



Oblate Letter

Living Benedictine Spirituality within the Catechesis of the Good Shepherd

By Camille Zumwalt, Oblate

"I see the love of God in you. The light of Christ comes shining through; and I am blessed to be with you, oh holy child of God."

Just as St. Benedict encouraged his monks to receive guests to the monastery as if they were Christ himself -- so too do our Monte Cassino School children honor Christ in one another as they sing this sweet prayer in the atrium.

From the moment they enter the atrium, walking slowly and quietly with "atrium feet" and "prayer hands," the children become noticeably aware they are in a holy place, a special room within their school that is unlike any other classroom. Every item in the atrium is carefully placed for one purpose: to help the children draw nearer to God. The children become stewards of all that is given to them in the atrium, treating each material as sacred. Their work is their prayer in the atrium (*ora et labora*), and they practice being respectful of their classmates' work and prayer.

With the "self-teaching" principles of well-known educator Maria Montessori and the theological moorings of Hebrew scholarship, scripture studies and Roman Catholic liturgy and doctrine, a woman named Sofia Cavaletti developed an approach that not only appealed to the profound religious intuition of younger and older children, but which evolved from the children themselves.

The Catechesis of the Good Shepherd, established in the mid 50's in Rome, Italy, is an approach to the religious formation of children. It is rooted in the Bible, the liturgy of the church, and the "hands on" educational principles of Montessori. This spiritual forma-

tion acknowledges there is a deep bond between God and the child, which produces in the child the desire to draw nearer to God.

Once a week, children gather in an "atrium", a room specially prepared for them, which contains simple yet beautiful hand-made materials that they use. You may be wondering how these materials help the religious life of children. If an adult hears a passage from the Bible, the adult might take a Bible, find the Scripture, and read it slowly again and again. He or she may think deeply about the words and perhaps speak to God in a thankful or hopeful prayer (*lectio divina*). But a little child, too young to read, needs another way.

In an atrium the child can ponder a biblical passage or a prayer from the liturgy by taking special materials for that text and working with them -- placing wood figures of sheep in a sheepfold with the Good Shepherd, setting hand-carved wooden apostles with Jesus around the Last Supper table, or preparing a small wooden altar with sacred articles used for the Eucharist. Older children, who do read, often copy parables from the Bible, lay in order written prayers and elements from the Mass and the rite of baptism, or label a lengthy grosgrain ribbon timeline showing the history of the Kingdom of God. Atriums are quiet places so a child may work and pray in ways conducive to listening with the ear of the heart. They experience interior peace that accompanies sitting in silence, and the value of making a quiet place for God in their hearts every day.

As a catechist, my role is to prepare the special environment, the atrium, and to make presentations that "call forth" the child's

response rather than "pour in" information. The true teacher in the atrium is the Holy Spirit. I am blessed each day to listen with the children and together ask, "God, who are you? How do you love us?"

After a theme has been presented, the child is free to choose an activity that will make possible the inner dialogue with the "interior teacher." As with the oratory of the monastery, the atrium is to be what it is called and nothing else is to be done or stored there.

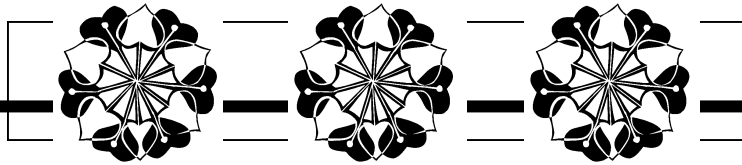
The atrium is a sacred space for prayerful work, which becomes a conversation with God. The children know that in the atrium, their work is their prayer. Children are encouraged to practice silence and respect for God, so their classmates who may wish to pray will not be disturbed by the insensitivity of another.

- The atrium was the place in the early church where the catechumens were prepared.
- For the child too, the atrium is a place of preparation for involvement in the larger worshiping community.

Materials in the atrium are attractively displayed, inviting children to explore and deepen spiritual experiences at their own rhythm. The most important characteristic of the materials is their close link to biblical and liturgical sources. Shelves include maps of Israel and miniature environments representing elements of the parables and historical events from Scripture that have been shown to satisfy the spiritual needs of the child.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

February 5th
Feast of St. Agatha
Feast Day of
Sr. Agatha Burke

February 10th
Feast of St. Scholastica
Feast Day of
Sr. Scholastica Reagan

February 11th
The Feast of St. Benedict of
Ariane, Abbot

February 20th
Feast of Blessed Jacinta of
Fatima
Feast Day of
Sr. Marie Jacinta Dorado

February 25th
Feast Day of
St. Walburga, Abbess

⊕
*Please keep all of the Sisters
in your prayers
as they do for you.*
⊕

OBLATE MEETING

February 8, 2009

Note change of schedule for this month only

- 10:30 a.m. Mass in the Oratory—everyone is welcome
- 12:15 p.m. Study group will meet in the Monastery Library.
Please bring your book.
- 12:15 p.m. Novice Study Group will meet in the Conference Room
- 1:15 p.m. Program: *Hearts Burning with the Presence of God*
- 3:00 p.m. Vespers in the Marian Chapel—Sisters of St. Benedict from Piedmont will join us

Sophia Center at Mount St. Scholastica in Atchison, KS is hosting an institute for Oblates from July 16-19, 2009. Abbot Jerome Kodell from Subiaco, AR will be one of the two speakers.

For more information contact
Judith Sutera, OSB at:
jsutera@mountosb.org

or
913-360-6200.

AROUND THE HOUSE

Sisters Marie Therese and Maria Paula will host the Region 13 formation gathering of the Religious Formation Conference on February 27-March 1. Approximately 10-12 women in formation and their directors from Missouri, Kansas and Oklahoma will participate in presentations and discussions on Practices in Prayer and Living in the Presence of God. Sister Meg Funk,

Beech Grove IN will direct the gathering.

Sister Christine will be joining Benedictine prioresses from across the country in Cullman AL for their annual meeting January 29-February 4.

The meeting will have a retreat format led by Sr. Irene Nowell, St. Scholastica Monastery, Atchison, KS. "Wisdom in the Rule of Benedict," is the theme of the retreat. One important item on the meeting agenda is the election of a new president of the group.

The monastery community will host a dinner and reception for the Red Plains Benedictines of Piedmont on February 8.

Twenty-five faculty members from Bishop Kelley High School enjoyed a day of reflection at the monastery on January 5.

Fr. Paul Eichhoff, pastor of St. Cecilia's Church in Claremore, treated the Sisters to one of his gourmet dinners—chicken a la cranberry—on January 9.

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Prayer Intentions:

We pray for the repose of the soul of:

Ray Ramos,
uncle of Sr. Catherine Martinez

We pray for abundant healing of:

Kathleen Reagan,
sister-in-law of
Sr. Scholastica Reagan

The Andrew Mayo Family,
nephew and family of
Sr. Scholastica Reagan

Jane Hogestyn,
daughter of Shirley Hogestyn, Oblate



Benedictine Oblate Retreat "Facets of Benedictine Spirituality" March 20-22, 2009 At Saint Meinrad Archabbey

This retreat is open to all oblates and novices. Saint Meinrad monk Fr. Prior Tobias Colgan, OSB, will give the retreat.

The fee is \$225 (single occupancy) or \$375 (double), which includes lodging, meals and retreat conferences. For the day without lodging: \$40 per person (for meals and conferences).

For reservations, call the Archabbey Guest House and Retreat Center at (800) 581-6905. Please send a \$25 non-refundable deposit to the Guest House, 200 Hill Dr., St. Meinrad, IN 47557 after you make your reservation.

Your reply is requested by March 12.

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The arrangement of the altar and its articles of the Mass conveys the centrality of the Eucharist. The baptismal font with its seashell and other liturgical items like colorful chasubles initiate the child into the liturgical life of the church. As with the tools and goods of the monastery, children learn to keep the working materials of the atrium clean and treat them carefully.

The Early Childhood Learning Center offers a Level 1 atrium – for the young child (ages 3-5)

The young child is particularly capable of receiving and enjoying the most essential elements of our faith – the announcement of God's love, in the person of the Good Shepherd, who died and is risen.

Materials on the life of Christ and his teachings help make the mystery of God concrete for the child. Geography materials establish Jesus as a real person in time and space and Israel as the land through which God realized salvation for all. Infancy Narratives announce the Incarnation with the words of Scripture. Selected parables serve as keys to unlock the mystery of the Kingdom of God and nurture the child's natural sense of wonder. How precious is the Kingdom of God (Merchant and the Pearl), how small it begins (Mustard Seed), how slowly it grows (The Leaven), how magnificent it becomes!

Through arranging of the altar cloth, chalice, paten, candles and crucifix, the child becomes familiar with articles of the Mass. The child enters into the mystery of the Mass by learning important gestures including: washing of the hands, preparation of the chalice, epiclesis, doxology, gesture of peace and breaking of the bread. The child becomes acquainted with the historical aspect of the liturgy through events of the Last Supper, Christ's death, and His resurrection.

The liturgical colors and calendar situate the child in the church year. A prayer table reflects the liturgical cycle with appropriate colors, prayers, songs and readings to enhance the holy rituals and celebrations of church seasons.

The Elementary School offers a Level 2 atrium – for the older child (ages 6-8)

While the heart of the catechesis for the younger child revolves around the parable of the Good Shepherd, the elementary age child is captured by the image of the True Vine. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me bears fruit in plenty; for cut off from me you can do nothing." The proclamation responds to the deep need of the older child to know better their relationships with God, family, friends and the larger community.

The child at this age seeks guidelines, and the moral parables offer a model for comparing one's behavior with that of the Pharisee, Tax Collector or Good Samaritan. The Found Sheep, Found Coin and Prodigal Son (Forgiving Father) are examined as the child prepares for the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Presentations and reflections focus on God's abundant love, which is constantly forgiving.

The older children come to understand the Mass as one big beautiful prayer to God, made up of many important smaller prayers. Preparation of personal Missals filled with illustrations and prayers is a lengthy work that deepens their love and understanding of the Eucharist.

The imagination of the older child and his or her agility with the concept of time is powerful stimuli to explore the past and the future. A timeline ribbon, fifty- meters long, focuses on high points in the History of Salvation from the Creation through the Redemption to the Parousia. Another timeline explores the many gifts we receive from God, culminating in God's gift of His own divine life, in the person of Jesus.

As in the monastery, there is a good zeal in the atrium that the children seek to foster by respecting one another and supporting with greatest patience one another's weaknesses of behavior. The children strive to practice great kindness, patience and sharing, in order to be more like Christ in all their dealings with one another.

(Camille Zumwalt, an oblate of St. Joseph Monastery, is a catechist at the Benedictine community's Monte Cassino School. This year marks the school's third year to offer Catechesis of the Good Shepherd to its pre-school through third grade children.)



BENEDICTINE OBLATES OF
SAINT JOSEPH MONASTERY

CONGREGATION OF BENEDICTINE SISTERS
OF THE SACRED HEARTS INC.
2200 SOUTH LEWIS AVENUE
TULSA, OK 74114-3117



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Sisters Christine, Catherine, Eugenia and Veronica will join Catholic students attending state universities at the annual Catholic University Students Conference at OK State University in Stillwater February 6-8.

A beautiful mural of the Sacred Heart Shrine that once graced the campus at the original monastery in Guthrie now welcomes visitors in the hall to the monastery dining room. The mural is the work of Michaela Lawless, a free-lance artist, from Locust Grove. The mural depicts the community's devotion to the Sacred Heart introduced by Mother Paula O'Reilly, founder of the community in 1879.

The Vocation team—Sisters Catherine, Eugenia and Veronica will participate in events that celebrate Vocation Awareness week, January 11-17. They joined other sisters in the diocese January 16 at St. Pius Church for the Catholic schools 5th graders vocation day.

On February 15 the Sisters will be at St. Benedict's in Broken Arrow for a vocation day for the 5th/6th graders in Religious Education programs in the diocese.

Other vocation events are scheduled for January 28 at St. Henry's in Owasso, and February 4 at St. Bernard's in Tulsa.

The Vocation team will be presenting lessons in community to the junior high students in Stillwater at St. John's parish on February 4 and to high school students in Tulsa at St. Thomas More parish.

Thanks to the generosity of those who celebrated Midnight Mass with the Sisters, the Sisters were able to present a check to The Tulsa Day Center for the Homeless in the amount of \$3,700. The donation was the first for Tulsa's Permanent Supportive Housing Project. This project proposes to build a 60-unit residential building to help eliminate homelessness in the Tulsa area.



Watch the new website grow: www.stjosephmonastery.org