



# Oblates of St. Benedict Belmont Abbey

November, 2008



## November Meeting

We will be moving the meeting from the usual third Sunday so as not to interfere with the Jubilee celebrations. The next Oblate meeting is on November 23 and will begin at 3:30 in the Gallagher Room.

## Jubilee Celebrations

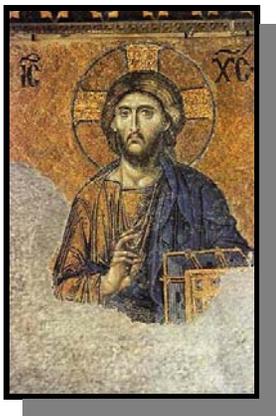
The Abbey is celebrating the anniversaries of the profession or ordination of several of the monks Sunday, November 16.

- Fr. Raymond Geyer, O.S.B.  
65th anniversary of monastic profession
- Fr. Matthew McSorfev, O.S.B.  
65th anniversary of monastic profession
- Abbot Oscar Burnett, O.S.B.  
50th anniversary of monastic profession
- Fr. Francis Forster, O.S.B.  
50th anniversary of monastic profession
- Fr. Kenneth Geyer, O.S.B.  
55th anniversary of ordination
- Fr. Davie Kessinger, O.S.B.  
50th anniversary of ordination

Please remember them in your prayers and give them your warmest congratulations.

## Taking up the Psalter:

**A letter to some friends by Samuel F. Weber, O.S.B.**



Recently I was asked by some friends not accustomed to using the Psalter, why it might be to their advantage to take it up in their worship and private devotion. This should not be too difficult a matter to explain, I thought at first. Anyone who has listened to Handel's Messiah is aware of the long Christian tradition of reading the Old Testament as a book of prophecy about Christ. Surely this would be a good place to start.

**Christ in the Psalms.** Having studied the history of Christian worship and prayer, I knew well the traditions that sang the Psalms in praise of the "Royal Son of David," the

Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., Psalms 2, 109[110], 131[132]), upon whom had been poured the "oil of gladness" (Ps 44[45]:8).<sup>1</sup> How the heart thrills when the Messianic Psalms are sung, especially during Advent and Christmastide!

In the Psalms of trouble and suffering, who could not help but recognize Jesus, the Suffering Servant? On the Cross, the Psalms of His People provided the words he needed to cry out to His God (Ps 21[22]), and led Him to commend His life and labors into the hands of the Father (Ps 30[31]:6).<sup>2</sup> No wonder these Psalms occur so often during Lent and Holy Week.

And then, how to hymn His resurrection glory? No finer song than Ps 117(118) for praising the "stone rejected" become "the cornerstone," and celebrating every Sunday as the special day "made by the Lord," on which rejoicing and gladness are the order of the day (Ps 117[118]:24; see also Mt 21:42, Mk 12:10 and Lk 20:17.; cf. Acts 4:11 and 1 Pt 2:7).



Although He did return to the Father's glory and is now seated at God's right hand, Jesus did not forget the loved ones who remained behind. The gift of the Holy Spirit in wind and fire at Pentecost attested: I am with you evermore. Psalter in hand, our Christian ancestors took up the chant on Ascension Day, "God goes up with shouts of joy" (Ps 46[47]:6), and longed for His Spirit-gift in their own lives, praying, "Send forth your Spirit ... renew the face of the earth!" (Ps 102[104]:30).<sup>3</sup>

**Baptism and the Lord's Supper.** As I was mulling over these, and various other possible ways of responding to the request my friends had made, I noticed, stacked in the corner of my bookcase, some postcards, memories of student years in Rome. Among them I came across one of the ancient baptisteries of the city, its walls adorned with dazzling mosaic. There, on the wall opposite the baptismal pool, situated in such a way that, as the newly baptized emerged dripping from the waters, their eyes would immediately fall upon it, was the figure of a youthful shepherd boy. A little lamb was hoisted upon his broad shoulders. I must show this to my friends and tell them how those early Christians newly up from the waters, upon seeing

this wonderful work of art, would remember that it was Jesus who had assured them, “I am the good shepherd” (Jn 10:11), and would sing of Him to whom their lives were now irrevocably committed:

The Lord is my shepherd ...  
near restful waters he leads me ...  
My head you have anointed with oil ...  
In the Lord’s own house shall I dwell,  
for ever and ever (Ps 22[23]:1, 2, 5, 6)

I picked up another postcard. This time the scene, from the catacombs, was that of a tiny cavern deep under the street level. Perhaps at one time it had been used as a small chapel. Etched on one of its walls, in red the color of clay, was a table. Near it were fish, and two baskets filled with loaves marked with crosses. Vines heavy with clusters of ripe grapes were also near. All was ready for a meal. “Taste and see that the Lord is good!” (Ps 33[34]:9, cf. 1 Pt 2:3). Perhaps my friends would be interested to know that primitive Christians found in this Psalm words most suitable to celebrate Christ present among them in bread broken and a cup shared. Perhaps this traditional communion Psalm would find a place in their own commemoration of the Lord’s Supper.



**The Mirror Image of Life.** As I considered the matter, I felt sure that these points would be helpful to my friends. And yet, something more was needed. What was it? I began paging through the hymnal they were accustomed to use, and as I did so, it became more and more evident what had to be said about the advantage of the Psalter.

This is what I noticed. Like the Psalter, the hymnal contained numerous hymns that praised and thanked God, and many others that recalled the beauty of His creation and extolled His unceasing providence. Faith, and hope in His promises were duly expressed, and the fellowship of Christian believers extolled. Hymns celebrating the mystery of Christ in the Church Year were not lacking either. Indeed, a number of them were beautiful paraphrases of the great Christological Psalms.

Unlike the Psalter, however, there was not one angry hymn in the entire collection. So often we feel the need to pour out our rage to God in prayer. How will the hymnal help us then? Perhaps this is precisely the point at which the Psalter is most valuable for our needs today, and the point at which

our current worship books and hymnals fall short. The Psalter is true to life; it accords so accurately with the rawness of human experience. It leaves nothing unsaid, no emotion unexpressed.

I knew then that I would have to tell my friends the whole truth about the Psalter, and what might happen to them if they took it up.

First of all, the Psalms would expose the pain of living, and demand that they face squarely every condition of human suffering. Betrayal by friends (Ps 54[55]), attacks of enemies (Ps 55[56]), the unfairness of a world in which the wicked seem to get rewards, and the just, for all their devoted piety, seem afflicted with endless trouble (Ps 72[73]) – it is all there, in graphic detail. The ultimate issues of sickness and death receive particular attention:

Spent and utterly crushed,  
I cry aloud in anguish of heart. (Ps 37[38]:9)

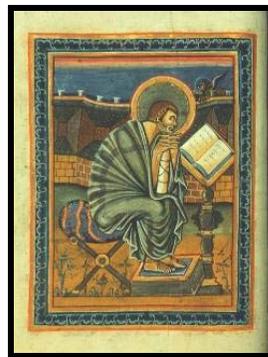
You have given me a short span of days;  
my life is as nothing in your sight (Ps 38[39]:6)

Take away your scourge from me.  
I am crushed by the blows of your hand. (Ps 37[38]:11)

This sort of prayer disorients life. It threatens security. It hurts! We are frightened.

But it would not be enough merely to expose pain. More is needed. There must also be a response on the part of the believing heart. It must do something with this pain. It must present it to God!

“Here my voice, O God, as I complain!” (Ps 63[64]:1).



These words were frequently to be found on the lips of some of the greatest saints! Curses, complaints and laments abound in the Psalter. And this is good.

Taking up the Psalter makes a bold statement to the world about the relationship between God and the human family. God cares how we feel. He cares about all our feelings, especially the ones we find so difficult to deal with. Since the Psalter is His inspired word, it is clear that He expects to hear from us when we are fed up with the disappointment and suffering of life. Even when we are fed up with God!

Taking up the Psalter makes a bold statement about us.

When we sincerely join the prayer of our hearts to the words of our lips, we declare that we have finally decided to stop burying pain deep within, where neither God nor loved ones can reach to help us. We say that we are ready to suffer through our pain and, when the time comes, to get over it and let it go.

Taking up the Psalter holds a promise. Disorientation is not forever:

When I think: "I have lost my foothold,"  
your mercy, Lord, holds me up.  
When cares increase in my heart  
Your consolation calms my soul. (Ps 93[94]:18-19)

We are not alone in our trouble; suffering, sickness and death do not have the final say. Could this be the reason why so many Christians have clung tenaciously to the Psalter for so many centuries? We need desperately to listen to the Psalms, to read them and to sing them, alone and together. To scream, to delight, to weep, to play them again and again until

My body and my heart faint for joy;  
God is my possession forever. (Ps 72[73]:26)

I know now how I will answer my friends. I will tell them, "If you take up the Psalter, prepare for an ordeal. Get ready to see the mirror image of your own life in the book your hands hold. Prepare to let the tears flow ... and the sighs, and the groans. And that will be good."

<sup>1</sup> The most frequently quoted Old Testament book in the New Testament is the Book of Psalms. Many have found in their reading of the New Testament a key to a Christian understanding of the Psalms. For Psalm 2:7, see Hebr 1:5; 5:5, and Acts 13:33. For Psalm 2:1-2, see Acts 4:25-26. Psalm 109(110) is the more frequently cited Psalm. In Mt 22:44 (and parallel passages) Christ applies this Psalm to Himself. Version of the Psalms used in this article: The Psalms: Singing Version, Paulist Press, 1983.

<sup>2</sup> For Psalm 21(22), see Mt 27:46 and Mark 14:34. Psalm 30(31) is found in Lk 23:46.

<sup>3</sup> These Psalms are not specifically cited in the New Testament. Their use at Ascension and Pentecost belongs too the tradition of Christian psalm-singing in worship.

#### Recommended reading:

- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Psalms: The Prayer Book of the Bible*. Augsburg, 1970.
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Praying the Psalms*. Saint Mary's Press, 1982.
- Merton, Thomas. *Bread in the Wilderness*. Liturgical Press, 1971.

- Merton, Thomas. *Praying the Psalms*. Liturgical Press, 1956.

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#### Wisdom from the Desert

"Where shall I look for Enlightenment?" the disciple asked. "Here," the elder said. "When will it happen?" the disciple wanted to know. "It is happening right now," the elder said. "Then why don't I experience it?" the disciple asked. And the elder answered, "Because you do not look." "But what should I look for?" the disciple wanted to know. And the elder smiled and answered, "Nothing. Just look." "But at what?" the disciple insisted. "Anything your eyes alight upon," the elder continued. "Well, then, must I look in a special kind of way?" the disciple said. "No," the elder said. "Why ever not?" the disciple persisted. And the elder said quietly, "Because to look you must be here. The problem is that you are mostly somewhere else."



*Wisdom Distilled from the Daily*, Joan Chittister, OSB., pages. 201-202.

"Neither cloister nor community alone makes a Benedictine; it is the energy of seeking God together that bonds place and people in this unique way."

*Prayer and Community*, Columbia Stewart, OSB, p. 72.

#### From the Scriptorium

Other books that can lead you to a better understanding of the Psalms and how to properly pray them are:

*The Monastic Hours*, edited by Anne M. Field  
*The School of Prayer, An Introduction to the Divine Office for all Christians* by John Brook;  
*The Liturgy of the Hours* by A. M. Roguet, OP  
*Inside the Psalms, Reflections for Novices* by Maureen McCabe, OCSO

*The Anchor Bible Commentary on the Psalms*, by Mitchell Dahood; and *Psalms*, by Konrad Schaefer.

### The Ordo

Listed are the Feast days and Memorials that are observed at the Monastery and follows the Ordo of the American Cassinese Congregation.

### NOVEMBER

- 16 Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time (Week 1)
- 21 Presentation of the Virgin Mary. Memorial.
- 22 Cecilia, Virgin, Martyr. Memorial.
- 23 **Christ the King, Solemnity. (Week II)**
  - 24 Andrew Dung-lac, Presbyter, Martyr, and His Companions, Martyrs, Memorial.



### SEASON OF ADVENT

- 30 First Sunday of Advent. (Week I)

### DECEMBER

- 3 Francis Xavier, Presbyter, Religious, Missionary, Memorial.
- 7 Second Sunday of Advent. (Week II)
- 8 **Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, Solemnity.**
- 12 Our Lady of Guadalupe, Feast.
- 13 Lucy, Virgin, Martyr, Memorial.
- 14 Third Sunday of Advent. (Week III)
- 21 Fourth Sunday of Advent. (Week IV)

### December Meeting

Our next meeting will be December 21, 2008. If you need to reach me please write to:

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