do not.

There are not some of us who are gift to the church and some of us who are not.

> The charisms of Jesus that the Spirit gives to each of us are not for sequestering by professional religious types.

Question 3: Who are you? is a question of identity and the answer is clear: to be an Oblate is to be a carrier of Benedictine spirituality. It is to be exactly who we are — who your monastery is — but in a different form.

You and we — we and you, are all meant to be gifts of Benedictine peace, prayer, justice humility, human community and life-giving work. Indeed, together we are meant to be messengers, models and makers of a whole new world wherever we are.

Indeed, the charisms of Jesus that the Spirit gives to each of us are not for sequestering by professional religious types. The charisms of Jesus the preacher, the healer, the wonder-worker, and gatherer of nations, are preserved to this day by the workings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of seekers everywhere.

They were made visible in the healing work of Benedictine hospices when sickness was considered a punishment for sin, and so call to us today to join hearts and hands and insights to be healing figures everywhere.

They were made visible when oppression and slavery were thought to be God's will but equality and justice was the hallmark of Benedictine monasteries, and so call us to join hearts and hands and insights to make equality a sign of our own communities today.

They were made visible in holy hospitality and call us yet to see Christ in everyone who comes through the doors of our homes, and the arches of our monasteries.

They were made visible in the prophetic works of Benedictines for peace when nations sinned in the name of God and called it Christianization, and the church itself strayed from the Gospel and called it orthodoxy.

And those charisms are meant to be shared, to be spent, to be strewed recklessly through the body of Christ, not held captive to some kind of semi-clericalized corps of ecclesiastical aristocracy.

More than that, they are the essence, the mark, the message of the life of Jesus. The charisms of the Spirit are alive, in other words. They go on going on — as Jesus goes on going on.

They are not then ever complete. They are not frozen in time. They are not fixed and static, stagnant and stock-still. They leap with life. They never die. They are the electricity that powers every good in us. They are that surge in you, that surety in me that we ride on a river of grace that is still and deep, raging and new.

They are not the gifts of vowed monastics alone but the common gift of professed monastics and committed Oblates to pursue together, ancient but immediate, they are dynamic, unfolding and as necessarily new today as they were in the soul of Benedict of Nursia.



Oblates from Africa sing at a liturgy at the Nov. 4-10 Fourth International Oblate Congress in Rome. (Judith Valente)

Charism, then, must be constantly rediscovered, and constantly re-expressed.

Charism is always ripe but always in bloom again, always finished for one age and people but starting over again in another — charism is like every living thing. It takes the shape of seed, branch, tree, flower and fruit of the spiritual life. It grows through one stage of life after another and then, through you and me, grows again. Here. Now. Always.

Charism is the fig tree that blooms in every season.

Separately and alone and together, we together must make it visible again in new ways. And together we must make it vocal again in the new language of a new time.

And therein lies the glory of the Oblate programs that are springing up in Benedictinism again from coast to coast, from continent to continent, everywhere.

Oblate programs are often now twice as large as the monasteries that sponsor them. But clearly — if the Gospel is any proof of the power of holy companionship — then Oblates are not meant to be simply consumers of the tradition.

You are also meant to be companions to the monastery to which you are attached. You are meant to be the carriers of the tradition, as well. As individuals, yes, but in concert, in community, with the Oblate community that is in concert, in community, with the monastery community itself.

It is the growing Oblate programs of small monasteries that are becoming tentacles of the spirit of the Rule, the outreach of spirit of the monastery to which they are attached.

You are to be Benedictinism in the nucleus of the world, a veritable critical mass of new life and new hope and new expressions of the spirit of The Rule of Benedict, of Jesus alive in us and of the voice of God among us.

There are Oblates everywhere being the charism of their order: They are preaching peace in my country that spends more money on destruction than on development.

They are doing justice in a world that provides its CEOs 100 times the salaries of the workers who make their money for them. They are being mercy in a world that kills killers to show everybody that killing is wrong.

They are demanding equality for the women kept invisible even in churches who say their model is Jesus. And at the same time, they are ignored by secular sexist systems that suck up their lives by putting on their backs twice the burdens and half the pay.

Oblates themselves must become a new kind of people in the midst of the mess of violence and greed and oppression and power: a people whose weapon is truth and whose strength is fearlessness. And whose witness, in concert with their monasteries, is the power of the Oblate community itself. In them indeed, the best of the Benedictine charism is meant to live on.

> Oblate programs must also model a whole church — a church that is wholly ministering, wholly open, wholly renewed — in the very heart of a church that has become, over time, too male, too clerical, too distant from the people of God.

Question 4: What must we do? is the question of mission and meaning.

It requires a new answer of both Benedictine monasteries and of Oblates themselves if charism is really what we're all about. Oblate programs have a purpose and a place in the contemporary church that is gift to the entire church:

First, Oblate programs must also model a whole church — a church that is wholly ministering, wholly open, wholly renewed — in the very heart of a church that has become, over time, too male, too clerical, too distant from the people of God.

When professed members of a Benedictine community merge their lives and their work, their spiritual wisdom and their public witness, their decision-making and the deepest part of their concerns with the Oblates who surround them, then the church itself becomes new — becomes whole — again.

In the spirit of the Jesus who walked with women, talked with Samaritans, and contested with the keepers of the synagogue, Oblate programs lift up the gates that have divided us from ourselves — and to the detriment of both of us.

Oblate programs make the integration of lay life and canonical religious life obvious, yes, but they do more than that. They give lie to the notion that one state is higher than another. They make evident the inherent holiness of each. They make evident that each of us is on the way to the same God — the only difference in our journeys is the way we choose to get there.

Oblate programs demonstrate what de Vinci's painting of the Last Supper – with its all-male, apostolic, privatized version of Jesus' eucharistic theology fails to record, but which Piasecki's print of men, women and children eating together at the Passover feast makes plain: the table to which Jesus calls us is a table of men and women, of apostles and disciples, of young and old, all sharing the same meal, all called to the same cup. And all participants in the theological development of the early Christian community.

They remind us of the array of people Jesus drew around him but which, over the centuries, became a pious pyramid designed to keep most people on the fringe of it.

Oblate programs are meant to dispel the image of exclusivity that makes spirituality the purview of a private club of cognoscenti — of special people — people

specifically privileged, specifically gendered, supposedly more knowledgeable, specially recognized, specifically asexual — who define its limits and confine its rewards to themselves.

Finally, Oblate programs seen as both consumers of the tradition and as part of its present carriers, as well, enable both its body of oblates and the religious community itself to strengthen the gifts of the other and to learn from the gifts of the other at the same time.

As Abba Arsenius and the old peasant knew, it is the wisdom we seek together that will be most likely true.

Oblates bring to the monastery the gift of immersion in another whole dimension of life with all its insights, all its understandings, all its muddy, complex complications, and its cry for our awareness our understanding, our involvement, and our voice.

Monastics bring to Oblates the lived experience and real witness of a long-standing spiritual tradition that has withstood the test of time over centuries of challenge, stabilized whole layers of people in the midst of grave dangers and given direction to whole bodies of seekers at times of great darkness.

In the fifth century, when the Roman Empire broke down and Europe lay in ruin, Benedictinism was there to give both spiritual meaning and social organization to a people left without either political center or spiritual guidance.

It is a cry to us to continue to bring Benedictine values to the center of every system.

When the emerging mercantile society began to consume the lives of the poor for the sake of a new economic system that robbed the poor of land and paid nothing for their labor, monastics educated the poor to prepare them to make the leap from serfdom to self-direction.

It is a cry to us to participate in the renewal of our own societies still caught in the materialism that dries out the soul and to engage ourselves, as well, in modeling other, deeper, longer lasting values.

When religion failed itself and spawned national divisions instead of peace, Benedictines struggled to create rule for war and sought to bring spiritual discernment to the intricacy of human relationships.

That model is a cry to us to see the development of Benedictine values as our social responsibility — not an excuse to withdraw from society in the name of false and fruitless piety in the face of the Jesus who says clearly: "By their fruits you will know them."

When family industries broke down, and family farms disappeared, when the new industrialization herded men into factories giving men money but women nothing, women monastics opened schools for girls and boys alike so that the seeds of a world without sexism would someday be not only possible but imperative. They began to provide women, too, with the education, and the child care, and the health care and the status their lives would depend on in coming generations.

It is a call to us, too, to gather up the forgotten again, to speak for the muted again, to paint across the sky again with our own lives the vision of a brighter, more just and equal world once more.

It is the depth of those spiritual traditions, the courage of those spiritual histories, the commitment of those monastics who brought us to this day, that monastic communities hold in trust for those who seek to find.

How can we fail, then, if we are truly forming strong Oblate programs, if we are truly seeking to be part of the spiritual tradition we treasure, to form justice-seeking people, strong and independent women and men, holy and spiritual laity for our own time?

Otherwise, how can we hide in our spiritual jacuzzis, our pious spas and say that we carry the charisms of those before us? Oblate programs are not simply there for monastics to strengthen an Oblate’s special gifts but for the monastery to learn from the wisdom and knowledge that single life and married life of our oblates are offering us, as well.

And Oblates for their part must learn the pervasive power of age-old spiritual traditions and truisms for the quality of life today.

Monastics, who are accustomed to the security of group projects, must learn the breathtaking impact of the kind of independent and individual actions that lay associates, in their isolated lives, risk every day, take for granted every day, brave without end every day.

We must look to one another for the wisdom of experience each of us brings to the table from a different part of life, another facet of living, a completely distinct perspective on being Christian, on being whole.



A poster of Oblate activities at Mount St. Scholastica Monastery in Atchison, Kansas, tells a common story: More lay associates are members of the community than vowed religious. (Judith Valente)

There are challenges, of course; It is an adjustment period for us all. In the first place, monastics and religious at large are just learning to learn from the laity. Religious are coming to a sense of a wisdom beyond the conventional.

We are also rediscovering their own role to pass on a spiritual tradition as well as a set of institutional ministries or spiritual practices from another day.

We are discovering that with the open door that characterized the foundresses of our mission monasteries goes their own sense of perfect privacy and antiseptic

control of circumstances and physical environments and regular schedules and sanctifying seclusion.

We are learning that life itself is not neat and that neat can be a trap that swallows us into the middle of ourselves where nothing grows but narcissism.

Religious are finding that what the lay seeker, and most often lay women lack most is space. They need space for the quiet that a clinging child does not give for one moment a day. They need space to talk about their own dreams and hopes and questions.

And they need someone to talk to. They need connectedness — a sense of being part of something larger than themselves, something that enables them to know that on the wide stage of the planet, they too count on the issues that make the Gospel real and the beatitudes true and the Resurrection possible for everyone.

They are finding out that lay men need a sanctuary where being macho and tough, where inflicting pain and taking pain are not the measure of a man. They are coming to realize that lay men need a place where the spiritual life is nurtured in them, not derided or considered weak.

They are beginning to understand that there are lay men out there who want to learn from the spiritual wisdom of women for whom force and power, money and profit are not the goals of life.

They are coming to understand that both women and men need to be invited, to be companioned into the soup kitchens and peace vigils and social justice groups that confront the state on behalf of the poor and cry out to the church on behalf of women and contradict the powers that chain the oppressed, and so renew the world with the message of the Christ.

They need monasteries that will lead them to take a monastic heart into a world in chaos.

They need, most of all, an opportunity to make a faith-journey that is regular and deep and tried and true — and they need someone to walk the journey with them. To teach them the way, to point out the path, to monitor the going, to applaud the efforts, and to care about both them and the tradition enough to walk the way with them.

Oblate programs are not meant to be this decade's substitute for ladies aid societies or monastery guilds or alumnae programs or community auxiliaries.

Oblate programs need to be the spiritual ripple, the life companion, and the support of the monasteries to which they belong — a call to community that is so rare in a world of isolates.

They need to extend the outreach, the depth, and the breadth of monasteries that built the last era and, now smaller, must begin to build again.

They are the hope that in this century, too, the life and values and spirituality of the Benedictine vision — now centuries tried and true — can be born in us again, anew and always.

And most of all, if our Oblate programs are to be authentic, let there be Oblates who will carry these values beyond the monastery to city hall and Congress, to corporate offices and city streets — even, if necessary, into monasteries themselves that have become too quiet, too comfortable with the world as it is, rather than committed to shaping a world as it must become.

In this most violent of centuries, the blood of our children runs in our streets because we have taught them violence well.

If our Oblate programs are to be authentic, let there be peacemaking Oblates, with the peacemaking charism of a Benedict of Nursia who put down weapons in order to do battle for Christ the King.

In this most sexist of worlds, women to this day are raped, beaten, bought and sold around the world, left to face widowhood without adequate resources, invisible in all the major decision-making arenas of both church and state, deprived of both equal pay and meaningful promotions.

If our Oblate programs are to be authentic, let there be associates with the spirituality of a Benedicta Riepp and Hildegard of Bingen who call the men of the world to conscience and accountability in both church and state.

Oblate programs and not meant to be pious additions to a string of private devotions. Benedictinism is a journey into the depths and demands of the contemplative life, into a prayer life that is real not simply ritualistic.

Benedictines stand on a mountain top of prayer immersed in the cries of the psalmist, challenged daily by the prophets, touched to the core by the demands of the gospel and called by Jesus — liberator, redeemer, healer, and lover — to "Come follow me!"

And so Benedictine prayer leaves us with the questions: As a Benedictine, who are you struggling to liberate from the chains of rejection, poverty and greed? What have you redeemed in a world full of its own destruction? Who do you love? Only the self or also the other and how would we know it if we ever saw it?

> Now is our time to carry these vibrant and world-changing charisms back into a world that needs them so badly now.

For many, the pious image of Cluny and its 24-hour prayer schedule remains. But the Cluny who refused starving peasants the harvest in their barns is an aberration of a great tradition of care and service, education and healing, justice and peace. And so the peasants of the day tore it down.

Cluny is at best a warning of what happens when a religious order goes sour.

Instead we are at a common table, you and I, called the church. We are called to share a common feast, with the world around us. We bear a common responsibility to bring the bread of life to every dying thing we see. We owe to the world now the cup of blood that is our own.

We are companions on the way and keepers of a great spiritual tradition, born in times of stress and discord, inheritors of merciless war and death, healers of spiritual poverty and physical pain, rampant oppression and great human need.

This is not a time to mistake the first great cenobitic tradition of history for some kind of spiritual spa, where we can burrow in and ignore the call of Jesus to hear the call of the poor.

Now is our time to carry these vibrant and world-changing charisms back into a world that needs them so badly now.

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Let us then with Ruth and Naomi, Elisha and Elija, Judith and her maidservant, Timothy and Paul, as Oblates and monastics companion one another again to prophetic truth, to gospel voice, to brave witness, to contemplative courage to risk the new life everywhere.

Let us, in other words, be true to the tradition we hold in common.

Once upon a time a disciple asked the holy one, "Holy one, what is the difference between knowledge and enlightenment?" And the holy one said, "When you have knowledge, you use a torch to illuminate the way. When you are enlightened, you become the torch to lead the way."

Where do you come from? You come from the heart of the Spirit.

Who are you? You are monastic gifts given by God for today.

What must you do? You must embody and extend the charisms or gifts of the Spirit long embedded in this great monastic tradition in new and even richer ways.

So, why do you exist? For one reason, and one reason only: to become, like the great monastics before you, the blazing, flaming, searing light to others that you are really meant to be.

Finally, the truth is that the call to wisdom, to witness, and to oneness in community is common to us both: Oblate and monastic alike, and the call must be heard. Together you and I must make it happen.

May you, I, our monasteries and our Oblate programs everywhere companion one another, listen to one another's wisdom and so become even a stronger part of the tradition — both of us — than we can ever be alone.

[Joan Chittister is a Benedictine sister of Erie, Pennsylvania.]