



# The Oblate

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

June 2023

Volume 67 Number 2

**Saint John's Oblate Retreat, July 14-16, 2023**

## **Discovering My Story with Saint Benedict**

In four conferences, Michael Rubbelke, Assistant Professor of Spirituality and Monastic Studies on the faculty at Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, will focus on "Discovering My Story with Saint Benedict." He intends to guide us in exploring what it means to tell one's story with Christ and one's community. Michael will draw upon key insights from the Rule, and is apt to focus especially on the Prologue along with chapters such as 7 and 72.

Michael earned a B.A. degree in Theology and English at Saint John's University in Collegeville (2008), followed by M.T.S. (2010) and Ph.D. (2018) degrees in Systematic Theology from the University of Notre Dame. The courses he currently teaches focus on the history of monasticism with an emphasis on the Benedictine tradition; growth, spiritual practices and theological themes among Christian schools of spirituality; and the integration of theology with spirituality in the work and formation of Christian theologians. He is in the process of researching and writing on the topics of *stabilitas* in the work of Christophe Lebreton, OCSO, as well as the status, sources, and contemporary relevance of Karl Rahner's concept of mysticism.



### **Retreat Registration Information**

**To register online**, go to [saintjohnsabbey.org/monastic-life/oblates/](http://saintjohnsabbey.org/monastic-life/oblates/) — **To register by surface mail**, complete the registration form included inside this newsletter and return it as soon as possible. Registration must be received by **July 5, 2023**. This is a firm deadline to permit preparations of facilities. Check-in will be at Mary Hall on Friday, July 14, from 1-7 pm.

Thanks to additional donations some oblates make, some sponsorship aid is available. If you need help, request it in the comment space at the end of the form.

## Abbot John Klassen, OSB



### Praying the Psalms in Nature

The Rule of Benedict is a wisdom book. In an understated way it offers a pathway to live the Gospel.

However, the natural world

is also a wisdom book that can be read, pondered, prayed, and contemplated. The earth can also teach us about our lives. All too often we think of other humans as our primary teachers. But the earth can teach us about change in a unique way because it has a four billion year resume in the field. The earth can teach us about loss and grief, about death and transformation. It is a great learning experience to walk a favorite path in the woods, to stop in favorite places, to do so in each of the seasons, and to note how the place changes with the seasons. Likewise, praying in the Breuer church, we are connected to the changing light of day and the seasons. We are aware of the passage of time.

In the upper Midwest we came through a long, hard winter and have longed for open water, green grass, and warm, sunny days. Because of the relentless accumulation of snow and ice in March and April, many had been unable to walk outside as usual. For the sake of restoring our spirits, we need to be outside this spring and summer. It is also a time to remember and pray those psalms which celebrate God's goodness in the creation. Let me name a few, without being exhaustive.

Psalm 8 is a beautiful, short psalm, easily committed to memory. "How great is your name, O Lord our God, through all the earth!" (Continued on page 3.)

## Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB



This year on July 11<sup>th</sup>, the Feast of Saint Benedict, I will be celebrating my 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of monastic vows! You are all invited to that celebration at Eucharist.

When I was first received into vows, there was the beautiful tradition of exchanging the sign of peace

with each member of my community, with many of my brothers saying a word of encouragement. One monk piped in, "Welcome aboard!" (was I on a cruise liner?!). Then came my spiritual director, Fr. Julius. He got up from his wheelchair, shuffled over to me, hugged me, and said one word, "Persevere!"

He got up from his wheelchair, shuffled over to me, hugged me, and said one word, "Persevere!"

Jesus tells of God's perseverance to us all the time, especially in parables. About a woman who loses a coin and lights a lamp to find it; a shepherd who loses a sheep and roams about the countryside until the shepherd finds it; and a father who loses a son and is always looking down the road for his return. These stories aren't ultimately about things and people being lost. These stories are about things and people being found. Our God simply doesn't give up. Ever. God is persevering towards us!

Today, the idea of perseverance may seem unwise or even too risky. Everything changes so rapidly. Much can disappoint. I believe that perseverance can be very life-giving. Perseverance is not dependent on the imagined perfection of life, but on the unchanging fidelity of God in the middle of it all—even in life's messiness. Things change, people disappoint us, and we let ourselves down. So, if something comes up in your life calling you to persevere, just give it a hug.

(Cont. from page 2.) **Praying the Psalms in Nature**

This psalm exults in God’s graciousness in the creation and in particular, the place of human beings in nature.

Psalm 104 in a more detailed and poetic way balances Psalm 8 in its vision of human beings as part of the creation, going about their work each day, even as other creatures are also blessed by God’s compassionate care. All of us depend on God’s gracious spirit for life and breath.

Psalm 65 celebrates God’s care for the earth and its resultant fecundity. “The hills are girded with joy, the meadows covered with flocks...” As my dad once said to me, “We plant this seed and it wants to grow!”

These are psalms that celebrate the gift of creation and its renewal each year and the life that comes to us. These spring and summer months especially, it is good to bring our prayer outside, to be and speak in harmony with God’s other creatures.

## Milestones

### Candidacies



Carol Bishop of Eden Prairie, MN,  
December 4, 2022

Gregory Harris of Minneapolis,  
MN, February 25, 2023



Hans-Peter de Ruiter and MaryAnn de  
Ruiter of Minneapolis, MN, May 24, 2023

### Oblations

Bryan LaHaise of St. Paul, MN,  
made oblation on April 5, 2023



### Deaths



James J. Dillon, OblSB, of Muskegon, MI, died April 25, 2023, aged 73. He made oblation in 1967. Once James wrote that being an oblate “anchors me to the Rule and the daily cadence and rhythm of the Office. It centers my life on the Sacred and is a much needed reminder to walk in the path of humility.” May he rest joyfully in everlasting peace.

**Errata:** On page 3 of the previous issue of *The Oblate* the picture for Jean Drawz is actually a photo of Carol Bishop.

“Most of the things we need to be most fully alive never come in busyness. They grow in rest.”

Mark Buchanan

On March 26th, Jessie Bazan, an oblate of Saint Benedict’s Monastery in St. Joseph, MN, presented a conference to Saint John’s oblates in person and on Zoom. She titled it, “Tending Our Time: A Benedictine Approach to Rest, Rhythm, and Renewal.” Her observations reflect her experience as a theologian, spiritual writer, and Collegeville Institute program associate.



Photo by Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB

Attendees—  
Dean Rademacher, oblate,  
and Carol Bishop, oblate candidate

Early in her talk, Bazan read one of her favorite poems, “When I Am Among the Trees,” by celebrated poet Mary Oliver. Explained Jessie, “Gently, the poem reminds me there’s no need to rush, that no moment is more important than the one happening right now, so stay in it. Savor it, reverence it.”

Jessie highlighted *The Sabbath*, a book hailed as a love song to the Sabbath and a classic of Jewish spirituality, by Abraham Joshua Heschel. She shared one of the author’s main points, that we can suffer from a deeply rooted dread of time that goes too fast, so we feel like we have too little, or that goes, feels, painfully slow.

Bazan stated, “Time is a precious, holy gift from God, but burnout, overworking, and exhaustion are systemic, cultural problems for us. We have an urgent need for a Benedictine perspective on structuring time. Benedict recognized that living a fulfilling life does not mean living a full life. He makes prayer a top priority. No one, not even a vowed monastic, is immune to overworking or struggling to find a more balanced rhythm of life. By leaning into the balance of prayer, work and study that St. Benedict encourages, our ways can counter our culture’s distortions. And as Joan Chittister, OSB, has written, Benedictine balance can make the Sabbath ‘the moment for returning to the solemnity of life, for setting our sights above the daily, for resetting the basics, for giving meaning to the rest of the week so that the mundane and immediate do not become the level of our existence.’”



Photo by Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB

Attendees—  
Andrew Preston, oblate candidate, and  
Charles Miller, oblate

How might we rein ourselves in so we don’t charge ahead day after day? Bazan spoke of the importance of community to help us slow our pacing. “We have a common mission to be the Light of the World.” She put forth the example of our feet which hold a quarter of all the bones in our body to support us and enable us to move and even fly! One bone of the foot won’t get us very far, but together, “we shall run on the path of God’s commandments, our hearts overflowing with the inexpressible delight of love.”

## Meet the New Assistant Director of Oblates

## Brother Walter Kieffer, OSB

I was born the second child (the first son) of Bernard and Mary (Coufal) Kieffer on June 1, 1946, at Rice Memorial Hospital in Willmar, MN, when my family lived in Bird Island, MN. Kathleen, my older sister was born in 1944. Four months after my first birthday, full-term twin girls were stillborn, and in 1949 my brother Daniel was born. In October of 1950 came Veronica, named by my father laying in the same hospital where she was born. On September 24th he had suffered a total facial caustic acid burn. Two years earlier he had opened a plumbing business in Stewart, MN. His accident set a course for my life.

My father was told he would never work again if he did survive, so my mother started selling off the business. Three years later when he was on the road to recovery, they decided that since both of them came from farming families, a farm would be a good place to provide for and raise a family. We moved to a small farm in Litchfield, on the south shore of Lake Ripley. That is the period I remember the most. I started school at St. Boniface in Stewart, and attended Litchfield Longfellow Elementary, followed by 3rd through 8th grades at the new St. Philip's School, when a Passionist priest from St. Louis gave us a retreat. As it ended, I asked him about becoming a brother. He returned the next fall and I filled out the paperwork to attend their Prep School in St. Louis, MO. I was accepted but for a physical. It was during the doctor examination that my mother was wondering about the distance from home and all. The doctor turned to her and said, "Well, there is a high school at Saint John's in Collegeville," of which we'd never heard, even though the Benedictine Sisters of St. Paul taught us and were friends of the family. We ended up doing the road trip on the next Sunday, only to find out it was the last day for entrance exams for the following year. I sat down, took the exam, and passed.



On August 28, 1960, I began at Prep with next to no knowledge of what I was in for and not knowing another student. After the election of a Catholic President of the USA, the start of the second Vatican Council, the change of the school from pre-divinity and college prep to only one curriculum, and moving from the nearly century old Quad to a new school on the hill east of the Church, I graduated on Memorial Day in 1964, one day short of becoming 18. I was accepted to enter the Abbey as a candidate for the brothers on September 15, 1964. I was accepted for the novitiate in the spring, became a novice in the first fully integrated class, took three year vows on July 11, 1966, and have remained at Saint John's since that time.

Over the years, some of the jobs I've had are: refectorian—managing the food service, sacristan—managing the sacristy, gardener, groundskeeper, managing Saint John's plumbing, heating, and wastewater, fireman, assistant fire chief and fire chief, safety officer, serving at Saint John's missions in the Bahamas and Tokyo, replacing lead supply water lines in Rome, dorm resident advisor, deacon, and sixty-two years on the maple syrup operation.

In 1991 following my 25th anniversary, I put in for a sabbatical. In the beginning of 1993, I attended a 100 day renewal program at a retreat center for religious, run by the Christian Brothers near Santa Fe, NM. It was an enriching experience in many ways. I made friends that are still close to me today.

I could say more on my life as a monk for nearly 60 years, but this is a start. I've had the Holy Spirit on my shoulder many times. That beats having the Holy Spirit on one shoulder and the Devil on the other.

## Meet an Oblate—My Oblate Journey

Deacon John Grek, OblSB



The medal had a cross on one side, and a figure of a man on the other. I had no idea what it was or what it was for, but somehow I knew I had to hang on to it.

One day I asked my parish priest if he knew what it was. He looked at it intently for a minute or so before saying he didn't know what it was, but that "it is very powerful." That impressed me enough to put it on my keychain, where I have carried it with me to this day.

Around 2004 a new parish priest asked me if I would consider becoming a deacon. I immediately replied, "No," and that was that—for two weeks. "Well, have you thought about it?" he wanted to know. Now irritated, I replied, "Okay, I'll think about it." Soon I began my diaconal studies.

In 1992, when I retired from military service, my wife and I decided to move back home to northern Wisconsin. The house we chose had an unattached garage that was empty, except for an old treadle-style sewing machine. In one of its drawers, under buttons and pins and other stuff, I found a large, round, bronze medal.

I was required to find a spiritual director. I asked the Franciscan friar who filled that role for me to recommend a place to go for a retreat. He suggested I investigate Saint John's Abbey. Why would a Franciscan suggest a Benedictine Abbey?



Photo by John Grek

As it turned out, one of my closest friends in diaconal formation was interested in going to Saint John's for an advanced degree, as well as to maybe become an oblate, whatever that meant, and the two of us took a road trip there together. After arriving at Saint John's campus we walked around, taking in all the sights, when I came to a dead stop. Above a large, imposing door was the exact imprint of one side of the

medal I had found years earlier, the side with the standing man. I pulled my keys out of my pocket, showed the medal to my friend, and pointed to the door. I think I said something like, "This is the place!" The medal I'd found years ago, the one I'd

needed to take action toward becoming an oblate.

The next year of studying the Rule and reading about Benedictine spirituality passed swiftly, and in July of 2019 I made my final oblation before Abbot



Photo by Br. Paul-Vincent Niebauer, OSB

carried with me, but still knew nothing about, was the medal of St. Benedict! The pieces of the puzzle of my journey to become an oblate of St. Benedict were slowly falling into place.

After that day I returned to Saint John's from time to time for personal retreats. They consisted of morning, noon, and evening prayer in the Abbey Church, daily Mass, a rosary whispered privately in the Guesthouse Chapel, perhaps a visit to the Saint John's Bible display in the library, and some reading and time for contemplation. At one point I realized I

John in the Abbey Church. The medal of St. Benedict that I found had been leading me to Saint John's Abbey, to visit it, to learn about it, and to embrace it as a place of peace and serenity that has in many ways become a second home to me.

Now it's easy to see where God was leading me, sometimes tugging and pushing, to bring me to the places where he has wanted me to be. As St. Paul tells us, "We know that all things work for good for those who love Him" (Romans 8:28).

## Speaking To and Hearing From God

Ron Joki, OblSB

Sometimes I wonder why God introduced me to Benedictine monasticism, since my early years were in an evangelical tradition where I learned to pray extemporaneously, without a script or the words of another. I believed that my prayers expressed my honest and true desire to give myself fully to Jesus Christ, to express sorrow for my sins and to receive the grace of salvation.

When I became a college student, I ran away from the negative judgments that I had heard in that early experience of church. I was done with the portrayal of God as a rigid disciplinarian, even though I retained the sense of a loving Jesus. Like many whose experience was similar, I was confused. I knew that I loved my faith community and yet I felt somehow rejected by them. To further the confusion, one of my college roommates was a devout Muslim who regularly prayed his prescribed prayers which sparked discussions about why this was meaningful for him. While not drawn to his religious practice, I was intrigued by his sense of praying in solidarity with Muslims around the globe.

My solution at the time was to turn to Eastern meditation which I came to understand as a prayer of presence to God without the theological constructs of Christianity, Islam, Judaism or many other faith traditions. I believe that God knew that this was what I needed at this time in my spiritual journey, a new way to continue and deepen my relationship and devotion to the God whom I loved and who loved me.

Ultimately it was my Hindu meditation teacher who led me back to Christianity with a new understanding of what church could be and how prayer could

take many forms. I learned a Christian form of meditation in centering prayer. A monk of Saint John's Abbey led me to understand monastic prayer as a way of being in solidarity with other Christians around the globe.

Saint Benedict devotes a sizable portion of his Rule to the "work of God," which I initially understood as

"reciting" the Psalms. As I studied the Rule, I came to a new understanding of "praying" the Psalms as a springboard to listening to God, listening for where these ancient texts might touch my life and inspire me again to seek an honest and true relationship with God.

Sr. Judith Suter, OSB, writes: "The ancients believed that the Word of God was just that, God speaking to us. So

when they said the psalms and listened to other readings from Scripture, the inspired Word of God, the words were said in order to make them present, to give those saying them an opportunity to hear, out loud, God speaking to them. Then they had to ponder the word in silence in order to truly hear and respond. Prayer, therefore, was not the lengthy times of recitation, but the silence between them" (*St. Benedict's Rule, an Inclusive Translation and Daily Commentary*).

I hesitate to say that I have come full circle with my experience of prayer, but I have learned a bit over time. I have learned that my prayer in the evangelical style, my meditation practice, and the monastic prayer that I do are all valid styles of speaking to and hearing from God; all have the potential to help me grow in relationship to God.





## A Precious Moment during Prayer

The Rev. Harlan Strong, OblSB

I am sharing the following in the best way I know to relate what I believe was an honest to goodness epiphany. Hopefully, this has piqued your interest to read the rest of this article. An epiphany for me is defined as the manifestation of a divine being.

So, I begin...I was seated in a choir stall in the sanctuary of St. Mark's Cathedral in Minneapolis with about 40 to 50 Episcopal priests and deacons for our annual blessing and reaffirmation of ordination vows. The service was conducted by our bishop, The Right Reverend Bishop Craig Loya, the tenth bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota.

I was distracted at one point during the bishop's sermon. I am not sure why except that I was saying a short prayer apologizing and asking God for forgiveness of my sins. This all happened in a nano-second or two, but I was totally unaware of my surroundings. Then I felt the presence of God and the words, "You are forgiven."

I spent several minutes trying to recapture and explain this epiphany.

You can probably tell from my wording how difficult it is for me to explain what happened but how blessed I am. At the end of the service, I had a quick chance to speak to the bishop. He listened, nodded in approval and blessed me. Then he said, "Let's go ice fishing soon."

As I search for meaning, I truly believe that God does work in mysterious ways. I thank all of you who take the time to read this article of mine. I hope you understand my need to share what is to me such a profound spiritual experience.

I am blessed and we all are blessed to be a part of the oblate ministry at Saint John's Abbey.

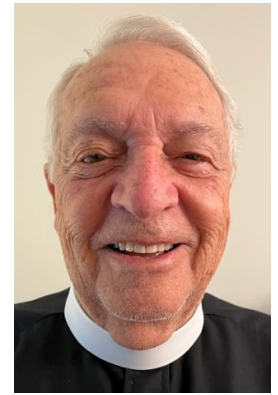
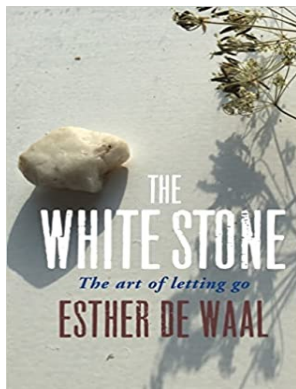


Photo by Br. Felix Mencias, OSB

Holy Thursday, 2023—Br. Aelred Senna, OSB, washing the feet of fellow schola member, Raj Chaphalkar.



### *The White Stone: The Art of Letting Go*

By Esther de Waal, Liturgical Press, 2022

“To the one that overcometh...  
Will I give a white stone  
and in the stone a new name written.”  
(Revelation 2:17)



*The White Stone*, Esther de Waal's most recent gift to all of us and especially to oblates, emerged from her time during the pandemic. She offers so much to us as she leaves behind Welsh marshes to make a new home in Oxford.

As we age, we all must begin to let go, each in one's own way. *The White Stone* recounts de Waal's journey of letting go. Needing to let go of her beloved cottage in Wales, she undertakes a ritual of walking very deliberately while reflecting upon earth, air, water, and fire. The small white stone she carries for those walks reassures her later, when she begins adjusting to apartment life in new surroundings.

Sharing short poems and quotes that have informed her spiritual journey, de Waal discusses letting go of possessions and of people. She celebrates simplicity while acknowledging the need for some form of lamentation. But she also embraces arrival, using the Psalms as she embarks upon a new life in reaching old age. Affirming monastic tradition, she seeks stability, conversion, and obedience (listening). All three point her toward Christ. Mercy, forgiveness, the prodigal son, and a “spirituality of subtraction” sustain her in what she calls the “erosions of age.” Poetry and music help her confront grief and loss, finally bringing her to focus on death and the stations of the cross.

How many other books use the Rule of St. Benedict, the Celtic world, Thomas Merton, and the Psalms among other traditions to nourish and support new beginnings in old age? The question brings to mind her 2003 book, *Lost in Wonder* (Liturgical Press), also a commendable read.

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### ◆ Other Oblate News

Patrick Michael Redmond, M.A., ObISB, who became an Oblate affiliated with Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, in 1992, is included in the national Scholastic Art and Writing Awards Centennial Timeline.

This newsletter, *The Oblate*, is breaking in a new person, Charlotte Martin, ObISB, to do layout for the great content you all submit. We are exceedingly grateful to Josie Stang for serving so faithfully, generously and skillfully since 2011 in this role (and more), and now for gently guiding Charlotte's steep learning curve.

### A treasure close by: *Daily Reflections*

Each year Liturgical Press publishes three small pocket-sized books (4 inches by 5), one for Advent and Christmas, one for Lent, and one for Easter to Pentecost. These booklets encourage and support daily prayer and meditation in the Benedictine “lectio” style.

With two pages per day, we find the day’s Scripture readings listed, with a verse excerpted for contemplative prayer. Then follows a reflection, a meditation, and a prayer for the day.

Sr. Genevieve Glen, OSB, wrote the promo for the 2023 Easter to Pentecost number: “This series builds bridges—personal, thoughtful, inviting—between our ordinary lives and Scripture, setting us on new paths to conversion.”



The prayer reflection for the Second Sunday of Easter (April 16) brought me up short and made me rethink the Gospel passage for the day from John – the Doubting Thomas story. The *Daily Reflections* authors took a new angle and headed their piece, “What wounds are for.”

Jesus, talking to Thomas, reminds us that “woundedness is part of the human condition.” Although “the risen Jesus is glorified,” the wounds of his crucifixion, still visible, form the bridge to help Thomas to faith. Our own wounds, our brokenness, can also form a bridge to help others recognise God’s love for each of us.

### Oblate Chapter News (See full list of chapters at <https://saintjohnsabbey.org/oblates-chapters>)

**For the Saint Joan of Arc Oblate Chapter**, Sunday, May 21, 2023, 3:00 – 4:30 PM was our last chapter meeting until we reconvene in September. Look for the church entrance (door #1) in the corner. Take the stairs or elevator up into the church for prayer. If you arrive late, you will find us in the lower-level Hospitality Hall. **Note:** at times we may have to change the exact locations on the Saint Joan’s campus due to unforeseen circumstances. Look for door signs to indicate this.

#### **Directions to Saint Joan of Arc Church:**

**From the north**, take Interstate 35W South from downtown Minneapolis to the 46<sup>th</sup> St. exit. Turn left onto 46<sup>th</sup> St. and go one block past the freeway bridge to turn left onto 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. S. Go to the parking lot mid-block on the right.

**From the south**, take 35W North from the Crosstown (Hwy 62) to the 46<sup>th</sup> St. exit. Turn right and go one block to turn left onto 3<sup>rd</sup> Ave. S. Go to the parking lot mid-block on the right.



## The Oblate

THAT IN ALL THINGS GOD MAY BE GLORIFIED

NEWSLETTER OF THE OBLATES OF SAINT BENEDICT:  
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### Mark Your Calendar

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

**November 19, 2023 Day of Reflection**

**March 17, 2024 Day of Reflection**



Photo by Fr. Lew Grobe, OSB

The baptistery, bathed in symbolic blue light, inside the front entrance to the abbey church ahead of the Easter Vigil.

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