

been established by her husband, Marshal Goldberg at Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon. Donations to the Marjorie Sue Abramovitz Memorial Fund will be acknowledged to the family and will support EMO activities where the need is greatest.

Marjorie was born and raised in Baltimore, MD, in a secular Jewish family. She moved to Portland with her husband and two children in 1973, after sojourns in Boston, Atlanta, the San Francisco Bay Area, Vancouver, B. C. and Madison, Wisconsin.

Marjorie's involvement with peace and justice work began in the early 1960s with the Congress on Racial Equality and the Baltimore Committee to End the War in Vietnam. She continued this work in Portland on the social action committee of her congregation and with a Jewish anti-nuclear weapons group.

Marjorie's spiritual journey led her to St. Clare Catholic Church and the Queen of Angels Monastery (the Benedictine Sisters of Mt. Angel) as an Oblate. Marjorie's humanist, feminist and progressive commitments carried through her life. She was a much-beloved wife, devoted mother and grandmother, and steadfast friend. Marjorie's intention as an Oblate in the last year of her life was: "To be mindful of God's presence in all things."

Prayerful Thoughts

Submitted by
Oblate Annelizabeth Pullman

"These are some prayerful thoughts I wrote since beginning formation to become an Oblate at Queen of Angels. I am so blessed to be a part of this community...any attempt to put the experience into words is pretty much futile, but these did seem to capture my feelings at the time.

"They were written during Lent in 2008 when I became an Inquirer."
Brother Jesus +,

Wrap your arms around my heart and soul + Immerse me in your love and grace + Share with me your

wounds then grace me with your strength + Lift the veil between us and encompass my being + Stroke my hair and let me wash your feet + Wipe away my tears and make me grateful and humble for each moment with you + Reinforce the beauty of your mystery and satisfy my questions not with words for my ears but by your presence in my heart + I place my hand in your hand and my head on your breast and we are one,
+

Fear or Freedom?¹

Thomas J. Rillo, Oblate
Bloomington, Indiana

Obedience is not a popular word today. It strikes fear in our hearts and reminds us of harsh, authoritative tyranny. We are reminded of people who are servile, with groveling submission to the point of being considered weak and without self-respect.

The word "obedience" conjures up a certain meaning to those of us who were born and reared in a democratic society based on individualism and independence. It means subjection to someone or something with authoritative power.

As cynical adults, not only do we find it difficult to obey, but we find it impossible to conceive of obedience as a virtue. To obey, we need to have someone to obey; and yet we have been taught to distrust all authority, to search for the facts and to make up our own minds.

Freedom of choice is a core value of modern life. An oblate candidate once expressed it this way: "I don't want to be told what to do. I want to be free to be me. I express my freedom by exercising my right to choose and I don't want to adhere to the dictates of an abbot."

What this individual did not realize was that the greatest freedom concerning obedience is that one *chooses* to obey. Obeying without knowing why is not free choice. Oblates must choose those things that open up future possibilities and not those things that would enslave them.

The word "obedience" derives from the Latin word *oboedire*, which means not only to obey, but also to listen. The prefix *ob* means "in the direction of," and *audire* means "to hear"; together they become

¹ This article is printed with permission from St. Meinrad Archabbey, Indiana, a Benedictine men's community. Please note that the content is applicable to a women's community as well.

A memorial fund for Marjorie Sue Abramovitz has

oboedire. The monastic way invites oblates to listen and select what voices they are to follow.

Obedience should not be blind obedience and should instead exercise discernment. Discerning obedience is really obedient freedom. It is what the monastic oblate way invites one to experience. To St. Benedict, obedience was not just doing what the most assertive voice tells us to do; it is about mutual love.

Obedience is a blessing to be shown by all, not only to the abbot, but also to one another as brothers, since we know that is by this obedience that we go to God. To Benedict, this meant you have to listen to other people and not just to yourself.

In Benedict's chapter describing the good zeal that monks should have for one another, he states: "No one is to pursue what he judges better for himself but instead what he judges better for someone else. To their fellow monks they show the pure love of brothers to God, loving fear." (RB 72.7, 8)

Thus the monastic way urges free and conscientious obedience. Oblates are confronted by the widespread belief that you are free and in control if you follow your feelings. The monastic way challenges that belief.

Alan Watts, an existentialist writer of the 1960s, once wrote a treatise titled *Masks of Identity*. In it, he wrote that we all wear masks of identity for specific situations. Because in our overpopulated, urban society we are constantly bumping into one another, we counteract this inevitable enforced contact by putting on masks. We have one for the subway, elevator, shopping mall, supermarket, athletic events, concerts and theatre.

This wearing of multiple masks is a way that people maintain their privacy and stay in control. What freedom of choice are they obeying? Putting on and taking

off masks does not speak of obedience based on innocence and mutual love for our brothers and sisters. It would be a sacrilege if an oblate put on a mask just for church, another for retreats and one just for the kids' soccer matches.

For oblates, the best demonstration of obedience is to exercise great inner freedom: the ability to judge what you desire and what the other desires, and to choose freely to set aside your desires for the desires of another. In essence, that is the description of the exercise of conscience. Conscience is not the same as feeling. Conscience is the inner process that enables one to listen to voices that are beyond one's own feelings and desires.

This inner process of judgment guided by the power of conscience is at the heart of true obedience. You decide not to have that extra drink because an inner process of conscience enables you to discern the law against drunk driving. This is a freely chosen obedience, a conscientious choice.

At the beginning of Lent, the abbot sends out a form for an oblate to list *bona opera*, good works, to be performed for the Lenten season. The completed form is then reviewed by the abbot and consequently approved. The oblate is then obligated by the nature of oblation and obedience to the monastic way to fulfill what he or she freely chose to do as *bona opera*.

The obedience that Benedict calls for is an active obedience, an obedience that struggles to obey because it is constantly struggling to conquer self-will. Benedict expects instant obedience from his monks, but does not expect them to be mindless robots.

The monks are to struggle with obedience. They are to be soldiers of Christ; as warriors, they are to do battle with the devil and with themselves. It is so with oblates. The struggle to obey is the

struggle of the spirit, and it is within that struggle that grace abounds. It is also from this struggle that spiritual power flows.

It is said that those who have not yet begun to struggle with obedience have not yet begun to obey. The story of obedience is one of rebellion, then of repentance, and then to return. This is vital for the path to salvation.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is an excellent example of two sons and their obedience. One son struggles with obedience and the other son rebels. The son who rebelled repents and returns, while the other son still struggles with obedience. The question is: which son becomes stronger because of the struggle?

Jesus tells another story of two sons. The father tells one son to go out to the fields and work. He tells the other to do the same. The first son does not go and procrastinates. The second son did not want to go at first, but eventually overcomes his struggle and goes to the fields. Which son was the strongest in his obedience?

The monks freely chose the monastic way of life and pledged their allegiance to the abbot. In a similar way, the oblates pledge their allegiance to the monastery and the abbot. Monastic obedience can be a simple road to religious freedom and thus it is full of pitfalls.

Some individuals embrace religious obedience as an escape from the realities of life. The monastic way is not for those who seek its obedience out of a desire to opt out of the demands of life. Some leave the monastic way when obedience becomes difficult.

St. Therese puts a lid on this notion by saying there was freedom in obeying even when the superior seemed wrong. No one ever said obedience would be easy. The

degrees of difficulty in obedience vary by individuals.

But the struggle within is on-going and perhaps never-ending. If it is born out of mutual love for one another, then it will flourish and endure. It is in this struggle that monks (and sisters) and oblates have a common ground.

Questions for Reflection

What is your initial reaction to the word "obedience?" How does the monastic vow of obedience apply to you?

Do I obey everyone or just those who are placed in authority over me? Can obedience help me with my relationship with others?

Obedience is defined as an attitude and humility as an action. Have I focused on humility as a positive attitude? Have I meditated on the vow of obedience to the point where it is an integral part of my monastic oblation?

Do I see the relationship between obedience and the other monastic vows of stability, hospitality, silence and conversion of life?

Can obedience help me internally with meditation, prayer, fasting and study? Can obedience assist me externally with simplicity, solitude, submission and service?

POETRY CORNER



Poems "At the Feet of Teachers" and "Ready Me to Respond" by Rachel Srubas are from the book, *Oblation: Meditations on St. Benedict's Rule*, ©2006 Rachel M. Srubas, used by permission of Paraclete Press, available at www.paracletepress.com.

At the Feet of Teachers

The third step of humility is to submit oneself out of love of God to whatever obedience under a superior may require of us.

(Chapter 7, St. Benedict's Rule)

Thank you for the ones who nurtured me
when I could only crawl,
who fell to their knees to see from my
small perspective,
and upheld me when I took my first,
faltering steps.
They helped me walk, however unsteadily,
in the way you had laid out for me.
When I veered toward danger, they
forbade me to go any further.
For my good, early guardians and
trustworthy teachers,
who insisted I obey them when my
preference for transgression
would have put me at risk, I thank you,
at last.
It took me decades to appreciate the limits
they set, to understand
I'd been hemmed in, behind and before,
not by arbitrary prohibitions, but by your
love.

The first preachers do little more than
remind us:
the teachings of Moses and Jesus
mandate reverence, self-control, and
kindness.
For exacting instructors who embody
compassion
without condescension, confidence
without arrogance,
who teach me my neighbors are everyone
without exception
and expect me to serve them
not as whimsical option
but as sacred obligation, I thank you.

Help me, O God, to outgrow
any remnant of defiant adolescence within
me.
Show me the difference between sullen
docility
and discerning obedience. Open my
conscience

to prophets who speak on behalf of the
silenced
and issue ultimatums grounded in your
covenants.
Sit me down at the feet of teachers
who will school me in humility.

Ready Me to Respond

*With a ready step inspired by obedience
they respond by their action to the voice that
summons them.*

(Chapter 5, St. Benedict's Rule)

In the beginning, you sighed.
You spoke over chaos and made the
original day.
This day shines as that one must have
done,
the sky a bright arc,
the earth a dark dynamic,
everywhere, beings you articulate in love.
When you speak, life pulses in my limbs.
I run with wild energy you breathe into
me.

Your second word comes: a summons,
Curbing the frenzy, guiding my feet.
Open the ear of my heart today.
Encourage me to do a harder thing
than mere hearing;
ready me to respond.

I'm fond of my internal monologue,
the sound of my mental soliloquy,
relevant to no one but me.

Obedience. The very word fences me in.
I chafe at the thought, and then—
find myself shaken awake
by some act of uncommon decency
or outrageous violation
that shouts me out of my self-
preoccupation and back
to the land of the living:

here, where you breathe
and name everything,
where my heart's ear bends
and my life depends
first on obedient listening.

The Battle of Holy Obedience Joseph C.²

The last nineteen years of my life I've spent in prison. This is nearly twice the number of years I gave to my small town family medical practice, which led me here. However, these last ten years I've been fortunate enough to serve under the guidance of *The Rule of St. Benedict*, which Fr. James Murray so graciously sent me when I needed it most.

In his Preface to *RB 1980*, Fr. Timothy Fry talks about the alternative that *The Rule* provided to the debauchery and paganism of the falling Roman Empire:

“In the unsettled strife-torn Italy of the sixth century, Benedict's *Rule* offered definitive direction and established an ordered way of life that gave security and stability.”

I have found that it does so here as well, in the chaos, torment, and sometimes uncontrollable violence of a maximum security penitentiary.

To be sure, there are indeed admonishments that don't fit in a modern day prison, such as the sufficiency of a half bottle of wine a day (RB 40.3) and removing your knife before you lay down to sleep (RB 22.5). Nonetheless, I've found that *The Rule* contains many exhortations from the great saint that are not only applicable in the twenty-first century, but extremely useful—especially in a penitentiary environment.

The Rule's emphasis on obedience is certainly not the least of these extremely valuable instructions.

² Joseph is a prisoner at a penitentiary in Illinois and became invested as an Oblate candidate on December 7, 2008. The article is printed with permission from his Oblate Director, Fr. James Murray, St. Bede Abbey, Peru, Illinois. Fr. James is editor of “Our Family News,” the Monastery's Oblate Newsletter, in which Joseph's article first appeared.

In fact, for me, St. Benedict's perspective on “holy obedience” actuated more changes in my approach to God than anything I've ever read before, or since, except for the Bible itself. Even though only chapters 5 and 71 have the word “obedience” in their titles, I've gradually come to appreciate how St. Benedict's particular perspective on obedience underscores and permeates practically everything he brings to us in *The Rule of St. Benedict*.

From the start, he dares us to be “armed with the strong and noble weapons of obedience to do battle for the true King, Christ the Lord,” (Prologue 3). And at the end, he proclaims boldly that “it is by this way of obedience that we go to God.” (RB 71.2) Everywhere in-between, “this way of obedience” is subtly, and sometimes not so subtly, in the background of his holy instructions.

It took me a while, however, to comprehend the scope, the breadth, and the sheer magnitude of “this way of obedience” that St. Benedict was propounding to his prospective monks. Prison is all about obedience. The obedience of the inmate toward the prison staff and the rule the enforce is prerequisite to sustaining the modicum of privileges allotted to a maximum security prisoner: the twice-weekly shower and recreational period, the occasional access to a phone, the library and the barber shop, and the opportunity to shop at the prison's commissary for a limited number of items that are not provided by the institution: deodorant, shampoo, gloves, coffee, and treats of various sorts.

The “obedience” of a gang member towards his “chief” and the rules that he enforces is perhaps a bit more personal. “Good standing” in his “prison family” is not only essential for his self-esteem, but also his basic identity in this world enclosed by cement and iron, and is well worth the extra narrow path that his gang requires him to follow.

Then, of course, there is a prison version of the “mutual obedience” that St. Benedict talks about in chapter 71. In prison, however, a person’s age and time-served usually count for naught in determining “seniority,” thereby leaving the question of “rank” wide open. Nevertheless, two individuals who each consider themselves an “alpha male” often must face each other alone in a locked cell, far away from the ears of anyone with a key and a can of pepper spray who could possibly thwart a bloody, perhaps even deadly, encounter. Here, a prison-styled “mutual obedience” toward each other’s privacy and property rights, as well as expectations of a cell that is relatively free of stench and squalor is paramount to both prisoners’ well-being, and maybe even life itself.

All of these forms of prison obedience offer an “ordered way of life” as well as “security and stability” for those who obey. But how close are they otherwise to St. Benedict’s “way of obedience that we go to God?”

The worldly results are identical; a life that is more stable and secure than it would be otherwise, and usually more pleasant as well. But the ultimate goal of prison obedience rarely goes beyond personal safety and pleasure, while the ultimate goal of St. Benedict’s obedience is far more eternal.

Even so, does this make a difference in the QUALITY of the obedience itself?

For the last nineteen ears I’ve had the golden opportunity to closely observe both kinds of obedience in a sharp contrast to one another that is rarely seen outside of prison walls. Contrary to public perception, there are individuals in prison who sincerely and wholeheartedly seek God.

I’m not talking about the religious fervor of the newcomer who is scared for his very life and needs some “divine protection,” or is still bargaining with God for some unexpected leniency in the appellate court. The seeker I’m

talking about usually has no “out-date” marked on his calendar, or any options left in the court system. His worldly hopes and dreams have all been stripped away by years of sorrow and despair behind bars. All he now has left is what God put there in the first place—the Call of Heaven.

I’ve never seen anyone truly seek God who has not somehow got a glimpse or a taste of God Himself. And this usually doesn’t come easy. But from that moment on, his “prison obedience” takes on an entirely different quality. The guards become his abbot, and as such, “hold the place of Christ: for him (RB 2.2). He has given up his own will (Prologue 3) and his compliance becomes “free from any grumbling or any reaction of unwillingness.” (RB 5.14).

Even when his obedience looks just like ordinary “prison obedience,” it surely feels different from where I’m standing. It has now become holy.



BLESSINGS ON YOUR LENTEN JOURNEY!

PLEASE REMEMBER: To contribute material for the Advent 2010 Newsletter, contact newsletter editor, Dorothy Frances: by phone (509-548-5697), by e-mail (dhbwrites@charter.net), or by U. S. mail (P. O. Box 2218, Leavenworth, WA 98826.)