



## MONASTÈRE SAINT-BENOÎT

DECEMBER 2021 ~ ABSQUE LABE CONCEPTA

Dear Oblates and Associates,

### Greetings

One of the signs of Christian inculturation is the common use of pious salutations, such as the German *grüß Gott*, French *adieu*, Spanish *adios*, and English goodbye (originally God be with ye). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, supporters of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, especially in Spain and Portugal and their colonies, adopted variations of the Latin *Ave Maria Purissima*! 'Hail Mary Most Pure!' to which the response is a vernacular version of *absque labe concepta*. This was meant not only to affirm the doctrine and its infallible declaration, ratified by the Blessed Virgin herself a few years later at Lourdes, but to stave off the spread of [errors revived in Russia](#) in opposition to belief in the Immaculate Conception, particularly regarding original sin, about which again the Blessed Virgin herself would warn a few decades later at Fatima.

### Modern Errors

Other errors, too, have become commonplace in the last century, even amongst churchmen: the notion that Saint Thomas Aquinas denied or did not believe in the Immaculate Conception; the confusion between *Magisterium*, which is the exercise of teaching authority exclusive to those who have received the Sacrament of Holy Orders, and theology, which is the study of doctrine and its sources; and the exegetic presumption that what is not explicitly affirmed in Holy Scripture is therefore somehow repudiated. The second of these, and the unfortunate arrogance sometimes incident to academia, is countered by the Blessed Virgin Mary's choice to appear to simple, rural children still learning the Catechism, as well as by the admonition in the sixth chapter of the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict *nam loqui et docere magistrum condecet: tacere et audire discipulum convenit* 'it becometh the master to speak and to teach, but it befits the one who studies to be silent and to listen.'

### The Stain of Sin

The third error may induce a 'critical method' reading of the Holy Rule that reaches the specious conclusion that Saint Benedict did not venerate the Blessed Virgin Mary, misinterpreting his lack of specific mention of her as disregard, whereas indeed it is an indication of the highest regard. From its very beginning to its very end, Saint Benedict states quite explicitly that His Holy Rule is written for those who have 'strayed by the sloth of disobedience', for 'slothful, ill-living and negligent people' who are beginners on the path to Heaven and in need of the help of Christ. As mentioned in [October's reflection](#), Saint Benedict is acutely aware of the sorry condition in which original and actual sin have left humankind, and the contamination from them that has polluted the rest of the world. The Immaculate Conception and the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict are both [reminders](#) of the ubiquitous corruption caused by sin, lest we be lulled into a false sense of security that what is 'normal' is safe or otherwise without danger. Although they may be good in general, our social, educational, business and political activities, even at best, without grace cannot be meritorious or advance us towards Heaven.

### Tradition

As a faithful Christian who must have participated in the local cultus of the Blessed Virgin Mary while he was a student at Rome, and later as a learned monk familiar with the veneration of the her passed down in patristic and monastic tradition, Saint Benedict also knew just as well how absolutely the Blessed Virgin Mary was preserved from the blight of sin, just how most perfectly she retains pristine purity of body and soul undefiled, and just what the full meaning is of the Archangel Gabriel's greeting to her as the One who is Full of Grace, she who has found grace with God. (Saint Luke 1:28,30) Without doubt he had read what Saint Jerome had written the previous century, and which we read every 8<sup>th</sup> of December in the Second Nocturn at Matins: *quia ceteris per partes præstatur: Mariæ vero simul se tota infudit plenitudo gratiæ* 'to others grace cometh measure by measure; in Mary however the same dwelleth at once in all fulness' ...*ideo immaculata, quia in nullo corrupta* 'she is without stain because in her hath never been any corruption.'

### Measure by Measure

The preemptive purity of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her fulness of grace are therefore for us who have been stained and corrupted by sin, beacons of hope, as are the Church and the Sacraments by which we may be not only cleansed from sin, but fortified against the inclination towards it with which we remain afflicted, and made able to acquire virtue by a normally gradual and incremented process, as in the days of Our Lord's public ministry was the climb of Mount Horeb by pilgrims en route to Jerusalem to celebrate Holy Days in the Temple, chanting the Gradual Psalms as they made their ascent. Monks and nuns, too, chant these Psalms assigned by Saint Benedict to the 'minor' hours of the Divine Office most days of the week, often enough to commit them easily to memory. Yet though they may be repeated frequently, the Gradual Psalms nevertheless do not become routine; rather, like the steps of pilgrims, they mark the pace of one's advance toward Heaven, measure by measure.

### Processu Vero Conversionis

Saint Benedict also knew from Christian and monastic tradition that before one can advance, however, one must first turn in the right direction. Hence his insistence on conversion of mores, a vow specific to sinners who acknowledge their need to turn *convertere* away from the devil and his works and pomps, and toward the Lord, just as in the liturgy we turn towards the east, whence Christ shall return. This redirecting of which we are in need is, because it is a work of grace, a mutual and cooperative process. As implored often throughout the Psalms, God turns His countenance towards us in mercy, and as repeated in one of the Gradual Psalms (125) God ends our captivity by turning us away from sin. In turn, we sinners are regularly admonished to turn our minds and hearts towards God, to re-turn to Him from whom we have strayed, to alter our behavior and our morals, to walk along the path to righteousness (Psalm 22). Only then we can repeat with the Blessed Virgin Mary that other verse from Psalm 125: *Magnificavit Dominus facere nobiscum* 'the Lord has done great things for us.'

### Privilege

Both the Immaculate Conception and the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict are extraordinary examples of the triumph over sin of God's mercy and grace. And while it may not be immediate or unique, as is the privilege of the Immaculate Conception (*beatissimam Virginem Mariam in primo instanti suæ Conceptionis fuisse, singulari Dei privilegio, ab omni originalis culpæ labe præservatam immunem* 'the most blessed Virgin Mary was in the first instant of her Conception preserved, by a singular privilege granted unto her by God, from any stain of original sin' – [Ineffabilis Deus](#)), so described in the PostCommunion of Mass of that Feast, it is a grace and a privilege nonetheless to live according to the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict. For it is the grace of God, the same grace the Blessed Virgin Mary received at the first instant of her existence, earned by the Sacrifice offered by Christ upon the Cross, as well as [hope in God's infinite mercy](#), that inspired Saint Benedict to found monasteries and to write his Holy Rule.

### Grace

Grace is, after all, a supernatural gift of God which confers on our souls a new life, a sharing in the life of God Himself. By His sole initiative, and through the Sacrifice of Christ, God acts upon us, working in us the *Opus Dei* that makes us holy and pleasing to God, adopted children of God, temples of the Holy Ghost and gives us

the right to Heaven. This sanctifying grace, the same received at the Immaculate Conception and in the Sacrament of Baptism, is complemented by actual grace, which is a supernatural help of God that enlightens our mind and strengthens our will to do good and to avoid evil. By cooperating freely with actual grace, fallen man can resist the power of temptation and perform his own actions which merit a reward in Heaven, and thus take part in the marvelous work of grace that is the *Opus Dei*. Repeated frequently enough, such actions can become habitual, supernatural virtue. This then is why we observe the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict: to cooperate freely and habitually in the *Opus Dei* of God's grace, to resist temptation and to merit Heaven.

### Beyond Belief

Among the most important supernatural virtues is Faith, by which we firmly believe all the truths God has revealed and in the Word of God revealing them. But Faith in dogma or the affirmation of the Church's *magisterium* alone is not enough, as might be inferred from the preponderance on the internet – which inflates the value of words and concepts and divorces them from reality on a scale that dwarfs exponentially that effect half a millennium ago of the printing press – of debates about what is to be believed, and the concomitant penury of discussion about virtues to be practiced. Another error revived and insinuated into popular thought, this *sola fides* is refuted not only by Saint Paul in the thirteenth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians, but again by Saint Benedict in his Holy Rule, throughout which he professes not belief but behavior, considering not only nature but grace even more. Yes, one must hear the Word of God, of course, *ausculta!*, but not without keeping it! Our Holy Father echoes Our Lord Himself from the shortest scene depicted in the Gospel accounts (Saint Luke 11:27-28): imitate what His Blessed Mother did most perfectly by supernatural virtue, though one may not be able to do what she admirably accomplished by nature. Our Lord's reply to the woman in the crowd of listeners is anything but dismissive; He extols His Blessed Mother as a prime example for Christians to follow.

### Excellence

In his own way, Saint Benedict does the same. For the Immaculate Conception is not merely an instant in time, beautiful but static as are the artistic renderings to honor it. The grace that fills the Blessed Virgin Mary is far from passive; nor is the contemplative life. Yes, virtue is its own reward, but we must be wary not to let the consideration of our own perfection arouse in us spiritual pride, for the Light that we bear is not our own. What should motivate us is not to be pleasing to ourselves but to please God, to give Him glory, to magnify Him out of love. This is what inspired the Holy Mother of God, this is what inspired the holy father of monks: *de bona observantia sua non se reddunt elatos; sed ipsa in se bona non a se posse sed a Domino fieri existimantes, operantes in se Dominum magnificant* 'not puffed up on account of their good works, but judging that they can do no good of themselves and that all cometh from God, they magnify the Lord's work in them.' This is Saint Benedict's echo of the Our Lady's *Magnificat* in his Prologue, before he quotes Our Lord directly about hearing His words and doing them. Then the Patriarch of Monks declares: *Dominus expectat nos cotidie his suis sanctis monitis factis nos respondere debere* 'the Lord daily expects us to make our life correspond with His holy admonitions.' A century later, Saint Gregory the Great will echo back, saying of his holy father, 'he could not otherwise teach, than he himself had lived.' (Dialogues Book 2, Chapter 36).

### Per Ducatum Evangelii

This is because Saint Benedict knows that virtue must be learned from example, the best of which he finds in the Gospels: 'Let us therefore gird our loins with faith and the performance of good works, and following the guidance of the Gospel,' he writes in the Prologue to his Holy Rule, which, written in divinely-inspired books, is a 'most unerring rule of human life' *rectissima norma vitæ humanæ* (Chapter 73). Of the monastic virtues described in the Holy Rule not a few are exemplified by the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Gospel accounts. Some instances are listed below for our practical consideration this month. If you find others, please let us know so they can be shared with our other oblates and associates.

### Marian Virtues

**Prayer.** A substantial portion of the Holy Rule of Saint Benedict is devoted to prayer; so is the substantial portion of what is recorded in the Gospel accounts about the Blessed Virgin Mary. The two Gospel canticles to which

Saint Benedict refers specifically were both related to Saint Luke directly by the Blessed Virgin Mary herself, as well as the *Nunc Dimittis* used in the Roman Breviary. (Zacharias, Simeon and the others were long dead by the time Saint Luke began compiling his Gospel account). The *Magnificat* reveals that already as a very young girl the Blessed Virgin Mary's familiarity with the Psalms and prophecies rivals that of Zacharias, a priest of long experience. It also reveals the immediacy of prayer prescribed by Saint Benedict at the beginning of the Prologue to his Holy Rule, and a habit of prayer acquired by the frequent application he lists in Chapter 4 as a tool of good works, as well as the reverence and assiduity in prayer he mentions repeatedly elsewhere.

**Liturgical Piety:** The Blessed Virgin Mary did not pray the Divine Office, at least not in the exact arrangement laid out by Saint Benedict in his Holy Rule, but we can be certain that she chanted the Gradual Psalms in pilgrimage to the Temple; Saint Luke twice mentions this was the Holy Family's custom. (Saint Luke 2:27,41-42) Our Lord clearly kept this custom learned from His Blessed Mother: seven times is His going up to Jerusalem to observe liturgical feasts explicitly mentioned in the Gospel according to Saint John, twice with an allusion to the wedding at Cana, at which Our Lady figured prominently. (Having taken her in after Our Lord's crucifixion, Saint John also heard directly from the Blessed Mother the memories she kept and pondered in her heart.)

**Attentiveness:** Besides Our Lord's praise of Her mentioned earlier, Saint Luke's record of the Annunciation (Chapter 1) reveals that receptivity depicted by Saint Benedict in his Prologue as 'attentive ears' *attonitis auribus*, echoing by *ausculta!* 'harken!', the first word of his Holy Rule, the first word uttered by the Archangel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary *ave!* 'hail!' or 'hark!' Notice also how, although the words are very similar reported by Saint Luke of the exchange first between Saint Gabriel and Zacharias and then with the Blessed Virgin Mary, the way they were pronounced was quite different: Zacharias's tone is skeptical and intransigent, but the Blessed Virgin Mary's remarks exemplify the docility Saint Benedict says in his 68<sup>th</sup> chapter that a monk should have when asked to do what seems impossible. Although she did not at first understand the angelic messenger, or later her twelve-year-old Son, Our Lady believed, kept and pondered all these things in her immaculate heart.

**Obedience:** While the vow of conversion is specific to sinners, how a vow of obedience is observed can be a hallmark of perfection. Again, the Blessed Virgin Mary's response to the Annunciation is exemplary of the obedience Saint Benedict describes in the fifth chapter of his Holy Rule: *obedientia sine mora* 'without delay' ... *si divinis imperetur, moram pati nesciant in faciendo* 'a divine command cannot suffer any delay in executing ... *non trepide, non tarde, non tepide, aut cum murmurio, vel cum responso nolentis efficiatur* 'not done timorously, or tardily, or tepidly, nor with murmuring nor the raising of objections.'

**Humility:** Saint Benedict knows that the docility that makes obedience pleasing to God and men is not possible without humility, so he echoes the two most perfect expressions of it in describing its first degree in Chapter 7: *ut fiat illius voluntatem in nobis* 'that [God's] will be done in us.' The Lord's Prayer and Our Lady's *fiat* also express perfectly the selflessness and love of God that are the second and third degrees of humility. The Blessed Virgin Mary's obedience with a quiet mind and her holding fast to patience and enduring without tiring or running away when faced with the difficulties and contradictions of giving birth while travelling to Bethlehem for Caesar's census, and even injustice, fleeing Herod's massacre of the Innocents and witnessing Our Lord's trial and execution, are all excellent examples as well of the 4<sup>th</sup> degree of humility. The stable at Bethlehem is also an example of her being content with the meanest and worst of things, the sixth degree of humility, as is her acceptance at the foot of the Cross of Saint John, and of us by extension, as her children. Undergoing the ceremonies of purification under the mosaic law, of which she had no need, is an example of her abiding by common practice as described in the eighth degree of humility. And everything else we know of the life of the Blessed Virgin Mary before her Assumption, and even her authentic apparitions since then, clearly and perfectly epitomizes the brevity and sobriety of speech and modest demeanor Saint Benedict describes in the ninth through twelfth degrees of humility.

**Modesty:** Our Lady's words in the *Magnificat* also evidence the modesty Saint Benedict describes in Chapter 4 of his Holy Rule: to attribute to God, and not to self, whatever good one sees in oneself.

**Holiness:** The *Magnificat* is an example of another of the tools of good works as well: first to be holy, that one may more truly be called so.

**Silence:** The Blessed Virgin Mary's ninth-degree-of-humility silence that occasioned Saint Joseph's worries at her return from visiting her kinswoman Saint Elizabeth exemplify that virtue also described in the sixth chapter of the Holy Rule.

**Reverence for the Old and Care for the Sick:** The joyful mysteries of the Visitation and the Presentation are examples too not only of a tool of good works, but of the solicitude and affection Saint Benedict describes in the 36<sup>th</sup> and 37<sup>th</sup> chapters of his Holy Rule.

**To Seek God:** Another joyful mystery, the Finding in the Temple, is a dramatic and poignant series of events that can serve as an example of the motivation and persistence to be discerned in monastic vocations. This virtue in itself alone would be a worthy topic of one of these monthly reflections.

**Stability:** The words that Saint Jerome uses to translate the sorrowful mystery of the Blessed Mother's calm strength at the foot of the Cross, taken up in the magnificent hymn *Stabat Mater*, evokes that other monastic vow of which she is a perfect model.

**Chastity:** Yet another of the tools of good works from the fourth chapter of the Holy Rule, Our Lady elevates chastity far above mere celibacy or continence, to the most fervent and pure love that inspires and exhibits *fraternal charity* inspired by the holy *zeal* Saint Benedict encourages in the 73<sup>rd</sup> Chapter of his Holy Rule.

**Love of Christ:** Anyone who honors and venerates her knows as well as Saint Benedict that no one has ever or will ever prefer more than the Blessed Virgin Mary, the love of Christ, her Divine Son; no will ever do more than she by her example and her intercession to promote that preferential love of Christ in others.

Please join us in prayerful thanksgiving to Christ and to His Blessed Mother on the tenth anniversary of the foundation of Monastère Saint-Benoît, marked by Pontifical First Vespers of the Immaculate Conception celebrated here yesterday.

Thank you for your charity in [supporting of the monastery](#), and for making our needs known to others.

I remain your disposition for any further contact you may wish to have through the Oblates and Associates' email address: [oblatietsocii@monasterebrignoles.org](mailto:oblatietsocii@monasterebrignoles.org). Please be assured that you are included in the *fratribus absentibus* prayed for at the end of each Office, and indeed of our gratitude for all that you do for us.

*Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus,*

Dom Anselm Marie.  
Master of Oblates and Associates.