



being **Benedictine** in the
21st century

spiritual seekers in conversation

July 1, 2021

Being Benedictine was both a reflection on practice and a questioning of our practice. Now, we are feeding those reflections and questions back to you and challenging you, individually and communally, to take the next step.

That next step isn't looking for answers or even jumping into action. Yes, that is part of it. But as seekers of God, our true next step is to do theology, to explore the meaning of our practice, to examine our questions, in the light of our faith in the God we seek. That is what will guide our actions. For what is the purpose of finding ourselves, living into our call to embody Benedictine spirituality in the world, if not to then give ourselves away? To love unconditionally, no matter the cost, truly being Benedictine.

Communication, real conversation, is an act of creation. As noted in a comment, choosing to live Benedictine spirituality, to connect oneself to a community to seek God in the Benedictine life, is not to join a social club. It is not about sterile formulas or rituals or boasting rights. It is about lifelong *conversatio*, a lifelong commitment to seek God, to be Christ for our world. That is why we can interpret this Benedictine life in every age, because God is in all of history. That is also why we need what we are doing now: reflecting on our life's practice through the lens of our guides: Scripture, the Rule, our Tradition. And that calls us to *ora et labora*, prayer and work. Or, as one of our speakers put it, prayer and protest. Not protest in a narrow interpretation but in its most broad sense: standing against all that is not of God, giving our lives to the Christ life.

What leadership is needed now so that rather than reacting too little or too late to the reality around us, we can take the initiative with new ideas? Whether vowed members, oblates, or other seekers, where do we put our best energies?

The pressures and constraints of our lives are real. They are complex. How do we come at these challenges from a place of seeking understanding rather than fear, of knowing that our fulfillment is not in conflict with the

demands of faith? We might need a little more Benedictine balance and a little less fear. But this life is not about giving up, not about asceticism or unquestioning obedience any more than it is about upholding an institution or a maintaining a monastery.

It is about finding Christ in our center. Let us remember this as we reflect on the outcomes of our first conversation.

The Being Benedictine in the 21st Century website said we were going to ask, “the important questions we haven’t yet asked.” This short document reflects more than 40 pages of feedback from three sets of breakout sessions during the May 28-30, 2021, weekend and the evaluation surveys completed by 50% of our participants. In each of five major themes, there are questions. Lots of them.

These are questions posed, for the first time, by an inclusive and diverse group of Benedictines from across the country. It is our belief that they will help us further this conversation and guide our action. We don’t have to wait until we have all the answers, we don’t even have to wait until we’re sure we’ll succeed. All we need to do is try.

As Joan Chittister writes in *Radical Spirit*, “An old monastic tale says it all. The disciple asks, “What do you do in a monastery?” And the old monastic answers, “Oh, we fall, and we get up. And we fall, and we get up. And we fall, and we get up again.”

Let’s fall together. And get up again.

Linda Romey, OSB
Judith Valente, Oblate
Judith Sutura, OSB

P.S. Save the date for a *Benedictine Colloquium* that will take place in at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, KS, June 21-23, 2022. Details will be released soon.

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“To be a Benedictine means to be a card-carrying member of one of the most long-standing spiritual institutions in the church. But being Benedictine, being in heart and soul a Benedictine, now that is something different.” —Sister Joan Chittister

1. Building Blocks of the Benedictine Community: Vowed Members and Oblates

We find life and energy in the relationship of vowed members and oblates and seek ways to nurture those connections. Those oblates who live near their monasteries are grateful for physical connection with the monastery: “being in the monastery makes me feel at home.” The vowed members and oblates provide companionship and mentoring for each other and learn from each other. Although each person expresses his/her own authentic way of living Benedictine spirituality, there is energy in being with the larger community.

Community provides opportunity for connection with people, others who share similar values and work on the same causes. It is a safe space for conversation and deep listening, even when disagree. There is a sense of belonging that sustains us.

Stability, a commitment to our own community, teaches us the value of not running from self but working through challenges and disagreements. This and other elements of Benedictine spirituality free us to become the fullest version of ourselves and we continually seek to nurture those aspects in our call to daily commitment.

We work to build relationships based on the Benedictine values of listening, humility, and hospitality and we look for ways to offer opportunities to share with others what we experience at our monasteries, and to learn about Benedictinism. Some of this is now done virtually.

Some of us would like more opportunities to live with vowed members, to experience their life of community, prayer and work. We long for the silence and solitude the monastery can offer.

There is general unease around the prospect of monasteries “coming to completion” and what will become of connected oblate communities. Some believe that a core, vowed monastic community is essential to the support of oblate life. Others are confident that as monasteries decline in numbers, new kinds of “communities” will arise, even in the digital world.

How do oblates come to see their role as more fundamental and become self-directed? (This may be similar to the process of Vatican II Renewal for women religious.) What is blocking their taking on this responsibility—their other commitments and needs that come first? Feelings of inadequacy or lack of preparation (real or imagined)? The sisters not willing to cede control?

If oblates are to “take more responsibility” for sustaining, leading, and sharing the Benedictine charism, what initiative/steps must oblates take and what spaces/tools could vowed members provide?

How do we begin to envision possible new models of oblate leadership? How might those models co-exist with the leadership of vowed communities? Are there areas of shared leadership? What are they? What sort of leadership training is needed? Are oblates willing/able to make the time commitment it will take to exercise leadership? Are vowed members willing to recognize the leadership ability of oblates?

How do we assist some vowed members to become more comfortable with oblates in leadership roles? How do we help some oblates realize they are not community members, sometimes vowed members need their own time?

Vowed members know detailed histories of their monasteries. How much do oblates know of the history of their monasteries? Is this important for carrying the tradition forward or is general Benedictine history enough? Why or why not?

2 . Benedictine Community: A Spiritual Heart Changing the World

Benedictines are not in this world to serve themselves. We are here to be Christ in the world in living our charism and Benedictine values faithfully. The monastery, and by extension wherever vowed members and oblates are, should contribute to the quality of life around us, bring God's love to all those we meet, and care for creation and the earth.

Benedictine spirituality is one of outreach, we are called to radical hospitality, extending ourselves to be a healing presence, offering respect for the dignity of others, kindness, and attentiveness to the world. Hospitality is the undergirding of our Benedictine spirituality and frees us in our search for creating a more just world.

Our Benedictine charism supports us to do justice, follow gospel nonviolence, engage in prophetic work, and serve the world.

We want to focus on outreach to youth and young people, help them know our tradition as inclusive, welcoming, grounding, and expansive. The core call is to welcome all as Christ.

Learning our history is valuable in preparing us to share these gifts with the contemporary world. Inviting more diversity into our communities, including through liturgy, is important. One of us suggested opening up monastic living for artists, writers, and other modern monks and seekers. We also value simply showing up together in a variety of situations, groups, and events, being the presence of the Christ where we are, being Benedictine outside of the monastery. Our participants were almost all from Northern American monasteries but it's worth noting that there are Benedictines around the world who are facing similar situations and raising similar questions and concerns. There are international Benedictine organizations which we can access online.

A lesbian participant, married to her female partner and living where the nearest Benedictine community is a male monastery, wonders whether she can hope to become an oblate.

"How do we best respond to the issues of our time as Benedictines have done in other times?" wonders one participant and another notes that Benedictine spirituality is a life-long commitment to the counter-cultural. After a presenter suggested our life should be one of "prayer and protest," that phrase appeared also in some comments.

How do we increase the visibility of Benedictine communities, whether physically situated in/around a monastery or not? How can we be more visible in the world?

What language do we need to begin changing in order to begin changing mindsets?

How do we invite more diverse populations into Benedictinism?

How do we envision the monastery as a center for spiritual formation and learning? Or, if it already is, how can we make it known that it exists, and that the offerings are what are needed now? Are we offering what younger generations are seeking?

How do we bring a Benedictine presence to the issue of our day, people on the margins (migrants, people of color, the poor, other persecuted or oppressed groups) and care for our earth?

“This conference was so much more than I expected. It really helped me see beyond my brick and mortar monastery to the Benedictine charism that saturates our mountain and beyond.”

3 ■ Benedictine Formation: A School for Beginners

As Benedictines we are called to a life of learning and ongoing formation. We study the Rule of Benedict and stay open to learning and listening. We need a solid foundation in Benedictine tradition and spirituality and its built-in flexibility that has helped sustain it for more than 1,500 years. Its dynamism gives us hope. It is our tool for daily living and for change.

Our roots go deep, our history holds a timeless, collective wisdom that is needed today. We would like to develop structures to support ongoing formation in that tradition, possibly a more formal and extensive formation process for oblates.

We note also that our Benedictine charism reaches across religions and faith traditions as well as generations. One thing we feel we need is a sort of clearinghouse for sharing information and resources. It would be helpful to find links to monastic community newsletters, blogs by oblates and vowed members, and retreat and workshop offerings all in one place.

This clearinghouse could also provide a space for sharing “blueprints” from communities on questions like how to move through the closing of a monastery from both the vowed and the oblate perspective. Or, blueprints for new ways of living in the monastery, including live-in volunteer or experiential programs.

We are all in agreement that connecting electronically via technologies like Zoom has opened many new doors for us. There are expanded opportunities not only for teaching and learning but also for shared conversation among those of us in the U.S. and also around the world. Our Benedictine family is world-wide and we’ve only touched the tip off the iceberg of what that means for us. Networking, idea generation, and sharing resources, which is key to our global understanding as well as the growth of our Benedictine community, is now borderless.

There is a certain need for institutional support for oblate programs and formation. It is the vowed members who are currently carriers of the wisdom of the tradition and the oral histories of the communities.

It would be helpful if there was a general, updated “Oblate Handbook” to guide inquirers and orient new oblates. Also, current vowed oblate

directors need to work on succession plans so that oblates can lead their own formation, either on their own if there are no vowed members, or in partnership with vowed members.

Our gathering showcased the universality of concerns across the country and how interconnected we are as Benedictines—with one another and with other “flavors” of Benedictinism. We are linked in spirit and action with the wider world. One example of this are the many dispersed Benedictine communities. We have much to learn and share together and new technologies make it easier for us to have hosted dialogue.

How do we more fully develop monastic formation programs for oblates and other seekers? What are the standards, levels of accountability and credentials needed for those who develop and lead those programs?

How do communities in general create stronger networks and share resources and make it possible for all seekers to find them and connect with the resources?

What would it look like to develop a Benedictine ecosystem?

“Whatever we found or re-found is not going to look like any one of us individually imagined it.”

4 ■ Being Benedictine: Seeing New and Renewed Ways to Live Our Charism

A participant reminds us that Benedict did not expect perfection: “Always, we begin again!” Listening, humility, hospitality, and flexibility all go into creating and accepting change and those are all key components of Benedictine spirituality. It’s in our bones to be open to change. We also remember, however, that we’re all at different places along the way.

The positive experience of so many at our Being Benedictine gathering, and our overwhelming desire to carry our tradition into the future in new ways that fit our emerging worldview, is clear evidence that we understand this gift of our charism. Many comments reminded us that we need openness to emerging approaches to Benedictine life, willingness to experiment, to foster creativity, and to welcome the seeking hearts of younger generations. Other commenters tempered their excitement with very real fear. Once again, the wisdom of our tradition prepares us, reminding us to seek balance.

One concern voiced by many is that of oblates whose vowed monastic community will cease to exist sooner rather than later. They want to begin now to find ways to remain connected and live their Benedictine life in community. Oblates want to be involved in planning for their future, “... not be bashful about trying new things or waiting for ‘permission.’” As Sister Judith Sutura said, “The luxury of slow deliberation is gone.”

There are many facets to Benedictine community and room for great variation. On this weekend we’ve experienced ecumenical Benedictine communities, learned of non-Catholic monastics, and people with a deep commitment to monastic life who are not vowed. We have also heard about the value of intergenerational community. We noted our longing for more diverse communities. Learning about other communities such as Nuns and Nones has offered additional ways to think about community, too. Bottom line, as Oblate Judith Valente said, it’s “about loving the tradition enough to let it be transformed.”

What must we leave behind as we move into the future? Canonical status? Vowed/non-vowed distinction? A hierarchy of calling?

What structural, cultural, and leadership changes might we need to consider as we move into a future where there are more non-vowed Benedictines than vowed Benedictines? What changes need to happen in monasteries? In oblate groups?

What does it mean for oblates when there is no monastery nearby, or their monastery has closed or is closing? What are possible alternatives to closing a monastery when there are no longer vowed members to sustain it?

How can we re-imagine the space of a community when it no longer needs to be physical?

How do we envision living monastic life in new ways and tell others about it? Opportunities for non-vowed to live in the monastery? Offering extra acreage/building space for intentional communities? Creating dispersed expressions of Benedictine community?

Can we envision ways in which oblates could play advisory roles on decisions concerning the future of a monastery's ministries? In evaluating the sustainability of physical plant and properties? Can oblates enter into creative conversations about their use and future use?

Who finances oblate programs, leadership training, and other costs? Is the monastery responsible for the finances? If not, how are they financed?

How do oblates or lay cistercians become full-fledged, active members of a monastic community (with a voice, voting privileges)? Is that possible or desirable in conjunction with vowed members, without a life commitment?

Monasteries of vowed members have complex financial structures and fiscal and legal responsibilities to support members and institutions. In exploring questions about greater oblate responsibility in the running of the monastery and more shared leadership, where do these realities come into play?

5 ■ Benedictine Prayer: Single-hearted Seeking of God

We come out of a stance of prayer. “The way I live is seeking God,” said one participant. We come to the monastery to seek God, that is our driving force, the filter through which we ask questions and make choices.

Many of us long for communal prayer and those not physically near their monastery are now finding ways to participate virtually. While not a perfect alternative, it does offer some level of connection.

In addition to communal prayer, many participants spoke of the importance of personal prayer practices including *lectio divina* and contemplative prayer. Study and the reading of texts that inspire and guide are also important, as is art and beauty.

We remember that we are a movement of Christians, not clerical or hierarchical, and we need to be clear about that and claim it. Benedictine spirituality is always about the presence of God in our time, and it is universal. It was good to experience in our gathering the number of Benedictine communities there are that live this spirituality every day. “I am starting to believe the key to sustainability is connection and stories,” noted one participant.

It would do us good to remember the Monastic Heart as a universal call. This is another version of the “archetype of the monk” or “contemplative consciousness” or “monk within” to develop in and outside of monasteries.

Why do we believe what we do (what are our core values) and what do we need to sustain/develop our beliefs? We each need to wrestle with what we believe AND recognize that different generations will have different ways for sustaining and developing their beliefs.

General Feedback

TECHNOLOGY LIMITATIONS

Some of the feedback provided on the Zoom conference experience would have been rendered moot had we been on site.

For example, if the conference had been on site, making videos of the presentations openly available after the conference would not have been an issue as we had not made plans to record. In hindsight, it would have been helpful if we had stated that videos would not be available. Joan Chittister's presentation will be included in a book next spring and the other presentations will be used on other occasions. Please trust that you heard what you needed to hear and that whatever notes you took contain the message you need.

As to having materials for local use, we are working on ways to do that. There are many resources available besides what we offered, and it is a matter of making them known.

Zoom breakout room technology limited what we could do with small groups and although we offered some open sessions, it isn't the same as the mingling and conversation that happens when people are gathered on site.

Large group facilitation via Zoom is also a challenge. It would have been helpful to have assigned group facilitators, but again, via Zoom breakout rooms, we could not do that easily. Likewise, we could not offer any group time by interest or any other breakdown with the technology.

We missed the opening social that would have happened on site. A few comments gave ideas for how we might have incorporated some aspects of an opening social via Zoom and we've made note for future events.

Although our names appear on the little Zoom screens in which we appear, they are not as easily read as a name tag that could also include the name of our monastery and city.

BEYOND OUR CONTROL

Some comments referred to things that were out of our control.

We invited Benedictine prioresses, abbots, and oblate directors to attend and/or invite others to attend the initial conference in 2020. Because we were at capacity when we postponed the conference, we did not do another mailing. However, we did contact some abbots again trying to increase the number of male

monastics. Who attended, and how often they chose to participate in any advance conversation, was out of our control.

There are many ways to be Benedictine, many ways to live the charism. Our conference, as stated on the website, intended to ask questions. We were not expecting attendees with the same viewpoints or backgrounds. We were not looking to "solve" anything. Our goal was conversation with an eye to creating new inroads into carrying Benedictine spirituality into the future.

OTHER ORGANIZATIONS

If we had been on site we would have had some kind of exhibit hall where the organizations we spoke about—American Benedictine Academy (ABA), Monasteries of the Heart, Alliance for International Monasticism (AIM-USA), Abbey of the Arts, North American Association of Benedictine Oblate Directors (NAABOD)—would have had displays. We will get information about them on our website soon.

Although there is strong desire for a website that aggregates Benedictine happenings, a virtual space for networking and conversation, and a Benedictine think tank, there was support for the fact that Being Benedictine has no intention of becoming a new organization or institution. Our hope is to support Benedictine life moving into the future and that may then lead other organizations as they seek ways to respond to the needs of Benedictine life in the coming years.

INNER MONK QUESTIONS

Several persons commented on the richness of the series of questions that was sent in the weeks leading up to the retreat. There was some confusion, though about their purpose.

The reflection on the archetype of the monk was intended as personal reflection prior to engaging in our conference conversation. However, as so many found the questions helpful and thought-provoking, we can consider having some Zoom conversations for those who would like to explore them further. The reflections can be found at beingbenedictine.org/inner-monk.

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