

Excerpt from Joan Chittister's Address that will be used at BACAR discussion May 19, 2013 Where the word "Oblate" is used substitute "Associate" or "Affiliate"

Paul is very clear about it in Corinthians: "To each one," he teaches, "the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. ... To one is given wisdom, to another knowledge, to one faith, to another healing, to one power, to another prophecy. ... All these are the work of one and the same Spirit and given to each one as the Spirit determines for the sake of the body, the whole."

Those charisms are gifts given to each of us for the sake of the whole Christian community. And so they must be given away for the sake of the whole Christian community!

The day we keep our charism to ourselves — either as individuals or as religious communities — that very day the charism dies in us and the Holy Spirit goes seeking for softer sand through which to run.

Clearly, the spiritual channel of religious charisms or gifts is meant to be an unbroken one — through the keepers of the wells of those traditions, us, to you, the keepers of the byways of the world.

And it has clearly been forever thus.

Scripture itself is full of companionship models of spirituality: Ruth and Naomi, Judith and her maidservant, Elisha and Elija, Paul and Timothy. In every case it is the blend of differences, the meld of diverse gifts, that makes possible the final miracle of faith.

In every case, it is the listening, the learning, the loving attachment of their spirits that take two weaknesses and makes it strong.

In every case, these companions, who come from different perspectives in life and spirit, make it possible for themselves to do together what neither of them could possibly do alone.

There are not some of us who embody the gifts of the Spirit and some of us who do not.

Thanks to Ruth, the Moabite, the foreigner, the outsider, Naomi, the Israelite, can return to Bethlehem. And so the line of David stays intact and Jesus is born to that line by — of all things — the foreigner, Ruth.

Thanks to the maidservant who risks her own life to accompany her, Judith can plot the end of the one who holds Israel under siege.

Thanks to the prophet Elija, Elisha is recognized — as the one who will carry on the prophetic work itself and gives it stage for its own message.

Together Benedictine monasteries and Benedictine oblates must do the same to liberate the oppressed today.

You and I must do that same thing for the voiceless of our own time. Thanks to Paul himself who recognized in Timothy's youth and his Greek ancestry the bridge Paul himself needed to preach Jesus to a whole new non-Jewish population, the work of the early church was able to thrive in regions far beyond the sound of Paul's own voice.

Now, we — you and I — must raise our voices together — where the Gospel is seldom heard. You in your world, we in ours.

Indeed, it was Jesus himself who said to many, everywhere and anywhere, come and see. And then sent them out together — no apostles in sight — to be the disciples of his own life.

Indeed, Oblate programs share a proud history, a broad scope. They also embody a bold theology: They demonstrate in a period of clericalism and a closed ecclesiology that the charisms of Jesus — all the gifts of which Paul speaks — are not for the keeping by a few.

They are not for the desert alone; they are to be given in the city as well. There are not some of us who are holy and some of us who are not. There are not some of us who embody the gifts of the Spirit and some of us who do not. There are not some of us who are gift to the church and some of us who are not. The charisms of Jesus that the Spirit gives to each of us are not for sequestering by professional religious types.

Who are you/we? is a question of identity and the answer is clear: to be an Oblate is to be a carrier of Benedictine spirituality. It is to be exactly who we are — who your monastery is — but in a different form.

You and we — we and you, are all meant to be gifts of Benedictine peace, prayer, justice humility, human community and life-giving work. Indeed, together we are meant to be messengers, models and makers of a whole new world wherever we are.

Indeed, the charisms of Jesus that the Spirit gives to each of us are not for sequestering by professional religious types. The charisms of Jesus the preacher, the healer, the wonder-worker, and gatherer of nations, are preserved to this day by the workings of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of seekers everywhere.

They were made visible in the healing work of Benedictine hospices when sickness was considered a punishment for sin, and so call to us today to join hearts and hands and insights to be healing figures everywhere.

They were made visible when oppression and slavery were thought to be God's will but equality and justice was the hallmark of Benedictine monasteries, and so call us to join hearts and hands and insights to make equality a sign of our own communities today.

They were made visible in holy hospitality and call us yet to see Christ in everyone who comes through the doors of our homes, and the arches of our monasteries.

They were made visible in the prophetic works of Benedictines for peace when nations sinned in the name of God and called it Christianization, and the church itself strayed from the Gospel and called it orthodoxy.

And those charisms are meant to be shared, to be spent, to be strewed recklessly through the body of Christ, not held captive to some kind of semi-clericalized corps of ecclesiastical aristocracy.

More than that, they are the essence, the mark, the message of the life of Jesus. The charisms of the Spirit are alive, in other words. They go on going on — as Jesus goes on going on.

They are not then ever complete. They are not frozen in time. They are not fixed and static, stagnant and stock-still. They leap with life. They never die. They are the electricity that powers every good in us. They are that surge in you, that surety in me that we ride on a river of grace that is still and deep, raging and new.

They are not the gifts of vowed monastics alone but the common gift of professed monastics and committed Oblates to pursue together, ancient but immediate, they are dynamic, unfolding and as necessarily new today as they were in the soul of Benedict of Nursia.

Charism, then, must be constantly rediscovered, and constantly re-expressed. Charism is always ripe but always in bloom again, always finished for one age and people but starting over again in another — charism is like every living thing. It takes the shape of seed, branch, tree, flower and fruit of the spiritual life. It grows through one stage of life after another and then, through you and me, grows again. Here. Now. Always. Charism is the fig tree that blooms in every season.

Separately and alone and together, we together must make it visible again in new ways. And together we must make it vocal again in the new language of a new time.

And therein lies the glory of the Oblate programs that are springing up in Benedictinism again from coast to coast, from continent to continent, everywhere.

Oblate programs are often now twice as large as the monasteries that sponsor them. But clearly — if the Gospel is any proof of the power of holy companionship — then Oblates are not meant to be simply consumers of the tradition.

You are also meant to be companions to the monastery to which you are attached. You are meant to be the carriers of the tradition, as well. As individuals, yes, but in concert, in community, with the Oblate community that is in concert, in community, with the monastery community itself.

It is the growing Oblate programs of small monasteries that are becoming tentacles of the spirit of the Rule, the outreach of spirit of the monastery to which they are attached.

You are to be Benedictinism in the nucleus of the world, a veritable critical mass of new life and new hope and new expressions of the spirit of The Rule of Benedict, of Jesus alive in us and of the voice of God among us.

There are Oblates everywhere being the charism of their order: They are preaching peace in my country that spends more money on destruction than on development.

They are doing justice in a world that provides its CEOs 100 times the salaries of the workers who make their money for them. They are being mercy in a world that kills killers to show everybody that killing is wrong.

They are demanding equality for the women kept invisible even in churches who say their model is Jesus. And at the same time, they are ignored by secular sexist systems that suck up their lives by putting on their backs twice the burdens and half the pay.

Oblates themselves must become a new kind of people in the midst of the mess of violence and greed and oppression and power: a people whose weapon is truth and whose strength is fearlessness. And whose witness, in concert with their monasteries, is the power of the Oblate community itself. In them indeed, the best of the Benedictine charism is meant to live on.

Oblate programs must also model a whole church — a church that is wholly ministering, wholly open, wholly renewed — in the very heart of a church that has become, over time, too male, too clerical, too distant from the people of God.

What must you/we do? is the question of mission and meaning.

It requires a new answer of both Benedictine monasteries and of Oblates themselves if charism is really what we're all about. Oblate programs have a purpose and a place in the contemporary church that is gift to the entire church:

First, Oblate programs must also model a whole church — a church that is wholly ministering, wholly open, wholly renewed — in the very heart of a church that has become, over time, too male, too clerical, too distant from the people of God.

When professed members of a Benedictine community merge their lives and their work, their spiritual wisdom and their public witness, their decision-making and the deepest part of their concerns with the Oblates who surround them, then the church itself becomes new — becomes whole — again.

In the spirit of the Jesus who walked with women, talked with Samaritans, and contested with the keepers of the synagogue, Oblate programs lift up the gates that have divided us from ourselves — and to the detriment of both of us.

Oblate programs make the integration of lay life and canonical religious life obvious, yes, but they do more than that. They give lie to the notion that one state is higher than another. They make evident the inherent holiness of each. They make evident that each of us is on the way to the same God — the only difference in our journeys is the way we choose to get there.

Oblate programs demonstrate what de Vinci's painting of the Last Supper — with its all-male, apostolic, privatized version of Jesus' eucharistic theology fails to record, but which Piasecki's print of men, women and children eating together at the Passover feast makes plain: the table to which Jesus calls us is a table of men and women, of apostles and disciples, of young and old, all sharing the same meal, all called to the same cup. And all participants in the theological development of the early Christian community.

They remind us of the array of people Jesus drew around him but which, over the centuries, became a pious pyramid designed to keep most people on the fringe of it.

Oblate programs are meant to dispel the image of exclusivity that makes spirituality the purview of a private club of cognoscenti — of special people — people specifically privileged, specifically gendered, supposedly more knowledgeable, specially recognized, specifically asexual — who define its limits and confine its rewards to themselves.