



## MONASTÈRE SAINT-BENOÎT

NOVEMBER 2021 ~ REMEMBERING THE DEAD

Dear Oblates and Associates,

### Memory Loss

As we get older, we tend more frequently to forget, and remember less and less. Forgetfulness is one of the principal consequences of original sin, itself something we tend to forget as individuals, and which modern society seems to have forgotten entirely. Now, to forget is not mere inattention, but rather the diminished ability – or the outright inability – to recall what was once known. Most of the time forgetting is involuntary. In the Garden of Eden, however, our first parents intentionally suspended their awareness [akin to what phenomenologists call ‘bracketing’, *Einklammerung* or *epoché*] of God’s cautionary warning and command, repeated verbatim by Eve at one moment (Genesis 3:3), then at the next ‘forgotten’, to consider the forbidden fruit from an exclusively bodily perspective: “good to eat, and fair to the eyes, and delightful to behold.” (*Ibid.* 6) This deliberate and disordered shunting of the intellect in favor of corporal appetite, we have inherited as the now involuntary reflex and scourge of concupiscence. Original sin has also weakened our intellect, so that not only do we forget, but we err as well.

### Body and Soul

But it is not only the preeminence of the soul over the body that is upset by original sin: the very bond of their union is weakened. When He created Adam and Eve, God fashioned for each a body first, then breathed a soul into it, so that the natural state of a human being is composite and complete with body and soul united. This made it possible for human beings to have a likeness to the Holy Trinity that even the angels do not enjoy: distinction of related persons who share equally the same unique nature. Moreover, by a marvelous complementarity, God also bestowed on human beings an ability otherwise unique to His Divinity: the power to engender or beget. Like the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, after our first parents, all human persons are begotten, all human beings have a father. And a mother. “Male and female He created them.” (Genesis 2:27) This obvious fact too, it seems modern man has forgotten, given the absurd ideological notions that gender can be attributed to human beings as though they were grammatical constructs, or that marriage, a natural reality that can be sanctified by a Sacrament, is merely an optional and dissoluble contract.

### Decline

The extreme violence done by the act that made sin possible for human beings otherwise endowed with preternatural grace did such damage to the natural union of body and soul that not only is it irreparable, but deterioration is inevitable and irreversible. The soul’s light from the intellect dims and its animation of the body ebbs until, even if not occasioned by more trauma or violence, the bond holding them together eventually breaks, leaving the body lifeless and the immortal soul in an abnormal state. It was against this most dramatic consequence of original sin that our first parents were forewarned; it was this consequence they chose to ignore; it was this lamentable legacy they left to us all: death.

## Passing

If, as mentioned in [last month's reflection](#), modern man finds suffering abhorrent, to be avoided assiduously or numbed with palliatives, he is even more repulsed by the thought of death, which is either 'bracketed' (to market 'life' insurance, for example) or statistics about it are brandished as a cudgel to bludgeon populations into submission. All too often death has come to represent nothing more than a meaningless end to life, and its evanescence into oblivion, the ultimate amnesia.

## Prompts

Fifteen centuries ago, Saint Benedict observed how oblivious corrupted human nature had already become and compensated for it by including in his Holy Rule frequent reminders about important and unavoidable truths. No fewer than thirty times throughout its chapters does the Patriarch of monks prescribe remembering or keeping in mind; frequently enough to prompt Abbot Justin McCann, O.S.B. in his translation of the Holy Rule to devote three long footnotes about grammatical variations in the recurring word *memor*.

## To See and Observe

One of our holy father's reminders in the fourth chapter is to "keep death daily before one's eyes." (The Church herself reminds us each Ash Wednesday that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.) Notice Saint Benedict does not limit this to the mere thought of death, nor just to one's own. Death is real and is supposed to be visible. Saint Benedict's own death he wanted witnessed by his brethren in the monastery oratory, and it is often used as an image of a holy death. So too should families gather around and pray with their dying loved ones, whom they should mourn and bury according to appropriate traditions and ceremonies, which include a viewing, a funeral and procession to the cemetery, blessing of the grave, and the marking of it with a cross. Not some vapid 'memorial' that is as much a prelude to 'out of sight, out of mind' as 'mindfulness' is mindless vacuity. In the same chapter, Saint Benedict includes among the tools of good works, the corporal work of mercy to bury the dead. For centuries Christians have interred their loved ones usually within sight of the monastery or parish church, not in some distant neutral lawn, nor, for convenience or savings, had them incinerated.

## Benedictines

Saint Gregory the Great tells us that Saint Benedict himself mourned the dead, lamenting even the death of an adversary. (Dialogues 2, Chapter 8) Moreover, our holy father prayed for the dead (*Ibid.*, Chapters 11, 23 and 32), instilling in his progeny that reverent piety that inspired particular prayers, including the Psalm *De Profundis*, after the Hour of Prime, and blossomed in the tenth century at the Benedictine Abbey of Cluny with Saint Odilo's institution of the Commemoration of all the Faithful Departed on the day following the celebration of All Saints. (We Benedictines also commemorate our own departed brethren in particular on November 14, the day after celebrating All Benedictine Saints.) Throughout the centuries, the spiritual work of mercy of praying for the dead has developed beyond a special prayer in the Canon of Holy Mass to the composition of various Masses for the Dead, and commemorations; of the Divine Office for the Dead, and commemorations; and of the dramatic sequence *Dies Irae*, to name just a few examples.

## Post Mortem

But although he would have his monks and nuns remain *usque ad mortem in monasterio* 'in the monastery until death' (Prologue), Saint Benedict does not see death as a finality. Nor does the Church, who assures us in the Preface for the Dead *vita mutator non tollitur* 'life is changed, not taken away.' There are realities following death that are more important, and even more dreadful, of which our holy Father also reminds us in his Holy Rule, beginning with the *tremendo iudicio* to be faced as much by the abbot as by his charges. (Chapter 2 What Kind of Man the Abbot Should Be) Nearly twenty times does he allude to the rendering of accounts, five in the last paragraph alone of that same Chapter 2. So, too, does the Holy Church in the Gospel pericopes for the end of the liturgical year. (Please see our Father Prior's sermons for [Twentieth Sunday](#), the [Twenty-First Sunday](#) and the [Twenty-Second Sunday](#) after Pentecost.)

## Accounting

For there will be an unavoidable Day of Judgment *die judicii* (Chapter 4) on which all will appear before [Christ the King](#), Who will pronounce just judgment based not on opinion or sentiment, but upon cold, hard facts. Judgment Day for each person will be the day of his or her death, and then there will be the General Judgment that all will witness, and to which all will be subject, at the end of time. Which the world fears and dreads – and ignores – as much as death because it means the end to all worldly things and the attachments thereto, the end of sin, and the end of ignoring – ‘forgetting’ – the truth. But while Saint Benedict takes this final, definitive judgment by God very seriously, as a Christian, he faces it with hope. Yes, the Lord is just, but He is also merciful to those who fear Him.

## Hope

And the hope Saint Benedict has in God’s mercy is boundless: it is the reason he founded monasteries and wrote a rule that lists as the final tool of good works: never to despair of God’s mercy. So that in the very next sentence of Chapter 4, the same mentioned above in which he refers to Judgment Day, our holy father writes: “If we employ [the tools of good works] unceasingly day and night, and on the Day of Judgment render an account of them, then we shall receive from the Lord that reward which He Himself has promised: *Eye hath not seen nor ear heard what God hath prepared for those that love Him.*” (1 Cor 2:9) The liturgy is replete with such expressions. Every day at the Hour of None, we chant with hope about awaiting the reward attained by a holy death *præmium mortis sacræ* bestowed by Him who at Friday Lauds we entreat as our *beata spes mortalium*, the holy Hope of mortals.

## Lengthening of Days

Saint Benedict knows without any doubt that God’s mercy is inseparable from His justice:

And the days of our life are lengthened and a respite allowed us for this very reason, that we may amend our evil ways. For the Apostle saith: Knowest thou not that the patience of God inviteth thee to repentance? (Romans 2:4) For the merciful Lord saith: I will not the death of a sinner, but that he should be converted and live. (Ezech 33:11)

Meditating upon this merciful lengthening of days of which our Holy Father speaks in the Prologue to his Holy Rule, the Church has developed an understanding that it applies to the afterlife as well as to the present. Our stay in this world is prolonged so that we may amend our ways and assure that our souls return to life by grace after the doom consequent to original and actual sin. If we take advantage of it to obtain God’s mercy, but must still fulfill the conditions of His justice, this respite can extend beyond death so that we may make amends for those sins. This is the mystery that the Sacred Council of Trent calls Purgatory and teaches that it occurs between the particular and General Judgment.

## Conciliar Doctrine

The Council teaches much else related to this: that by virtue of the Incarnation, the relation of persons we have as humans makes possible our redemption by the salvific Passion and Death of Christ, and furthermore the Communion of Saints and intercessory prayer. Moreover, the authority Christ gave to His Apostles and the sacerdotal ability to pray and offer sacrifice for others *in persona Christi* in turn makes possible the application of the expiatory value of Christ’s Passion and Death in what are called indulgences (the root meaning of which is pardon). The teaching significant for this reflection, therefore, is that prayers offered for the souls of the Faithful Departed in Purgatory are efficacious in relieving them of whatever penance might remain for them to endure under divine justice, so that they may rest in peace.

## Requiem

In the [September reflection](#), peace was considered from the perspective of the presence of Christ, and this is the peace that the holy souls in Purgatory will enjoy in Heaven once they are purified. This month it is their rest that we consider, which is much more than relief from fatigue: it is the kind of rest taken by God, who cannot tire, when a task is accomplished, because it is finished. Like an artist or performer having completed an opus, at the

end of a Creation day, God pauses to regard His work, to appreciate its quality and to relish the achievement. Redemption too, has a day, beyond the seven of Creation, *Dominica* the Lord's Day, when, after servile work has ended, there remains only the *Opus Dei* to which we are invited by the Master at the first, third, sixth, ninth and even the eleventh hour, an endless day of eternal rest.

### Consecrated Ground

It is to pray God to grant this eternal rest that, on the day of death or burial, on the third, seventh and thirtieth day thereafter, on the anniversary, and even daily, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass is offered, that priests are permitted to offer Holy Mass up to three times on All Souls Day and that the Church offers the opportunity for the Faithful to earn a plenary indulgence for a soul in Purgatory on each of the first days of November. This latter is traditionally associated with prayers during a visit to a cemetery, but may be earned by a visit to the Blessed Sacrament if that is not possible. All these pious exercises, as well as the blessing of graves, are performed with the belief that the remains buried therein will one day rise again, to be reunited with the souls that sin has torn from them. Just as Christ rose from the dead, because of His Passion and Death, all will be resurrected, Saint Paul taught us in an Epistle read recently at Sunday Mass. But not all will be glorified.

### Gehenna

In His infinite mercy, God does not will any harm or death or punishment of sinners. But in His infinite justice Christ respects the choices each of us makes with the free will He gave us in His image. He is driven, Saint Benedict warns solemnly in the Prologue, by our sins to cast into everlasting punishment *perpetua pœnam* the wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory *noluerint ad gloriam!* This reality, symbolized by *Gehenna*, a pyre where in the first century the bodies of condemned criminals were burnt, and to which Our Lord frequently referred, Saint Benedict also reminds us is to be dreaded (Chapter 4) and feared (Chapter 5), because it will burn those who despise God (Chapter 7), Who has the power to condemn those who dare to mock Him (Chapter 58).

### Repentance

Fear of damnation, it is important to note, like the love of friends, is not a virtue, and dread of everlasting pain and loss of Heaven cannot by itself constitute contrition, the necessary matter for the Sacrament of Penance. Fear of offending God, however, *does* suffice, *if* one acknowledges that He is all good and deserving of all our love. (Note: The traditional Act of Contrition is an excellent summary of *all* the elements required for *imperfect* contrition.) The Psalms declare this filial fear of the Lord to be the beginning of wisdom and Saint Paul teaches that it is a gift of the Holy Ghost. Joined by God's merciful absolution, with penance accepted to fulfill God's justice, contrition can be elevated by grace to become compunction, a marvelously preventative development of penitence.

### One Last Thing

"And if we would escape the pains of *Gehenna* and reach eternal life, then we must," Saint Benedict encourages us in the Prologue to his Holy Rule, "while there is still time, while we are in this body and can fulfill all these things by the light of life, hasten to do now what may profit us for eternity." It is in practicing humility that one comes to be motivated no longer by fear but for love of Christ and through good habit and delight in virtue, confident in hope of the divine reward, going on with joy to declare: "But in all these things we overcome, through Him who hath loved us." (Chapter 7; Romans 8:37). "Let them prefer nothing whatever to Christ," Our Holy Patriarch prays on our behalf in the final chapter of his Holy Rule, "And may He bring us all alike to life everlasting... whoever thou art that hastenest to thy heavenly country... by the help of Christ... then at length under God's protection..."

Some Practical Considerations:

### For Oneself

Hope, pray and prepare for a holy death. The best way to prepare for a holy death is to lead a holy life, and the surest way to lead a holy life is to receive the Sacraments properly disposed and frequently, to live in a state of

habitual grace. We should examine our conscience frequently, not only to get ready for sacramental confession, but also before praying the *Confiteor* at Compline and at Holy Mass. In addition to these 'remote' preparations, some have made it a habit to carry a card or some other notice in case of emergency that one is Catholic and requests a priest. If one is in danger of death, call a priest right away to perform the last rites, which include as well as Extreme Unction, Confession and Holy Communion as Holy *Viaticum*, all of which should be preceded, if possible, by an examination of conscience and the *Confiteor*. (Note: The most ancient and traditional reason for reserving the Blessed Sacrament is to make Holy *Viaticum* 'food for the journey' available for those who are about to die, as it was received by our holy father Saint Benedict.) And make arrangements to receive proper funeral and burial rites, as described above.

Other practices include devotion to saints such as the Blessed Virgin Mary, who we ask to pray for us at the hour of our death, to her holy spouse Saint Joseph, and to Saint Benedict, whose medal includes the invocation: *Eius in obitu nostro praesentia muniamur*. 'May we be strengthened by his presence in the hour of our death.' After Compline, some make an Act of Resignation in acceptance of one's death, similar in sentiment to the children's bedtime rhyme: Now I lay me down to sleep; I pray the Lord my soul to keep; If I should die before I 'wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take. If inspired by the desire for eternal life with all spiritual longing (Chapter 4), this nightly reminder of mortality will be not maudlin, but soothing.

### For the Dying

As for oneself, we should pray for and with the dying and encourage them to have a priest give them the last rites. We should visit and console them, watch with them and, if possible, be present to commend their soul to God when they die. And we can also help them make arrangements to receive proper funeral and burial rites, as described above.

### For the Dead

It is our duty to pray for the dead, a spiritual work of mercy, and to bury them, a corporal work of mercy, with proper mourning, funeral and burial rites, as described above. The Faithful Departed should be laid to rest in consecrated ground, where they can be remembered and visited. The most efficacious prayers for the dead are Requiem Masses (attended if possible), the Divine Office for the Dead, indulgenced prayers and commemorations, and visits the cemeteries and the Blessed Sacrament, all described above. If you do not already know them, learn the following verses and pray them often, especially when hearing about or remembering a loved one's death.

*Requiem aeternam, dona eis, Domine. Et lux perpetua luceat eis. Requiescant in pace. Amen.*

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.