



## MONASTÈRE SAINT-BENOÎT

JANUARY 2022 ~ STABILITY

Dear Oblates and Associates,

The current preponderance of forms of religious life in which vows are pronounced of poverty, chastity and obedience, may give rise to the notion that the type of vows professed by Benedictine monks and nuns – stability, conversion of mores (life) and obedience (Holy Rule, Chapter 63) – are outside the norm.

### To Seek Perfection

After all, most Catholic children learned when they were taught the Catechism (or they should have been) that what are called the ‘evangelical counsels’, though not required for salvation, are encouraged by Our Lord and by the Church for those who would be perfect. (Cf. Saint Matthew, Chapter 19; Saint Mark, Chapter 10; Saint Luke, Chapter 18.) Indeed, when innovative and popular forms of instituted religious life (only a very few of which are properly called a religious ‘order’) were being established at the height of Christendom in the Middle Ages, then later in what was perceived still to be Christian society, it seemed only natural for their members to adopt the evangelical counsels as formal vows.

### Expansion

The different vows prescribed by Saint Benedict according to a more ancient tradition pre-dating Christian Rome, while still venerable, might have seemed to have been outgrown. After all, if most of society had been baptized as infants, taught Christian doctrine in school and through frequent preaching, and observed just laws instituted by Catholic leaders, what need would there be for conversion? That was now relegated to heathens fought by Crusaders and pagans evangelized by missionaries. The development of these international initiatives themselves too, and their need for efficiency, gave rise to centralization and organization according to a military model that would diminish appreciation and support for the monastic tradition of stability. Instead of quaintly living in a monastic family and home headed by a Father Abbot or Mother Abbess, these new religious would be intermittently stationed at houses of formation, convents, schools, hospitals, missions, and other institutions directed by major superiors, provincials and generals. Even some Benedictines assumed similar norms.

### Retreat

But as we pondered in [last month's reflection](#) Saint Benedict did not conceive of the vow of conversion of life as being for those who already assured salvation seek a greater perfection, but one specific to sinners who acknowledge their need to change and for the grace to do so in hope of salvation. (Note: For a lengthy and erudite analysis of the meaning of ‘conversion’, which Saint Benedict hopes will ultimately lead to perfection *perfectiōnem conversationis* (Chapter 73), please see Note 107 in Abbot Justin McCann, O.S.B.’s

translation of the Holy Rule.) The Rome that Saint Benedict fled though nominally Christian was not the Rome of [Christendom that centuries of monks helped to build](#) and its educational and ecclesiastical institutions were susceptible to corruption. The emperor may have become Christian, but the empire was not. And much the same can be said of the state to which post-Christendom Western civilization has decayed in our own day. Even in the Church, the zeal that once launched crusades and missions has withered into whimsical slogans and more and more formerly brimming convents, schools and missions are now emptied and shuttered.

### Volatility

As much as ever, our world is in need of conversion; but for conversion to endure, Saint Benedict learned from the wisdom of the ancients, it must be supported by stability. The understanding and appreciation of even the most basic instances of stability, and the experience of them, however, have declined drastically in recent centuries, as instability has worsened and spread. Religious revolt has led to civil revolutions, regimes toppled one after another, and subsequent political and even ecclesiastical administrations work hard to undo the policies of their predecessors. Economies cycle between boom and bust; social norms such as marriage and family are upended; even maturing to adulthood and building of character are increasingly disrupted by disorders.

### Meaning

As much as ever, our world is in need of stability; but before it can be re-established or encouraged, it must first be understood. What did stability mean for Saint Benedict, that he would impose it as a vow along with obedience and conversion? The word stability comes from the Latin verb *stare*, to stay or to stand. Like the word [rex](#), *stare* is the origin for many other words and their meanings:

- To stay in, stay away, stay awake, stay home, to stay somewhere (dwell or visit), etc.
- To stand up, stand still, stand by, stand with, stand (up) for, stand apart, stand back, stand tall, to take a stand, to hold a stance, to withstand, to understand, etc.
- And others such as station, stead, steadfast, instead, establish, stable, and, of course, stability.

### Anchored

It was with a sense of this wealth and depth of meaning that Saint Benedict developed the discipline of *stabilitas loci* ‘stability of place’ from the ascetic tradition of the desert fathers. At its most fundamental, stability meant the practice of remaining in a monastery for life *usque ad mortem* (Prologue): after profession of which vow ‘according to the law of the Rule one is no longer free to leave the monastery or to withdraw one’s neck from under the yoke of the Rule.’ (Chapter 58) Not only does the vow of stability bind one to the monastery, but the Holy Rule itself, like a yoke, is a stabilizing influence. Both help prevent counterfeit forms of religious life, which can be ‘soft and yielding’ to subjectivity, as the sarabaites who Saint Benedict describes in the first chapter of his Holy Rule as detestable *teterrimum*: ‘whatever they think of or choose to do they call holy, what they like not they regard as unlawful,’ or the gyrovagues, ever roaming and never stable *semper vagi at numquam stabiles*, whom Saint Benedict laments are even worse. By contrast, anchorites, recluses who leave their cells only rarely if ever, Saint Benedict admires for their strength. (The word’s resemblance to the term for a device used to stabilize water vessels is merely fortuitous, being of different etymological origin; it is nevertheless felicitous to our reflection.) Cenobites are strongest, however, precisely because they remain in monasteries: stability gives them strength.

### Abiding

Earlier in Chapter 58 of his Holy Rule Saint Benedict repeats the verb *stare* to mark the stages of discernment of a monastic vocation and its formation: after two months *si adhuc steterit* ‘if the novice still abide’, and then again after another six months *si adhuc stat* ‘if the novice still abide’. Yet Saint Gregory tells us that Saint

Benedict himself twice left a monastery (Dialogues, Book 2, Chapters 3 and 8), the second time removing other monks from the monastery as well. But he did not do so without good reason: the corrupt monks of the first monastery tried to poison him, and a clergyman jealous of Saint Benedict tried to corrupt his monks in the second monastery.

### Perseverance

Abiding is therefore more than merely remaining in the monastery, it is perseverance. Already expected as the initial sign of a monastic vocation *veniens perseveraverit pulsans* ‘if coming, one shall persevere in knocking at the monastery door’, it is also promised before any profession of vows, even before beginning the novitiate: *si promiserit de stabilitate sua perseverantiam*, which Abbot Justin McCann, O.S.B. translates as ‘if he promise to persevere in his purpose’, with the following note: “Dom Morin affirms... a very interesting reading which confirms my own impression that the dominant meaning of *stabilitas* in the Rule is perseverance. The Master, too, appears to be of this mind, using the words interchangeably, but *perseverantia* more frequently than *stabilitas*.” This persevering stability, upon which our Father Prior commented in a [recent sermon](#), involves staying the course, steadfast, through time and despite difficulties.

### Persistence

This persevering stability Saint Benedict also designates in Chapter 7 of his Holy Rule as the fourth degree of humility, which with it complements and perfects obedience. Far from any contrary inability to move or change, like a guidepost stability is the constant that makes the change needed for conversion measurable, efficacious and lasting; it is the choice to adhere, a free and continuous act of the will that, like a healthy vital sign, is inherent to the very nature of vows, whether religious, sacramental or otherwise, themselves meant to be stable.

### Supernatural

So, although usually concomitant with a place, stability has a much broader meaning, a meaning more elevated than the natural kind of reliability expected of employees, or even the heroism of soldiers. Like conversion and obedience (and poverty and chastity), the origin, source and object of stability is divine. God Himself is stable, which is evident to reason even without revelation. He is the Unmoved Mover intuited by philosophers and which the hymn chanted at the Hour of None invokes as *Rerum Deus, tenax vigor, Immotus in Te permanens* O God, constant Mover of all things, Thyself remaining unmoved. All while remaining seated at the right hand of His Father in Heaven, the Son of God took our flesh to become our Redeemer and Savior, to become for our fallen nature the Rock upon which our house can be built (Prologue), against which our temptations can be dashed (Prologue; Chapter 4; *et al.*).

### Grounded

God, unchanged in His Divinity, became a changeable human being, so that we changeable human beings can become like Him. Moving us by attraction, not by force, through Christ, His grace and His Church, the Holy, Mighty and Eternal One draws us to Himself, like gravity for our conversion, to build and perfect in us that image of Himself in which we were created. How foolish or perverse (or both) would it be to confuse stability, the embracing of that *Opus Dei*, God’s work of art and beauty and love in us, with ‘rigidity’!

### Indefectible

Moreover, Christ founded the one, true, holy and Catholic Church, choosing for His vicar on earth an Apostle who He renamed *Petrus* ‘the Rock’, endowing him and his successors with special protection to hold the office and fulfill the duty to confirm his brethren, to steady them with sound doctrine and just directives. Yet according to another Gospel metaphor, it is not because it is Peter’s that the barque of the Church can remain

afloat, but because Christ is in it to calm the storm. Illustrative as well is the beginning of the traditional Introit for the Mass of the Common of Pontiffs: *Statuit ei Dominus testamentum pacis* the Lord has established his office to be a testament of peace. (Ecclesiasticus 45:30) So too can monasteries act as providential havens of peace and anchors for the Church by their stability of virtue, worship and doctrine. Oblates and associates in their own turn, can benefit from this stability by their bond to a particular monastery.

### Practice

Stability of **Prayer** is certainly asserted by the preservation of immemorial rites, but it is also exercised more subtly in the consistency of place and times of prayer (recommended in the [September reflection](#)), the monastic *statio*, where and when monks and nuns prepare for the holy liturgy, and even by the order kept in choir *in choro standum* (Chapter 63). These latter can be imitated by Oblates and Associates as recollection before prayer, the calming *pax* of entering Christ's presence, especially before the Blessed Sacrament, and reverential respect for saintly elders, ecclesiastical hierarchy and liturgical ministers.

Furthermore, the **Sacraments** themselves are incident to liturgical stability, as well as to conversion, especially those that intensify the image of God in us by impressing an indelible character upon our soul: Baptism, Confirmation (aptly named) and Holy Orders. Along with Holy Matrimony, these are associated with vows and other formal commitments, which should be honored not only by those who make them, but by society in general. Over the centuries the Church has also grown in its understanding and appreciation for the persistence of the eucharistic presence of Christ, Who should be reserved in a place of honor and beauty in churches and oratories, and honored as well by quiet stillness, visits, reverence, proper disposition for Holy Communion, public veneration, Benediction, processions and other worthy ceremonies. Devotions, too, partake of stability, in forms such as that of Stational churches and the Stations of the Cross.

Oblates and Associates can also cultivate their sense of **belonging** to the monastic family to which they are bound: Oblates by wearing publicly at the monastery and privately when praying the scapular with which they have been clothed, which is of much greater significance than enrollment in any confraternity, noble or venerable though it may be, and both Oblates and Associates by visiting the monastery and by making there at least an annual retreat.

Because stability can be a **virtue**, it can be learned and increased by following good examples, particularly those of the saints, and most especially that of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the excellence of whose stability was briefly considered in [last month's reflection](#).

Worthy of **meditation** therefore are the following verses of the magnificent hymn begun by the phrase Saint Jerome used to translate the Gospel account of the Blessed Mother's calm strength at the foot of the Cross, and worthy of **contemplation** is the perfect love that kept her there, steadfast and stable:

*Stabat Mater dolorosa,  
juxta crucem lacrimosa,  
dum pendebat Filius...*

At the Cross her station keeping,  
Stood the mournful Mother weeping,  
Close to Jesus to the last...

*Juxta crucem tecum stare,  
et me tibi sociare,  
in planctu desidero.*

By the Cross with thee to stay;  
There with thee to weep and pray;  
Is all I ask of thee to give.

So too this verse from the Vespers hymn for the Seven Sorrows: *Cunctis interea stas, generosior Virgo, Martyribus* Whilst thou standest there, Blessed Virgin, thou dost surpass all martyrs.

## Consolation

Yet for all the sorrow and suffering endured by the Blessed Mother, there is even so more victory and glory in her humble stance, evoked succinctly in Psalm 64:10 : *Adstitit regina a dextris tuis* the Queen stood at Thy right hand. As we chant them in the humble and enduring presence of Christ, Whose victorious and glorious Sacrifice is offered upon our altars, the Psalms can console us too in times of difficulties and contradictions and even injustice (Chapter 7, fourth degree of humility):

*Vacate, et videte quoniam ego sum Deus.* Be still and see that I am God. (Psalm 45:11)

*Tu autem idem ipse es, et anni tui non deficient. Filii servorum tuorum habitabunt; et semen eorum in sæculum dirigetur.* But Thou art always the selfsame, and Thy years shall not fail. The children of Thy servants shall continue: and their seed shall be directed for ever. (Psalm 101:28-29)

*Lætati sunt quia siluerunt et deduxit eos in portum voluntatis eorum.* And they rejoiced because they were still: and He brought them to the haven for which they wished. (Psalm 106:30)

*Quia in æternum non commovebitur. In memoria æterna erit justus; ab auditione mala non timebit. Paratum cor ejus sperare in Domino, confirmatum est cor ejus; non commovebitur donec despiciat inimicos suos.* Because he shall not be moved for ever, the just shall be in everlasting remembrance: he shall not fear the evil hearing. His heart is ready to hope in the Lord: His heart is strengthened, he shall not be moved until he look over his enemies. (Psalm 111:6-8)

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.