



MONASTÈRE SAINT-BENOÎT

SEPTEMBER 2021 ~ PAX INTER SPINAS

Dear Oblates and Associates,

Thank you for your dedication and assistance to Monastère Saint-Benoît, and for your patience in awaiting this monthly reflection. As Father Prior mentioned in his earlier message, amidst our duties and the many and varied demands that are made on our time each day, every message received is read and your intentions are carried into Choir without fail.

These days of August have been particularly full at the monastery, with important liturgical feasts, guests and visitors, and the anniversary of our arrival last year here at Domaine Saint-Christophe. God willing, you were also able to celebrate Our Lady's glorious Assumption into Heaven by attending Holy Mass and perhaps a [procession in her honor](#), as was our privilege here at the monastery. At the very least, you can read and reflect upon the [homily](#) Father Prior preached that hot, sunny day.

Seasons and Providence

Since then, the hot and sunny days have become cooler with the approach of the change in seasons. The tenor of the monastic day changes too, and its liturgy, in conjunction with the seasons. In the forty-first chapter of his Holy Rule, our holy father Saint Benedict refers to corresponding meteorological and liturgical seasons when he would have the abbot adapt the monastic *horarium* to account not only for weather conditions and daylight hours (centuries before Daylight Savings Time), but *omnia temperet atque disponat qualiter et animae salventur*, 'let him so arrange and ordain all things that souls may be saved.' For Saint Benedict, the abbot's disposition of temporal things should reflect and correspond to how God ordains time and events, be they daily or historical: *abbatis sit providentia*.

The Cross and Providence

In this chapter of the Rule, Saint Benedict also mentions a specific date that we are now approaching: the Ides of September, on which falls the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, that ancient celebration of the transformation of it, by the Sacrifice wrought upon it, and the Divine Love with which it was offered, from an ignominious instrument of punishment and death to the glorious instrument and sign of mercy and redemption. It is no accident that in treating of changes in seasons and the dispositions of providence, Saint Benedict should evoke this Feast, on which at Holy Mass the celebrant chants in the Preface *ut unde mors oriebatur, inde vita resurgeret; et qui in ligno vincebat, in ligno quoque vinceretur*, 'so that whence came death, thence also life might rise again, and that he who overcame by the tree might also be overcome on the tree.' No more marvelous disposition of Divine Providence that souls may be saved than the overturning of sin by its very consequences: suffering, death and condemnation. Again, when offered with love as sacrifice, these things are transformed from abhorrent to expiatory and salvific. As can be even the seemingly small sacrifices of children, Our Lady taught the shepherd children at Fatima.

Winter is Coming

Saint Benedict prescribes another change in the monastic *horarium* later in the year, this time for the Night Office in the beginning of November, on account of winter. Liturgical readings too, hymns and their tones will change, becoming longer and more somber to fit the longer winter nights. Ever practical, Saint Benedict is aware that time advances inexorably and changes everything that is subject to it: important things like the holy liturgy, but also small things like the needs of nature he also mentions in the eighth chapter of the Holy Rule.

Increasing Darkness

We witness the same ourselves. Summer gives way to autumn. The leisure of vacations ends and the toil of work and study resumes. So too in history, times change, from enlightened by faith and fervent in courage and charity, to darker ages in which minds are dulled by error and distractions, and hearts grow cold in the pursuit of ambitions, worldly enticements and ephemeral trends. Such are the times in which we live today, prefigured by Saint John in the Prologue to his account of the Gospel, in which darkness that does not comprehend the light shining into it, and with it sin and death encroach ever more and more upon the life that was the light of men. This relentless growing darkness would be dreadful, as to ancient Romans the prospect of longer and longer nights with the approach of winter, were it not for its eventual reversal, for the Romans on the winter solstice celebration of *Sol Inviētus*, and for Christians celebrating the Nativity of Christ, *Lux claritatis dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus*, Light by which seeing, God is clearly known (Preface for Christmas). Later in his Prologue, Saint John will also distinguish between the *mundus per ipsum factum est* - the world that was made by God - and the *mundus eum non cognovit* - the world that knew Him not.

Worldly Cares

Now, in Christian literature what in English we call 'the world' is in Latin also called *saeculum*. This word refers to the temporal, temporary things, things that pass with time and do not last, as opposed to the eternal or everlasting things of God. This is the word Saint Jerome uses in the Vulgate, *sollicitudo saeculi istius*, in translating Saint Matthew's Gospel account of the Parable of the Sower (Chapter 13). For the cares of this world (as well as the deceitfulness of riches), thorns *spinas* are the allegory: like thorns, growing worldly cares threaten to choke the life out of the seed of God's Word planted in our souls and render us fruitless.

The Deceit of Riches

Now, these worldly cares are not necessarily evil in themselves. Our Lord is no Marxist, despising the wealthy. Indeed, the wealthy were among His disciples, some like Zacchaeus being very wealthy. It is the deceitful illusion that riches are a necessity competing with the Word of God growing within us. Riches did not impede the young man who approached Our Lord from being good (Saint Mark 10:17ff), but it was the importance he ascribed to them that impeded him from attaining perfection.

Cares and Concerns

Riches are not alone in falsely claiming too much importance in our lives. Witness the scene in Bethany (Saint Luke 10:38ff), at the home of some wealthy disciples and friends of Jesus. One sister, Saint Martha, attending to the material duties of hospitality and frustrated that she alone is busy, pauses her much serving to complain: "Lord hast Thou no care?" "Martha, Martha," replies Our Lord, "It is you who have care about many things that trouble you." Then He refers to her sister Mary, sitting at His feet, attentive to Him above all else, "But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Attentiveness

How often that same scene in Bethany is played out again in our hearts, and even here in the monastery. Christ is present, but our attention is drawn away by material concerns: order and cleanliness and hospitality, business and finances, politics and news, messages and notifications on electronic devices, etc. I will be attentive to Christ, we tell ourselves, but first I need to take care of this or that. That word 'first' is indicative of where our priorities lie. Given too much importance, the thorns of worldly cares and worries, like the darkness and cold of winter, encroach upon the tranquility - *pax* in Latin - and the light and warmth of the presence of Christ.

Pax inter Spinās

Hence the monastery's motto: *Pax inter Spinās*, an oasis of peace in a world overgrown with the thorns of troubles and worries. And like an oasis, even though it may be surrounded by hostile conditions, the monastery remains undisturbed by them. *Pax inter Spinās*. The other day while peeling potatoes, one of the brethren - a fine Latiniſt - remarked that the phrase is *inter spinās* and not *in spinis*. The combination of the preposition and the declension of the noun do not denote inclusion, the meaning is not 'in or 'among' but 'between' or 'amidſt'. Or to use modern terms, co-existing but without co-mingling.

Absence

So what is this *Pax*, that remains unperturbed *inter Spinās*? To those troubled by worldly cares, even Christ's disciples like Saint Martha, *Pax* may seem like an absence, freedom or relief from conflict or worries. As with the aforementioned ended vacation - *vacare* means to empty - it is removal that comes to mind - of the cares of work or studies in a vacation, of the burden of the chores of hospitality with a sister's help, of the worrisome thorns of worldly cares to have peace. But this tells us only what *Pax* is not, not what it is. Saint Peter, on a different occasion (Saint Matthew 19:27), sees things from a similar perspective, when he asks Our Lord a question that could loosely be paraphrased: 'Lord: we have left everything to follow you; now what?'

Presence

For Mary, however - both the Blessed Virgin assumed into Heaven and saintly sister sitting at Our Lord's feet in Bethany - peace is not an absence. It is a presence: the presence of Our Lord, Who captivates and enthralls, Who enlightens the mind and thrills the heart, Who calms worries - Saint Martha's and our own - and Who declares that those who have chosen the better part shall not have it taken from them. It is this same Christ Whose True Presence is worshipped and adored in Tabernacles throughout the world, Who offers Himself in the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass as the Lamb of God Who takes away the sins of the world, Who has mercy on us and Who grants us peace. It is the presence of Christ among us that is our *Pax inter Spinās*.

Priorities

But first we must be attentive to Him; first we must choose the better part. During His Sermon on the Mount, a portion of which was read recently at Sunday Mass, Our Lord tells His disciples "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His justice". (Saint Matthew 6:33; please read Father Prior's [homily](#).) Seek God before tending to any care of this world, even necessities such as food or clothing (*ibid.* 25, 31), or even planning for the future (*ibid.* 34). In choosing the better part, we must give it priority. Though it may be *inter*, *Pax* nonetheless comes before *Spinās*. Throughout his Holy Rule, our holy father Saint Benedict expresses this priority with an intensity greater than it sounds in English translation: *Nihil amori Christi praeponitur*, to prefer nothing to the love of Christ (chapter 4); *his qui nihil sibi a Christo carius aliquid existimant* those who hold nothing dearer to them than Christ (Chapter 5); *Christo omnino nihil praeponant*, prefer nothing whatever to Christ (Chapter 73). It is only when one holds Christ as first and above all else that one can leave the world and its worries, family and fortune, to enter a monastery and truly live the monastic life.

Practical Application

Beyond these principles, the Holy Rule itself is an expression of top priority given to Christ. Its prescriptions and practices are the application of it in life and activity. And even for those who admire the Holy Rule without the ability to live its precepts fully, some of the dispositions it describes can be applied to life outside a monastery. The following are some suggestions.

Priority of Prayer

Because he knows that for us in this life the presence of Christ is most perfect in the holy liturgy, in his Holy Rule Saint Benedict gives the liturgy itself priority along the same terms: *Nihil operi Dei praeponitur*, let nothing be put before the Work of God. (Chapter 43) He calls the liturgy the Work of God because it is made by God, whose Holy Ghost inspires the composition of its Psalms and hymns, of its arrangement and ceremonies, a living work of art in the creation of which men cooperate. Men cooperate too in offering the prayers of the holy liturgy. But the Work is not ours, it is God's. Christ, present in the Eucharist and in the Church, His Mystical Body and His Spouse, offers the Holy Sacrifice and the sacrifice of praise to His Heavenly Father. Our personal prayers and devotions have value, of course, but it is the prayer of the Word of God Incarnate that is perfect, and by grace it is our privilege to be able to participate in it.

Now, outside the monastery it may not be possible to attend Holy Mass and all the Hours of the Divine Office every day, but with a bit of effort, one may be able occasionally, perhaps even daily, to go to Mass other days in addition to Sundays and Holy Days. Likewise, the Hours of Prime and Compline are not difficult to learn and several monasteries publish inexpensive booklets with excerpts of bilingual (Latin / vernacular) excerpts from the Monastic Diurnal precisely for use by Oblates, Associates and other lay persons as morning and evening prayers.

Priority of Place

In the fifty-second chapter of his Holy Rule, our holy father Saint Benedict describes the Oratory, the most important place in a monastery. But this description is not of the physical building, or its design, dimensions or appointments. Rather, Saint Benedict describes its spiritual features. By design it has one sole purpose: "Let the oratory be what its name implies, and let nothing else be done or kept there." Its dimensions are great, *summo* in Latin -- silence and reverence. It is appointed with the brethren and their prayers, first the *Opus Dei*, but also particular and secret prayers, adorned with tears and fervor of heart.

These qualities should apply to all oratories: to the place we attend Holy Mass, and to the place reserved in our home for prayer. It should be a place of importance, more important than that of any electronic screen or entertainment device. Our oratory should be central, permanent and reserved for prayer alone. It should be free of noise or chatter, dings or beeps or ringtones or cross traffic. It should be a place free from any hindrance or impediment to prayer -- twice Saint Benedict insists in this chapter -- to hearing the Word of God. Free from the cares of this world, including Saint Martha's... An oasis: *Pax inter Spinis*.

Priority of Time

Saint Benedict divides the *Opus Dei* into hours, and so by these hours is the monastic day divided. It is no coincidence that the day hours of the Divine Office: the first, the third, the sixth, the ninth and the last of remaining daylight, - Prime, Terce, Sext, None and Vespers - correspond to the hours the master in Saint Matthew 20 goes out to seek laborers for his vineyard. Saint Jerome translated the word for these workmen as *operarios*, whence our word 'cooperate', the same word employed by Saint Benedict in the Prologue to his Rule. The calling to share in the Work of the Master in His vineyard probably took place at the hours when in the first century people in the villages and fields surrounding Jerusalem could hear the Levite's horns calling to prayer in the Temple, and pilgrims on roads approaching for the great feasts, chanting the climbing 'gradual'

psalms as they ascended, rejoicing, up to the house of the Lord until their feet stood at the gates of Jerusalem. (Psalm 121)

So too in the monastery, "As soon as the signal for the *Opus Dei* has been heard, let them abandon what they have in hand and assemble with the greatest speed, yet soberly." (Holy Rule, Chapter 43.) Again, outside the monastery it may not be possible to pray all the hours of the Divine Office, but some prime time could be reserved for part of it: besides time to attend Holy Mass, the time immediately after waking for the Hour of Prime and the time just before going to sleep for Compline. Like the place of the oratory, these times should be kept for prayer alone, free of other duties or activities, 'cleansed of all vain, perverse or distracting thoughts.' (Prayer before the Divine Office) This is 'quality time' to spend with Christ, time for *Pax inter Spinās*.

Vincula Pacis

A final note: the *Pax* that should ground our monastery and our lives, though discrete and not clamoring for attention like the *Spinās* surrounding it, is a benefit not exclusive to us who enjoy it thanks to the discipline taught to us by the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict, and the example of countless saints throughout history. It is what Saint Paul in his Epistle to the Ephesians calls the bond that holds together the unity of the spirit. A good portion of the fourth chapter of this Epistle is read at the votive Mass *pro Ecclesiae unitate* for the Unity of the Church [at this time in the life of the Church offered here in our monastery each Friday](#) where it is liturgically possible. Yes, there is concern for unity in the Church, beset as she is by the world and its cares, and even by troubles *ad intra*. But more than anything else, it is the presence of Christ, and love for Him before and above all else, in our monasteries, in our hearts and in our lives, that will keep the Church whole and undivided, from the Vatican to the farthest mission, from the greatest cathedral to the humblest chapel, in Christian nations and under the direst of persecutions. "Walk worthy of the vocation in which you are called," writes Saint Paul, "with all humility and mildness, with patience, supporting one another in charity."

Thank you again for the charity of your own [support of the monastery](#), and for making our needs known to others.

I remain your disposition for any further contact you may wish to have through the Oblates and Associates' email address: oblatietsocii@monasterebrignoles.org. Please be assured that you are included in the "*fratribus absentibus*" prayed for at the end of each Office, and indeed of our gratitude for all that you do for us.

Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus,

Dom Anselm Marie.

Master of Oblates and Associates.