

Loving Encounter

St. Benedict's Alternative Path

- *brother Elias*

EVERY SO OFTEN A BOOK MAKES its way into our hands that stimulates our interest, draws us in, awakens our heart, and brings a key word or phrase to our conscious awareness. One such recent book is *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community*. It is written by Padraig O Tuama, poet and leader of Northern Ireland's longest established peace and reconciliation movement. An excerpt from Morning Prayer:

We begin our day with trust,
knowing that we are created for *loving encounter*.
We begin our day with hope,
knowing that the day can hold
love, kindness,
forgiveness and justice.¹

Our recently renewed experience of having oblates here at Weston Priory is well characterized by the knowledge that everyone comes to be together in a loving encounter. Periodically this brings together brothers and a group of friends who have expressed an eagerness to explore the values and underlying meaning of Saint Benedict's Rule for Monks. We interrelate in a common search for a new approach to life in today's world amid the confusion of our times.



More than anything, brothers, oblates, and oblate-novices meet together to create a space in which openness, dialogue, prayer, and listening can help us discern new ways in which to live our lives sensitively and courageously looking through the prism of Saint Benedict's wisdom. A great deal of the energy generated at our gatherings comes from the desire to enter into a common effort with each other. After all, everything that Saint Benedict teaches in the *Rule* is to be put into practice within the context of a heart-centered community.

Groups of oblates and oblate-novices meet periodically as their schedules and choice options allow. One group meets once a month: all of whom live in the town of Weston. Another group meets every week: people from Weston and surrounding towns. And oblates-at-a-distance study and exchange with each other on-line and, when possible, come to Weston for one or all of the quarterly plenary meetings. Participants in

¹ Padraig O Tuama, *Daily Prayer with the Corrymeela Community* (London: Canterbury Press, 2017)



this group live in different parts of the country: Virginia, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, California, Arizona, Massachusetts, and northern Vermont.

The plenary meetings in our Visitors' Center afford an opportunity for everyone to come together, roughly every three months, to share experiences and insights that develop from reading, study and reflection on the *Rule* as well as personal practices that remind us of Saint Benedict's call to deep listening and being other-centered in our everyday lives.

The most recent plenary meeting, on March 20th, and planned well in advance, took place during a snowstorm that brought 18 inches of snow to most of New England. The meeting was well attended even by some folks who came a distance on snow covered roads, including a young father with a five-year-old daughter. A number who were not able get to the meeting sent their regrets. Yet, most importantly, they sent their thoughts and prayer as well.

The result? A dynamic meeting overflowing with energy that was greater than the sum total of all of us gathered in the room. We began with praying the Oblate Prayer followed by a brief time of *lectio divina* focusing on a portion of the day's Gospel reading. This was followed by a period of silence. Then a dynamic discussion period began after a reading from Sister Joan Chittister's inspiring and challenging presentation given at the 2017 Benedictine Oblate Convocation in Rome.

What is the experience of journeying as an oblate here at Weston Priory? It varies for each and every one. However there are common threads of meaning that are beginning to mesh together to create a beautiful tapestry: forming small community-minded groups of oblates; choosing an alternative way of living in this world; inter-connecting with others to achieve a common goal; being open and vulnerable to spiritual growth and healing; following in the footsteps of Saint Benedict according to our individual life situation and possibilities; and discovering that we are created for *loving encounter*. ■