

The Oblate

News Magazine of the Oblates of Saint John's Abbey

February 2024

Volume 68 Number 1

Spring 2024 Day of Reflection, March 17

The Saint John's Bible and the Revitalization of Imagination in Biblical Exegesis

When the Bible Task Force first convened to set the direction and scope of *The Saint John's Bible*, one objective it sought to promote was the melding of imagination and scholarship within both the Church and the academy. The role of the imagination might appear to some as a trifle, but this dismissiveness obscures a tectonic force at play. Fr Michael Patella, OSB, the Chair of the Committee on Illumination and Texts for *The Saint John's Bible*, will discuss the role that art—and the lack of it—has had for biblical interpretation and how *The Saint John's Bible* is revitalizing an ancient tradition for today.



A monk of Saint John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota, Fr. Michael is a professor of New Testament at Saint John's University, where he also serves as the seminary rector. His book, *Word and Image* (Liturgical Press, 2013) addresses the theology, art,

and interpretation of *The Saint John's Bible*. In addition, he has published works on Paul, Mark, and angels and demons, and he wrote on Luke's Gospel for the *Jerome Biblical Commentary, Fully Revised Edition* (T & T Clark, 2022).

To register, please contact Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB, at oblates@csbsju.edu or 320-363-3022 by March 11.

There is no fee, but a freewill offering is appreciated.

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 Small group discussion
- 1:30 Conference followed by discussion
- 2:50 Blessing and Dismissal



I am so grateful to you as oblates for your decision to walk with us, for exploring Benedictine spiritual practices with us. Monastic life as envisioned by Saint Benedict is much more practical than it is theoretical. What do I mean by this?

When a person comes to the community to explore a possible vocation to monastic life, after some preparatory conversations, the person is invited to come and be in the monastery for three to four days—to pray, live, eat, work, and recreate with the community. If the outcome of this first visit is positive, more extended visits follow, and with each visit, the person is introduced to some basic teaching for a specific practice.

For example, one weekend might be devoted to basics of *lectio divina*, the next to praying the psalter in community, further to being silent in the practice of centering prayer, and the list goes on. In this way, we are trying to give that seeker some basic advancement in skills, an approach to durable practices that he will be able to take with him regardless of whether he pursues monastic life.

I so admire oblates for taking on the task of adapting this array of practices that is central to monastic spirituality and shaping it to the particular set of de-

mands that are part of your life. The ultimate challenge of this spiritual work is to lock in an array of practices that is resilient and flexible enough to sustain you through ups and downs of everyday life.

We, monks and oblates, fall off the wagon! The question is not *whether* this will happen—we know it will. Our challenge is to have the wherewithal to get back on the wagon as quickly as possible, that is, to resume our spiritual practices, so that they can sustain us in the midst of the mess we are in. One of the fundamental challenges of monastic formation is to help the beginning monk retrieve practices he has abandoned in crisis. It is a sweet irony of human experience that we often abandon precisely those tools which will help us through the mess!

Is this true for you? A good Lenten question is what happens to me when I am in crisis? What spiritual practices sustain me? Which spiritual practices do I jettison? For myself, this always comes down to the willingness and creativity to adapt. For just a moment, as I write this, I am thinking of myself as Captain Kirk, signing off on a mission completed. Having just stepped down as abbot, I have found it a gift to write to you about things that matter so much. Peace.

Many thanks to Oblate Pam Keul for her previous work on this fine newsletter. *The Oblate* is in our 68th year of publication and has seen contributions from many oblates offering their insight and wisdom in many articles written. We welcome Oblate Charlotte Martin as our current editor and layout manager.

Father Michael Peterson, OSB
Oblate Director

Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB



I've always been drawn by Saint Benedict's promise in the prologue of his Rule: "Do not be daunted immediately and run away from the road that leads to salvation; it is bound to be narrow at the outset. But as we progress in this way of life

and in faith, we shall run on the path of God's commandments, our hearts swelling with the inexpressible delights of love."

It promises so much. "It's beautiful," I long ago told Father George, my formation director, "but is it true?" His reply, "You offer your own life as gift, and you will find that life will be beautiful." Beautiful! George used that word much.

I would imagine that this "delight of love" depends

on a courageous, and even reckless, act of oblation. In John 4:3 we read, "Mary took about a pint of pure nard, an expensive perfume; she poured it on Jesus' feet and wiped his feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." We see and we smell Mary's oblation as sweet nard. Mary poured out her life upon the feet of Jesus.

I would have loved to have been there to see Mary after the anointing. There she is at table, her hair all mussed up and dripping with oil. She's smiling from ear to ear because she has done a beautiful thing. She found the one thing necessary. Jesus.

Don't listen to your cautious side that would demand that your life be spent on something more practical than God. Saint Benedict encourages us, "Do not be daunted." Do not withhold the fragrant nard of your life. Pour it all out. Beautiful. Fill the room with its fragrance. That's what oblation means: self-gift.

Milestones

Candidacies



Michael McCormack
Valrico, FL
11.06.2023

Joachim Seelos
Iowa City, IA
11.30.2023



Dan and Marie
Meierhofer
Liberty, MO, 11.21.2023

Susan and Dave
Kuszmar
Fresno, CA, 10.13.2023



Maureen Murray
Cooperstown, NY
11.21.2023

Sam Bazan
Milwaukee, WI
12.29.23
(not pictured)

Jean Beckel
Arvada, CO
10.17.2023



More Milestones

Oblations



Pastor Brian Mundt
Minneapolis, MN
transfer of oblation
to Saint John's Abbey
12.11.23

Deaths

Maria Cristina Perez Ramos
Green Bay, WI
10.25.23

Maria Cristina (b. January 9, 1942) was a dear friend to many from her studies at Saint John's School of Theology and later as an oblate. Though a small lady, her big heart spoke of her love for God and others. Her depth of spirit and breadth of caring served many in the oblate community as well as Hispanic members of the Green Bay diocese. She particularly enjoyed making visits to Saint John's Abbey, where she will always hold a special place in the hearts of oblates and monks who knew her.

Ron Joki, ObISB

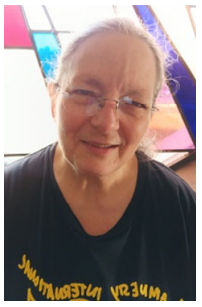


Our New Abbot



Born September 30, 1954, Abbot Douglas Mullin, OSB, made first vows July 11, 1979, was ordained August 4, 2007, and became abbot January 9, 2024. He holds a Bachelor of Arts in elementary education, a Master of Arts in religious education and school administration, a Master of Divinity, and a Doctor of Education in educational leadership. He has served as an educator, as Dean of Students for Saint John's Prep School and as the University's Vice President of Student Development. He has also been the abbey subprior and a faculty resident. Most recently, he served as a chaplain at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in St. Cloud.

From the Editor, Charlotte Martin, ObISB



“... that in all things God may be glorified” (Rule 57:9).

Greetings, y’all! As Fr. Michael noted on page 2, Pam Keul opted not to continue as our editor, and I’m giving it a whirl. So buckle up!

I am eager to see our newsletter give each of us glimpses of the minds and hearts and spirits of more and more of our fellow oblates. Fr. Michael recently told me how many oblates the abbey has, and I was stunned. Over 600! Sadly, I know far too few of you.

I became an oblate in 1990, while at the Collegeville Institute writing my dissertation (theology, Vanderbilt University in Nashville, where this native Minnesotan learned “y’all”). But until 2022, I lived and taught in Iowa. Because my visits to Saint John’s never coincided with oblate gatherings, when I moved to a home eight miles from the abbey, I knew many monks (at least to greet) and no oblates! Granted, an unusual path. Probably other oblates, such as the 70, roughly, at the retreats this year and last (which I did attend), have gathered here often; regular retreatants might know 25 or even 50 other oblates by name. Only 550 to go! And you already know even more as authors of newsletter articles you’ve read over the years. Still, there are always the new people and that as yet largely silent majority. Many of us can stand to know more about many others of us, I believe. Would it not be delightful?

Happily, oblates already author most of our newsletter articles. We want more of you contributing! Each edition we try to have someone write a “Meet an Oblate” piece of maybe 400-600 words—how one became an oblate or why one loves being an oblate, some variation on self-introduction. If you haven’t written yours yet, come on, it’s your turn! Don’t be

shy! If you get really anxious over writing, might I or another oblate interview you? Some 500-plus people are eager to “meet” you. Others of you share your thoughts or experiences of Benedictine themes—stability, prayer, etc.—or of visiting an abbey or oblate gathering elsewhere or having another Benedictine-relevant adventure like a great new read. Let’s keep this up, too, especially people who have not written here recently; don those thinking caps, write something out for us, and submit it, because we can’t wait to know more of you.

But I’d like to try a new thing too. I’d like to pose here a little question that you folks can respond to in a *very brief* way, and then I’d like *many* of you to submit responses so our June edition can have a page, more or less, on which I lay out responses from 10 or even 20 or more of you (as many as I receive and can fit), with just your name and city/state. We’ll try a new question each edition, or perhaps one a year. I think it will be fun to see the different responses that a good many oblates and candidates offer to a common question, including people who lack the time or inspiration just now to submit something longer.

For the June, 2024, edition, our common question is this: *What are up to five ways to describe the role that Saint John’s Abbey plays in your life, using in each case a single word or a very short phrase?*

Submit your five (and *all submissions*) by *April 1* to oblatenewsletter@csbsju.edu; having little time each week (garden, piano, etc.), I need many weeks. I’ll contrive some way around repetition. Please include a headshot (a *close up* from your shoulders to just above your head—so when I make the pictures tiny, we’ll still see faces). This is a work in progress, folks, so humor me some, eh? With your cooperation and refinements as we go, I’m hoping this lets us garner just a bit more insight into each other’s persona.

The Doorway Effect – A Reflection

David J. Sorensen, OblSB



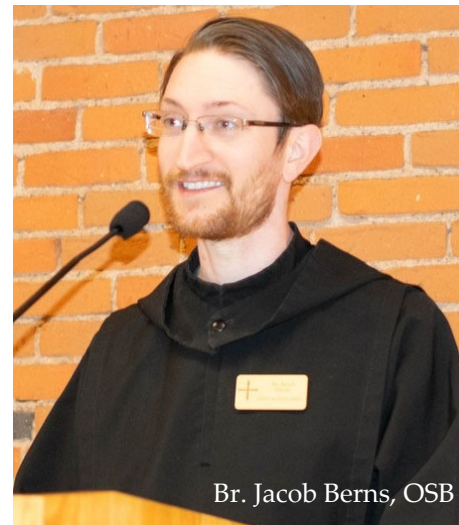
Editor's Note: At my request, David wrote this reflection to convey an aspect of where he was taken by mulling over Br. Jacob Berns' November, 2023, Day of Reflection presentation, "Gateways of Grace." For Br. Jacob the monastery gate signifies both the novice's new beginnings and monastic hospitality. (Also, thanks to Barbara Marincel for all photos on this page but David's.)

The storm door hung catawampus by a single strand, with the wood door behind it ajar. Returning to my childhood home after many years away, but against my better judgment, I parked across the



Patsy Jones, OblSB

street and gazed at the old place, sifting through memories, seeing what was left. An earlier premonition had whispered, "Forget it, leave it alone; just appreciate the old recollections instead." That back door was a gateway to so



Br. Jacob Berns, OSB

many powerful memories, both dear and dreadful. Childhood innocence, adolescent confusion, young adult freedom. Christmas, Easter, birthdays, engagements, weddings, reunions, as well as departures and death, had all met me through that doorway. I had stepped through it to laughter and tears. And now it just gawped at me, tarnished and ruined. It was a hollow and horrible moment. But then I recalled from my childhood, my mother reciting from memory "The House with Nobody in It" by Joyce Kilmer:



Rosemary Griffin, OblSB

Kathy Janku, OblSB

...But a house that has done what a house should do,
a house that has sheltered life,
That has put its loving wooden arms around a man and his wife,
A house that has echoed a baby's laugh and held up his stumbling feet,
Is the saddest sight, when it's left alone, that ever your eyes could meet.
So whenever I go to Suffern along the Erie track
I never go by the empty house without stopping and looking back,
Yet it hurts me to look at the crumbling roof and the shutters fallen apart,
For I can't help thinking the poor old house is a house with a broken heart.



Fr. Timo Backous, OSB

Alex Duvall, OblSB



Fr. Michael Peterson, OSB

Ellen Cutting, OblSB



Tom Guinan, OblSB

Fr. Michael Patella, OSB

Meet an Oblate



In introducing myself I must also introduce my guide dog, Veronique. She is one of several that I have had who have visited Saint John's Abbey and been well received. I am currently a faculty member of the Episcopal School for Deacons (now called the Deacon Formation Collaborative through Bexley Seabury Seminary) where I teach homiletics (preaching). I have also been active at St. Mark's Episcopal Church in Berkeley, CA, especially in the choir. I have studied music, liturgy and theology.

I came into being an oblate of Saint John's Abbey by a circuitous route. In a certain way, I am a "bi-oblatinal" oblate. For many years, going back to my move to California in 1987, I have been an Associate of the Order of the Holy Cross (OHC Episcopal). This was especially fruitful when several of the monks lived in Berkeley. That house no longer exists, though they are still in several other places, including their Mother House in West Park, NY. I still pray for them, and from them I developed a rule of

Jan Robitscher, OblSB

life. But I wanted to go deeper. In the early 2000s I met hermit Angie del Greco, then studying at the Jesuit School of Theology here in Berkeley. She shared with me about becoming an oblate, and I was intrigued. After doing some research into different Benedictine monasteries and hearing about other friends (almost all from other Protestant denominations) who were also oblates of Saint John's Abbey, I felt called to make my oblation at Saint John's, the place friendliest to Episcopalians.

Perhaps the most interesting part of this story is how I made my oblation more than once! The first time, here in Berkeley, was on the Feast of William Tyndale, martyr, who first began to translate the Bible into English. My oblation was received (and supported) by the small group of OHC monks still here then. But somehow it never got recorded, and I did not know this for several more years. So on one of my trips to Collegeville (I think in 2012) for the Oblate Retreat, I repeated my oblation there—a wonderful experience! My only sadness was that Abbot John had to be away that day.

While still valuing my relationship with the Order of the Holy Cross, I also cherish our monthly oblate meetings on Zoom—a great gift from the pandemic. My rich explorations of the Rule of Benedict during my candidacy have been augmented by how much I have learned from the varied and fascinating talks presented in our Zoom sessions, in which I've also enjoyed Fr. Michael's beautiful flute songs.

Day by day I try to live out the Rule in my life. My hobbies include photography (yes, even with low vision!) and a love of early music. A life-long learner and someone who loves to meet people, I hope to make another visit to Saint John's for the Oblate Retreat and to hear the newly rebuilt organ and "sweet singing in the choir."

Oblates with Pope Francis

In mid-September, I reported on early days of my participation in the World Congress of Benedictine Oblates at Sant' Anselmo in Rome (see 9/15 email from oblates@csbsju.edu). That gathering included 200 oblates from around the world, representing 25 countries and 90 abbeys. On the last day of the conference, we were scheduled to have an audience with Pope Francis. To say the least, we were quite excited to meet with His Holiness. But, then, we were told right before leaving the Aventine Hill that each of us would have the opportunity to greet the pope at the conclusion of the audience. This only heightened our excitement.



Author, right, with Abbot Primate Gregory Polan, OSB

Once we arrived at the Vatican, we waited outside on the piazza and then entered the Apostolic Palace. We climbed a series of wide staircases until we reached the Sala Clementina, a large room dedicated to the memory and honor of St. Clement, bishop and martyr. Handsomely dressed ushers welcomed us to our seats, and there we waited, all abuzz with a palpable energy. And then Pope Francis came into the room as we jumped to our feet and began to applaud. Walking directly to an Anglican priest and oblate who held his young son in his arms, he gave the boy a kiss on each cheek and a blessing.

Once the applause died down, Francis took his chair and welcomed us. We each received an English copy of his remarks, which he offered in Italian. His Holiness reminded the gathered oblates that our monastery is the world. In this world we are called to let “the unspeakable sweetness of love” expand our



Fr. Samuel Torvend, OblSB

hearts, which he reflected on by highlighting from the Rule “the search for God, enthusiasm for the gospel, and hospitality.” The search for God includes especially the scriptures and *lectio divina*. Enthusiasm for the gospel of Jesus Christ lets it become the light that guides our lives, especially in our calling to be leaven in the world. And finally the practice of Benedictine hospitality in the world manifests itself especially in our committed love above all for the poor. Concerning the latter, Pope Francis said, “We need this [hospitality extended to the least in the world] as much as we need air.”

The conclusion of his exhortation was met with thunderous applause, stomping feet, and much cheering (so much for Benedictine restraint!). We were then invited to approach the pope one by one. When my turn came, he offered me his hand to shake, I thanked him for his remarks and for his incredible work, *Laudato Si: On Care for Our Common Home*, at which he beamed brightly and then said, “I have another one coming out soon!” On Facebook I wrote this: “I was able to greet him, shake his hand, and receive his blessing. Quite unexpectedly, it moved me to tears.”

The pope’s full message can be found here: <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2023/september/documents/20230915-congresso-oblati-benedettini.html>

Pope Francis speaks to the assembled oblates

Listen with the Ear of Your Heart—Thoughts on the Spirituality of Benedict

Maureen Murray, Candidate



I grew up in a Benedictine parish, a Bronx, New York, mission from Saint John's Abbey, Collegeville, Minnesota. My parents became deeply committed to the first lay apostolate for Catholic couples, the Christian Family Movement

(CFM). Leaning liberal, and decidedly toward social justice, the CFM mission, "observe, judge, act," shaped my growing up years before, during, and after Vatican II. Close affiliation with like-minded Benedictine priests who emerged as CFM chaplains soon linked us to the abbey at Collegeville. My brother and husband both graduated from Saint John's Preparatory School on the Collegeville campus; my parents became oblates; and a monk who was responsi-

ble for the connection between my "pre-husband" and me also witnessed our wedding. On reflection, my liturgical and spiritual teeth were cut on Benedict. Saint John's Abbey remains my spiritual epicenter.

And I think I could do far worse than studying the spirituality of Benedict and his Rule, which has endured for 15 centuries. Benedict grounded the rule squarely in scripture, taking the gospels as guide. Terry Matz writes in "St Benedict" for Catholic Online, "Benedict realized the strongest and truest foundation, for the power of words was the Word of God itself. For what page or word of the Bible is not a perfect rule for temporal life?" In fact, the Rule is laced with references to specific scripture passages. "The Rule of Benedict is not a treatise in systematic theology. Its logic is the logic of daily life lived in Christ and lived well," as Joan Chittister observed in *The Rule of Benedict, Insights for the Ages*.

Benedict's voice in his Rule addresses us all: "I speak to you whoever you may be." He guides us to follow a simple way of life filled with prayer and work—*ora et labora*. Yet he believes that the two can be combined. Work is prayer. Material and spiritual are inseparable. The humdrum can lead to God. God is everywhere. Our job is to seek God's presence in the field, in the home, at work, at prayer. Benedict was never a priest but set out principles that would guide the members of a busy household to find God in their busy-ness. The Rule addresses us as individuals on our own individual pathway to God, yet places value on community and our relationships with others, in all the many iterations of community in which we find ourselves.



Where I pray in the mornings. East light, sun rising.

Preferring the Work of God

Toni M. Nichols, OblSB



“Nothing is to be preferred to the Work of God” (RB 43:3). The phrase “Work of God” appears 18 times in the Rule of Benedict, always associated with the Divine Office. In Benedict’s era, the monks gathered seven times each day and once at night to pray, sing, and read psalms, scripture, and ecclesiastical

writings. In naming this activity the “Work of God,” Benedict made clear that praying the Divine Office was the monastery’s primary apostolate. Following the 1960s’ reforms, Benedictine monasteries adapted the Divine Office to their individual community needs and situations, in part to accommodate other apostolic responsibilities. Currently the Office at Saint John’s includes morning prayer, midday prayer, evening prayer, night prayer, and a daily Mass.

For the oblate aspiring to live into the teachings of the Rule, following a monastery’s prayer routine generally isn’t feasible. We might pray one or two Hours each day, ideally Morning and Evening Prayer. The Divine Office is not the oblate’s Work of God (primary apostolate), yet can we not somehow apply this concept to our own needs and situations?

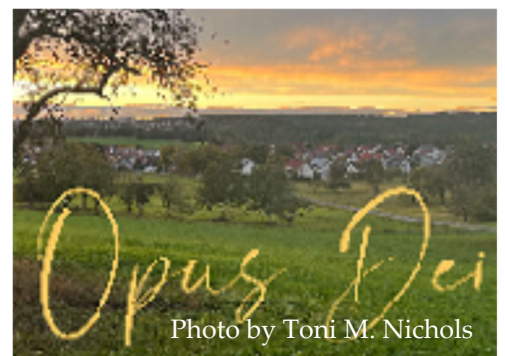
At the beginning of the year, I moved to a small village in what seemed to me to be the middle of nowhere. Adding to the decision’s gravity was that I was also buying a small home there; if things didn’t work out, I couldn’t easily pick up and leave. A confluence of events had led me to this decision, and their nature meant I felt that I had been led by the Lord. Was this truly where I was supposed to do my ministry? Everything seemed to be pointing to that. However, I was missing a particular authorization from the county government which—after I moved—I discovered I might not receive. I applied, but imagine my nervousness as I waited throughout the summer months and into the fall.

When so much is up in the air, sometimes those doubts come in, don’t they? Is this really where I am supposed to do my ministry? And then allowing myself to wallow a little more in my negative thinking, I wondered if I would ever serve in my line of work. Thankfully, years of walking with the Lord would bring me back to a state of peace: The Lord has a plan, and it will be good, whatever it might be.

One day, while reading the Rule, I asked myself, “While I am in this period of waiting, what should my Work of God be?” I defined my primary apostolate under four distinct categories: 1) *Health*, caring for my body in order that I am fit—mentally and physically—to serve the Lord as long as possible; 2) *Spirit*, praying, researching and learning more about what I am to teach, but also practicing what I am learning so that I can speak from my own spiritual experiences; 3) *Language*, improving my command of German, which is integral to my work here; 4) and finally, *Sacred Leisure* (a grand Benedictine category), playing the musical instrument I recently started learning, which gives me immense joy!

Defining my Work of God has changed my life. Since doing so, I have felt so much more at peace; I know that whatever happens, I have important work to do now! At another point in my life, my *Opus Dei* will change, but for today this feels right.

What is your Work of God?



Editor’s note: After five months, the needed authorization came through, opening up to Toni the chance to work as she has felt God leading her.

Various and Sundry—Zoom Sessions, Chapters, Volunteer Days

Oblate Zoom Meetings

Please join us each first Saturday of the month, 9:00-9:50 AM Central. This is a great way to learn more about the Rule of Benedict and form a stronger oblate community. Each Zoom meeting includes a conference and a discussion. Generally 30 to 50 oblates participate every month. (Screenshot captured by Fr. Michael on 1.5.24.)



Chapter News

[Collegetown chapter](#) — third Sundays for Mass, lunch, and discussing part of E. de Waal's *Living with Contradiction*. Contact pamelakeul1@gmail.com

[Southeast Wisconsin chapter](#) — every two months via Zoom; midday prayer, discussion of the pope's *Laudato Si*. Contact Tracy089@gmail.com to join in.

[Minneapolis Chapter at Lutheran Church of Hope](#) meets fourth Saturdays (so Feb. 24, March 23, April 27) at 10 a.m. to pray psalms, practice centering prayer, and discuss the Rule. All are welcome. Contact nicholastangen@gmail.com

[Minneapolis Saint Joan of Arc Chapter](#) — second Saturdays (Feb. 10, March 9, April 13, May 11), 10:00 to 11:30. Contact rejslp@aol.com (Ron) for material.

[Anyone interested in creating a new chapter \(Zoom-based or otherwise\)?](#) Contact oblates@csbsju.edu

Oblate Volunteer Day

Saturday, March 9, oblate (and candidate) volunteers will spend two hours or so cleaning the church, especially the choir stalls and the pews in the church nave.

Schedule for the day (tentative):

11:30	Mass
12-1	Lunch together in Slaggie
1-3:30	Cleaning crews in church, coordinated by custodial staff
3:30	Dessert and wrap-up in Slaggie
4:45	Clean up Slaggie
All details contingent on weather and such.	

Registration: Watch for further information in the usual Friday emails from oblates@csbsju.edu.

An April date may bring us to meet again to clean up the cemetery and/or to help prepare the abbey garden.



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 9, 2024	Volunteer Day
March 17, 2024	Day of Reflection
July 19-21, 2024	Oblate Retreat
November 17, 2024	Day of Reflection



Photo by Br. Felix Mencias, OSB

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