

# The Oblate

*News Magazine of the Oblates of Saint John's Abbey*

February 2023

Volume 67 Number 1

## Spring 2023 Day of Reflection, March 26

### Tending our Time: A Benedictine Approach to Rest, Rhythm, and Renewal



Day of Reflection presenter, Jessie Bazan, OblSB, writes: S. Joan Chittister, OSB, got it right when she wrote: “The soul without a sense of Sabbath is an agitated soul.” Daily life demands a lot from each of us.

To-do lists never stop growing. Our callings pull us in many directions—a reality that makes the practice of Sabbath even more necessary.

This conference will explore aspects of rest, rhythm, and renewal in Benedictine spirituality. Oblates will be invited to consider: What is the rhythm of your life? When do you carve out time for rest and leisure? What makes practicing sabbath difficult in today’s world—and how might we (re)commit to sabbath practices in the days ahead?

**Please register by March 20 by e-mailing [oblates@csbsju.edu](mailto:oblates@csbsju.edu), or calling 320-363-3022**

Jessie Bazan is a theologian, spiritual writer, and oblate of Saint Benedict’s Monastery in Saint Joseph, MN. She teaches a course on Benedictine spirituality at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University and serves as a program associate for the Colledgeville Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research. Jessie edited and co-authored the book, *Dear Joan Chittister: Conversations with Women in the Church* (2019), and is a contributing author at *Liturgical Press*.

#### Schedule for the Day

- 9:30 Arrive in Great Hall for fellowship
- 10:30 Eucharist in Abbey Church
- 11:45 Lunch in Quad 264
- 12:30 Group *Lectio Divina*
- 1:30 Conference followed by discussion
- 2:50 Blessing and Dismissal

**We plan to meet in-person and virtually. The Zoom link for the conference will be provided to all the oblates with e-mail a few days before the Day of Reflection. There is no fee but a free will offering is appreciated.**

## Message from Abbot John Klassen



### Some Reflections on RB 49: The Observance of Lent

In his Rule, Benedict inherits a positive anthropology from the church of Saint Leo in Rome, and that explains the hopeful, positive character of chapter 49 in the Rule. In a monastic Rule,

one might expect a discussion of Lent to err on the side of the grim. That is far from the case with RB 49. There is hardly a chapter in the Rule that can match its gentle and serene approach to monastic (oblate) life.

I started out writing this column, intending to give you a more formal reflection. But as I completed it, I was more and more dissatisfied with it. I think I need you to be more active learners for this one. Please stop here, dig out the Rule of Benedict and read chapter 49, the observance of Lent, like you are doing lectio with it: out loud, slow, noting interesting, surprising ideas and thoughts.

What are some things that catch your attention? Your imagination?

To whom is the chapter addressed? How does that work for an oblate?

What does Benedict think is the purpose of Lenten practices?

How does Benedict visualize or express the outcome of giving ourselves wholeheartedly to a Lenten practice or practices? What is the goal? Does the goal work for an oblate? Does it work for you?

Why does Benedict insist that the individual monk bring his intentions forward to the abbot? What is he trying to avoid in members of the community? How might this practice work for an oblate? (Continued on page 3)

## Message from Father Michael Peterson

We read in the gospel of Mark that “The Spirit drove Jesus out into the desert and he was there for 40 days.”

But how did the Spirit speak to Jesus? Was it a clear voice? A feeling in Jesus’ gut he couldn’t

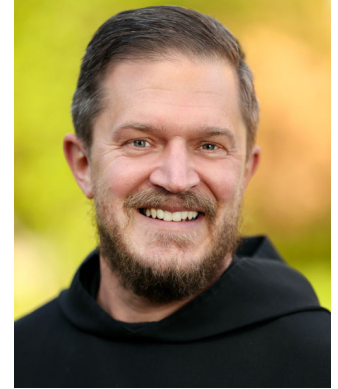
shake? Maybe the Spirit spoke through his friends or family? My experience is that the Spirit speaks to us in many, many ways. How is the Spirit speaking to you today?

Going out to the desert was something Jesus had to do even though it was difficult. The Spirit compels. We feel a strong pull, “You gotta do this.”

This was the case of a fellow graduate student I knew. She was being called to parish ministry, yet she fought against the tenacious Spirit because she had other plans. I saw her one day on a bench near Lake Sagatagan, arguing out loud. I slowly approached her and asked, “Are you ok?” She replied, “I’m giving God one more chance to change God’s mind.”

I think the Spirit is also less direct. Gentler. One of my favorite childhood memories is visiting my grandma. My loving image of grandma is of her making chicken gravy. She would make us lunch, and she would ask about my day, how I was, ever so happily curious. She would give her own gentle advice to me. This is a good image of the Spirit to me. The Spirit as grandma.

The first word of Benedict’s Rule is “listen.” Listen with the ear of your heart. In what ways are your ears open? How is the Spirit speaking to you?



(cont. from Pg 2) **RB 49: The Observance of Lent**

Some further thoughts (don't take these in a pedantic sense – you already know these!)

Resist the urge to have a long grocery list of Lenten resolutions. Real change takes resilience and concentrated effort.

I try to focus on a practice that will lead to a sustained change in a habit, either leaving something behind that is destructive or unhelpful, or replacing it with something life-giving.

I really believe in looking for what Charles Duhig in

his book *The Power of Habit* calls “keystone habits.” When we hit on one of these, positive change spills over into other areas of our life.

Telling someone what I am going to do increases my resilience and commitment to move forward. Trying to improve practices of *lectio*, prayer, exercise, centering prayer, whatever it is, is hard work because of inertia – we are always moving in a Newtonian sense. To change direction requires an intentional pulse of energy!

Blessings and joy to you in this Lenten season which takes us into the heart of the Pascal Mystery.

## Milestones

### ◆ **Candidates** (clockwise from top left):

**Toni Nichols**, an American currently living and working in Germany. September 23, 2022.

**Nick Koerner** from Woodbury, MN. September 30, 2022.

**Craig Anderson** from Colorado Springs, CO. November 7, 2022.

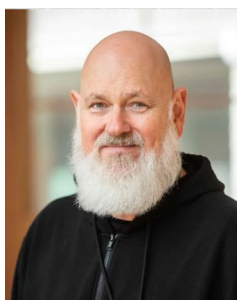
**Jean Drawz** from Wayzata, MN. November 9, 2022.



### ◆ **Oblations**

**Bryan Biba** (family photo bottom right, with Fr. Michael) made oblation October 18, 2022.

**David Sorensen** (right) transferred his oblation to Saint John's Abbey on December 11, 2022.



### ◆ **Deaths**

+ **William “Bill” Muldoon**, OblSB, age 78, September 6, 2022. Bill spent many years as a chemistry teacher at SJU, and as a pharmacist in the Twin Cities, and was a dedicated oblate. He was well-known by many of us, and the Oblate staff greatly appreciated his weekly volunteer work in the Oblate Office.



*May the angels lead you into paradise; may the martyrs receive you at your arrival and lead you to the holy city Jerusalem. May you have eternal rest.*

## Fall Day of Reflection ~ 2022

Pam Keul, OblSB

On November 20, 2022, Brother Paul-Vincent Niebauer, OSB, a Benedictine monk at Saint John's Abbey since entering in 1993, spoke to oblates in the Quadrangle 264 meeting room on the topic of "Humor in Monastic Life."

Although St. Benedict appears to have taken a dim view of monks being loose lipped - "In a flood of words, you will not avoid sin." - including that passage from Proverbs 10:19 in Chapter 6 of The Rule, Brother Paul-Vincent commented that "There are different kinds of laughter; it's a natural high, a good thing." When he said, "Humor in the monastery is way funnier than anything that was funny in the circus," Brother Paul-Vincent spoke from experience. Before arriving at Saint John's Abbey he spent thirteen years as a ringmaster/performance director for several circuses throughout North America.

Of a number of stories Brother Paul-Vincent told, one included a line that could be useful to many. A monk enthusiastically went to the office of the abbot to share his cherished proposal. **"What's that?!" asked the wide-eyed Abbot as he gaped at a spot in the air above the monk. The Abbot continued, 'Oh, it's the fat chance balloon sailing over your head.'"**

By the time Brother Paul-Vincent was done speaking to the oblates, some of them reported tired facial and chest muscles along with



Photo by Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB

breathlessness from laughing, but no one complained. Don't miss your chance to attend a future Oblate Day of Reflection. They are extraordinary.



Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB

## Meet an Oblate: *My Road to Oblation*

Brian Hirt, OblSB



Let me introduce myself. My name is Brian Hirt. I live in southwest Michigan in a town called Kalamazoo. I am an artist working in ceramics. I am also a retired teacher and chair of the ceramic department at the

Kalamazoo Institute of Arts. I have been an oblate for seven years, but a student of the Rule for much longer.

It all began a while ago, in the early nineties. The university here in town hosts an annual Medieval Congress. People come from all over the world to take part. The university also houses the Cistercian Library. For that reason Cistercian monks come to Kalamazoo to participate in the congress from various monasteries around the world. Some dear friends of mine would host one of the monks, Fr. Edward, at their home while he was in town. My friends called and asked if I could be Fr. Edward's "wheels" while he was in town, and I agreed.

One of the things Fr. Edward liked to do while in Kalamazoo was visit the Hindu monastery/retreat center, Vivekananda, on the shores of Lake Michigan. We jumped in the truck and hit the road. We would have these great spiritual conversations while driving away the miles. He introduced me to the Rule as well as centering prayer. We became good friends. The seeds were planted!

I began to study the Rule. I read books by Kathleen Norris, *Dakota* and *Cloister Walk*. Joan Chittister's *Wisdom Distilled from the Daily* was an

early study. A friend gave me *Preferring Christ* by Norene Vest. It was a kind of daily reflection/journal on the Rule. I felt very drawn to the wisdom I found in the pages of the Rule.

Now we jump forward a few years. At work I scheduled a workshop with Richard Bresnahan. He is the resident artist at The Saint John's Pottery. We were having dinner one evening and the subject of the Rule came up! I mentioned I had been studying the Rule and would like to become an oblate, but there were no monasteries around. Richard's response was, "Why don't you come to Saint John's, maybe they will have you." That is exactly what happened! On my first visit to Saint John's, I was bringing ceramic pieces from the workshop in Kalamazoo to the pottery to be fired in the campus's Johanna Kiln. While there I made arrangements to talk about oblation possibilities. I felt at home immediately. Doors opened, and I became a candidate. The next thing I knew I was standing before the altar (trembling a little) and making promises that would change my life!

You might ask, "How have those promises changed your life?" That would be a good question, but one to be answered at another time. I will say this. Along the way I have met many super people and made some new friends. I also understand the beauty and challenge of community and its sanctifying ability in a new way. I am grateful daily to be a part of the oblate community. I am grateful for the wisdom and support found there. I am also grateful to the Holy Spirit for leading me to Saint John's through the side door after a long and winding road!

## A Visit to the Benedictine Abbey Münster Schwarzach

by Christine Peterson, Oblate Candidate

My recent trip back to my home country of Germany included a two-day stay at the Benedictine Abbey Münster Schwarzach, located in Northern Bavaria, on the river Main, near Würzburg. Benedictines have lived and worked at Münster

ous to learn about the oblate program at a German Benedictine Abbey.

Brother Alfred, who helps at the busy reception desk, was a most welcome presence throughout

my stay. He arranged for a meeting with Father Udo who was, until recently, the oblate director at the Abbey.

From Father Udo I learned that Münster Schwarzach has a vibrant oblate program. Their membership is currently about 115 oblates. About a year ago, the direction of this program was given to a lay person, an oblate herself, and recently retired from pastoral work. She was appointed to this position by the Abbott and is assisted by Father Udo. In addition,

a council consisting of four

oblates, nominated to this position by their peers, assists with networking and planning retreats.

Schwarzach since the time of Charlemagne. The Abbey Church as it stands now with its famous four towers was built in the 1930s. Over 90 Benedictine monks are affiliated with the Abbey at Münster Schwarzach.

The guest house has over 100 rooms spread over several floors and different buildings. My room was simple, quiet, and beautiful. Guests are generally expected to take three meals in the dining room, and seats are assigned. I located my table with a little wooden sign saying "Frau Peterson" and shared all meals with three other women, ages 18 to 72. What lovely and inspiring conversations we had.

As a recent oblate candidate myself, I was curi-



Munster Schwarzach Abbey Church, famous for its four towers, in the little town of Schwarzach

photo by Christine Peterson



Christine's room at Munster Schwarzach Abbey

Christine Peterson

A person may express an interest in becoming an oblate or may be invited to consider becoming



photo by Christine Peterson

A sign in the courtyard in front of the Munster Schwarzach Abbey Church reads,  
*"Listen with the ear of your heart."*

ing an oblate after repeated visits to the Abbey. The candidate then enters a year of preparation and discernment which includes three or four weekend visits focusing on "Benedictine Living."

Prospective oblates have many opportunities to find out if they feel at home in Münster Schwarzach and if the community is a good fit for them. Currently there are six persons going through their "Probe Jahr" ( trial year) with ages ranging from young adults to retired persons. Father Udo reports that some find community and a spiritual home at the Abbey that they were unable to find in their home parishes.

At Munster Schwarzach, Benedictine oblates choose a new name at the time of their oblation. They stay connected to the Abbey with a newsletter, Zoom meetings, participation in retreats and courses, and frequent visits as able.

While there were a few differences, the similarities to Saint John's Abbey and our oblate program prevailed. I felt welcome, experienced a genuine and kind hospitality, and a strong sense of community, all coming out of love of Christ and neighbor.

*First verse of the  
Rule of Saint Benedict:*

*"Listen, my son, to the  
Master's instructions, and  
attend to them with the ear  
of your heart."*



Christine in Grand Marais, Minnesota, June 2022

## The Three Hs of Kindness in the Rule of Benedict, Part 3 Cyril Gorman, OSB

The first H is for Hospitality, a significant form of kindness in the Rule of Saint Benedict. The second H is Humility. The third H is Happiness. In this instance, I want happiness to have the same weight as the word “joy.” Reflecting upon several experiences I have to ask myself: Was I, am I, concerned for the happiness of the other person? You could argue that being concerned for the happiness of the other person is part of hospitality, but for me it is a more focused question, not to be lost in the shuffle of offering a room or meal. Maybe for me it has to be a separate H so that I can distinguish my work in the guesthouse as groups manager and one on the spiritual direction team from all the other interactions that I have with people. Am I concerned for the ultimate joy and well-being of the other? I feel that I am often breaking the precept of the Rule that says, “Do not turn away when someone needs your love.” To follow that precept is an expression of kindness, according to the Rule.



When the novice master and community discern the call of the novice with the novice, this is what Benedict says, according to my novice master. “1. Does the novice show eagerness for the Work of God (that is, prayer)? 2. Does the novice show eagerness for obedience? 3. Does the novice show eagerness for humble tasks of service?”

As oblates, are you eager to pray? Do you try to listen with your heart to do what must be done? Can you see your work as teacher, leader, parent, preparer of meals, cleaner, dishwasher, etc., as a humble task of

service pleasing to God? Being able to answer those kinds of questions in an affirming way is good. Those who help you to be that way, like the novice master, ought to be concerned for your ultimate happiness. So again my short-cut to understanding the Rule of Saint Benedict so that I can express kindness in day-to-day life is 3 H’s. Am I hospitable? Am I humble, of the earth? Am I concerned for the happiness of the other? In this last regard I remember once being involved in a discussion about the temptation not to go to common prayer or to the common table. One reason to go, even if one doesn’t feel like it in the moment, is for the sake of the happiness of one’s brother in community.

Now that you have a framework I want to point out a specific instance of kindness in the Rule. In chapter 31, the Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer, the one who distributes goods to the monks, it says, “Above all let [the one who distributes goods] be humble. If goods are not available to meet a request, [this person] will offer a kind word in reply, for it is written, “A kind word is

better than the best gift” Sirach 18:17.

I think that little advice for the cellarer is really a big deal. It is really a paradigm and example for all of us. I will give you a specific example and a larger one. In my work at the Abbey Guesthouse I find that we or I cannot meet every request that comes our way, but at least we can try to answer kindly. “I am sorry, those dates are already full, would you be open to considering other dates? If your dates are not flexible, have you considered the spirituality center at our sister monastery (Saint Benedict’s Monastery) in



St. Joseph, or Christ the King Retreat Center in Buffalo, Minnesota?”

Another example is a principle that I learned when studying the spirituality of St. Ignatius. It is possible to be so spread out doing good things that one ends up working to the detriment of the good. The example we had in our spiritual direction formation program concerned a priest who was really good at preaching. He was invited to preach elsewhere. One day his brothers in community had to point out that they were losing fraternal bonds.

Likewise, a story my dad told me years ago was that the bishop of the diocese had asked him to be on some commission, and Dad turned the bishop down. At that point he had a wife and three little kids. I think it also would have involved travel to the bishop's city—some distance away. My father said that he couldn't do it without neglecting his family. Sometimes, like the distributor of goods in the monastery, we have to decline a request with a kind word.

Basically the *whole* chapter on the cellarer is a summary of how to be kind as an individual and as a community. Here is a slight rewording of RB 1980, chapter 31: “Qualifications of the Monastery Cellarer.” The new title is “What it Means to be a Kind Oblate and a Kind Monk.”

**Each person who has been called to and taken on the life of an oblate or monk should be wise, mature in conduct, temperate, not an excessive eater, not proud, excitable, offensive, dilatory, or wasteful. Rather be in awe of God, one who gives life to family, friends, community, and strangers. You should not annoy others in the covenant. If someone makes of you an unreasonable demand, you should not disdain that person or cause that person distress, but reasonably and humbly deny the improper request. Be sure to watch over your own soul, ever mindful that the one who serves well secures a good**

**standing (1 Tim. 3:13). You must show every care and concern for the sick, children, guests and the poor, knowing for certain that you will be held accountable for all of them on the day of judgment. Please regard all utensils and the goods of your dwelling place as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected. You should not be prone to greed, not be wasteful or extravagant with the goods in your care, but should do everything with moderation and according to the wishes of those to whom you are responsible.**

Above all you should be humble. If goods are not available to meet a request, you can offer a kind word in reply, for it is written, a kind word is better than the best gift. (Sirach 18:17). You should take care of all that has been entrusted to you. Distribute what needs to be distributed without pride or delay, lest others lose hope and be led astray.

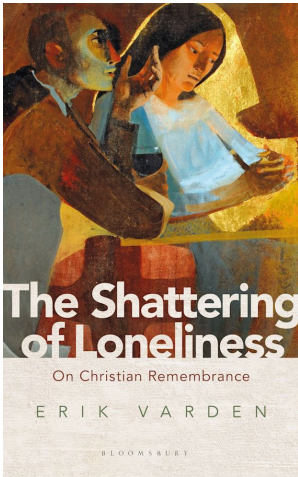
As an aside, my novice master highlighted the importance of not making requests of anybody without a sensitivity to the appropriateness of the time and space. It is not always right to bring work issues to meals or recreation, for example. A person may need a break!

I am sure that I have not comprehensively covered kindness in the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, but I hope that I have helped you to enjoy interest in the topic. Some of Benedict's requests, to me, seem too much. For example, at the guesthouse, we can't meet all the requests from the poor. Discernment requires a lot of prayer and consultation in many cases. In the end, as St. Benedict says as the last of the Tools for Good Works, **never lose hope in God's mercy.**



Fr. Cyril Gorman, OSB

Books on using the Rule to live the Christian life in today's world



## *The Shattering of Loneliness: On Christian Remembrance*

By Erik Varden, OSCO, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2018

Bishop Erik Varden, born 1974, a Cistercian monk and former Abbot of Mt. St. Bernard Abbey in Leicestershire UK, was made Bishop of Trondheim in his native Norway in 2019. He enjoyed a distinguished academic career before entering the monastery. While his scholarship shines from every page, the language in this book is, in the main, simple and direct. While at one level this book is "theology," it remains firmly grounded in scripture. Bishop Varden reflects from a Benedictine perspective on what it means to be human, to be a Christian in today's world.

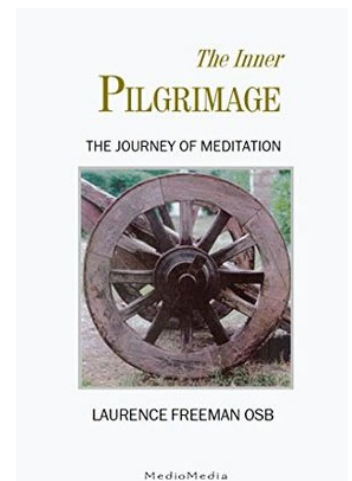
In each of his six main chapters, Varden utilizes Scripture as it reminds us again and again to "remember" who we are, where we have come from, and where we are headed, where God is calling us. There is a chapter on remembering that we are created from dust by God, on remembering Lot's wife, on Jesus' command to "do this in remembrance of me," and on the injunction to the two women at the grave on Easter Day—the first and most important thing for the disciples of the risen Jesus was to "remember." Each of these biblical reflections is balanced by a story Varden tells about people closer to our present day, particularly the way they created meaning in their often difficult and lonely lives through "remembering" the loving relationship God offers.

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## *The Inner Pilgrimage: The Journey of Meditation*

By Laurence Freeman, OSB; WCCM, 2007.

Fr. Laurence is a monk of the Monastery of Sta Maria di Pilastrello, Italy. He is Director of the World Community for Christian Meditation and of its Benedictine Oblate community. His (very) short book talks about "contemplative prayer," more commonly called "Christian meditation." The essential aspects of Christian meditation are interiority, silence, trust, calmness and attention. It is not so much a "technique" (where we remain in control of our prayer, calling the shots with God), but a "discipline" (a state-of-being prayer that encourages and enables openness to God's redemptive love). This approach to prayer relies much on the Rule of John Cassian (360-435) and the Rule of Benedict as "re-imagined" by the late Fr. John Main, OSB, an English Benedictine monk who died in 1982.



### **How to Meditate** (*Fr. Laurence's Summary ... page 56*)

Sit down. Sit still and upright. Close your eyes lightly. Sit relaxed but alert.

Silently, interiorly begin to say a single word. We at the World Community for Christian Meditation recommend the prayer-phrase *maranatha*.\*

Recite it as four syllables of equal length.

Listen to it as you say it, gently but continuously.

Do not think or imagine anything spiritual or otherwise.

If thoughts and images come, these are distractions at the time of meditation, so return to simply saying the word.

Meditate each morning and evening, for between twenty and thirty minutes.

\**Come, Lord Jesus.*



Pam Keul, OblSB

Nearly a full house of oblates attended the Saint John's, Collegeville, chapter meeting on January 15, 2023.

The **Minneapolis Oblate Chapter** gathers at University Lutheran Church of Hope in Minneapolis on the 4th Saturday of every month at 10 a.m. We enjoy a short prayer service, 20 minutes of Centering Prayer, and fellowship time to check-in and discuss the Rule of Saint Benedict. Currently the Chapter members are planning a fall retreat at Saint John's in November, and connecting with oblates in the Twin Cities.

If you are interested in attending the Chapter Meetings, please contact Nick Tangen at [nickt@ulch.org](mailto:nickt@ulch.org) for more information.

## I Believe, So I Can Understand

My interest in becoming an oblate germinated while reading *Dakota*, by Kathleen Norris. She portrayed her oblate practices as a means to deepen and broaden her Christian faith. Unknown to me, this was a desire of mine both innate and practical. However, my view of monasticism at that time was that life in a monastery was best pictured by the dark robes worn by the monks. How could becoming an oblate be anything but a joyless ride?

Here I am about twenty years later, and very pleased to be an oblate, thank you. My daily prayers refocus my spiritual compass. Readings from *The Rule of Benedict*, the Bible with *lectio*, *Day by Day with Saint Benedict*, by Terrance Kardong, and much other literature, has enhanced my life and deepened my Christian faith.

But that's not all! I get a yearly big deal retreat with presentations by noted Benedictines while schmoozing with wonderful, interesting and fun fellow oblates. I don't believe our amusement defiles Benedict's instruction to "not engage in prolonged or explosive laughter," but on a rare occasion that mark may be missed. There are also gatherings prior to Advent and

## Tom Keul, OblSB

Lent with high energy, discernment, community and excellent meals. Always these occasions are highlighted by special opportunities to attend Mass in the Abbey Church, and the very special inclusion of oblates in morning and evening prayers with the monks of St. John's Abbey. I didn't even mention the pleasure of our monthly smaller group oblate gatherings at the Abbey with Mass, a great meal, discourse on a Benedictine book of our group's choice, and community, plus first Saturday of the month Zoom presentations.

All this and I've also made new oblate friends and new friends with many wonderful monks who happen to live at the Abbey and give it the life that has been so invigorating to me and others. I consider myself to be a very lucky man to have wandered into all of this, and I wholeheartedly agree with the statement or question recently spoken by my friend and fellow oblate John when he asked, "Why aren't there more people joining the Saint John's oblate program?"

Becoming an oblate has pushed back existential angst and provided a framework for my faith. There's nothing like it. Now, as St. Anselm proposed, I can easily "believe, so I can understand."



## The Oblate

THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED

NEWSLETTER OF THE OBLATES OF SAINT BENEDICT: *published three times annually (February, June, October).*

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### Mark Your Calendar

**March 26, 2023 Spring Day of Reflection**

**July 14-16, 2023: Annual Oblate Retreat**

**First Saturday of Month: Oblate Formation  
9 a.m. CT, on Zoom. The Zoom link is  
emailed a week prior.**

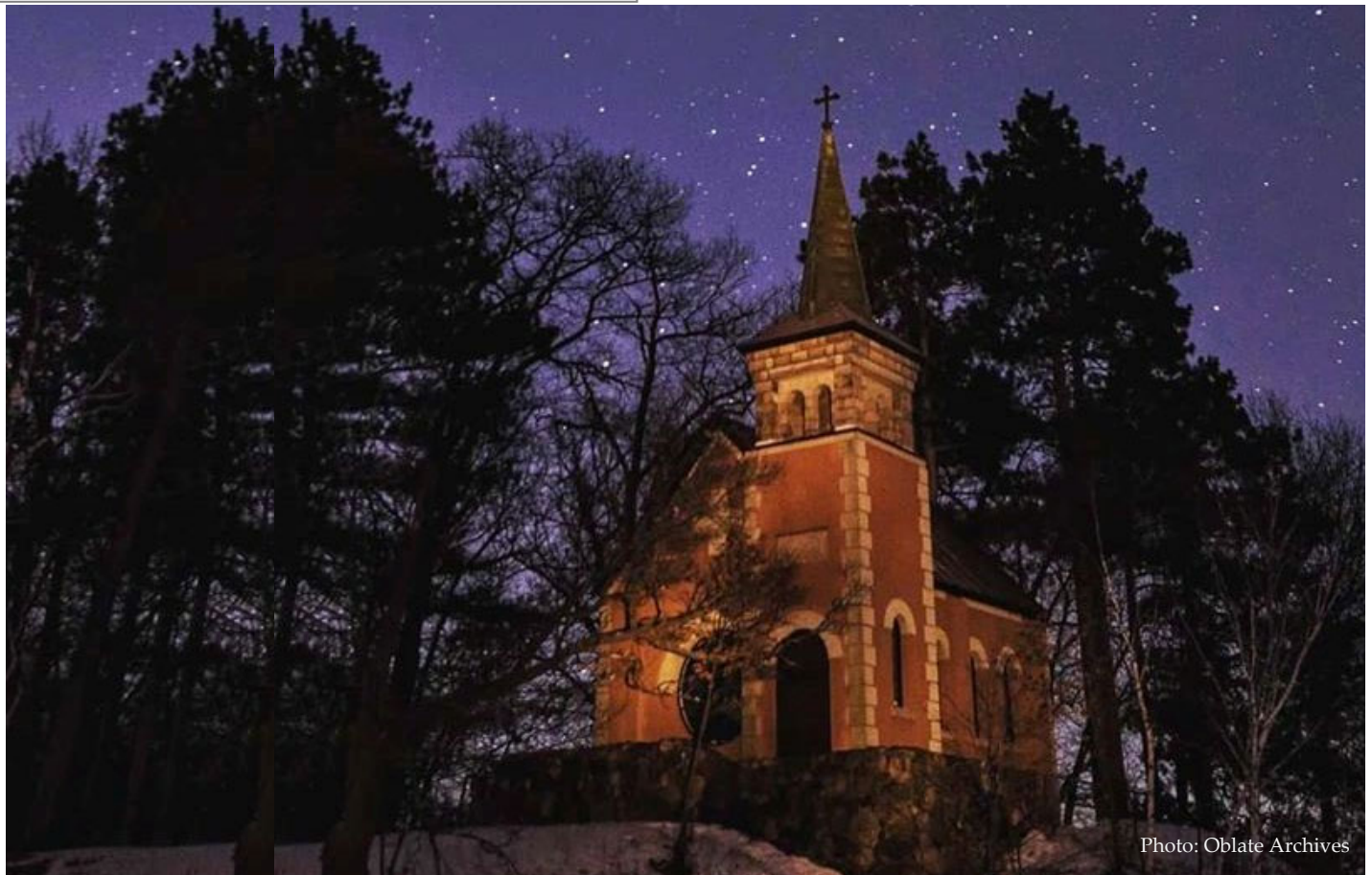


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### Contact Oblate Office

**320.363.3022**

**oblates@csbsju.edu**

**Website: [saintjohnsabbey.org/oblates/](http://saintjohnsabbey.org/oblates/)**