

Oblates Retreat

Although we had been expecting a larger number to attend our first retreat weekend with our new Master of Oblates, Dom Boniface Hill, last minute cancellations reduced us to a very small group – a fact which, however, did nothing to reduce our usual enjoyment of Downside’s peaceful surroundings, of one another’s company and of spiritual profit.

The purpose of the retreat was fundamentally to immerse ourselves in the rhythm of the monastic atmosphere and regular round of prayer, but on Saturday we met in the Pastoral Centre for a talk from Fr Boniface in which he drew our attention to Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exultate* in which the Holy Father re-emphasises the teaching of Vatican II concerning the “Universal Call to Holiness” – i.e. to the fact that it is not just clergy and religious but every single Christian who is called to be a saint! We are all initiated into the life of grace at Baptism and need to co-operate with that grace so as to become truly God’s holy people. Points specially made by Fr Boniface were 1) that the form that each individual’s holiness takes will be different and we can’t become holy by simply copying another Saint! 2) True holiness is a joyful thing (see verses 14-21 of the Prologue to St Benedict’s Rule where he asks “What could be sweeter to us dear brethren, than the voice of the Lord inviting us?”); (3) becoming holy is always a work in progress and even great Saints like Francis de Sales reached the end of their lives feeling they hadn’t done enough. Anyway, we travel surrounded and supported by fellow Christians so we should never get discouraged.

Fr Boniface’s talk was followed by nearly an hour of lively discussion in which we reached the conclusion that our road to holiness consists primarily in following our individual vocations, prayerfully developing the talents which God gives to each and using them in the service of others and always with love. In this regard, our sister oblate Frances shared with us the prayer of St Francis de Sales which is printed below as a way of orienting each day towards this pursuit of holiness. Following midday prayer with the monks we enjoyed a bountiful lunch laid on by our Oblate Master himself. As our brother oblate Andrew summed it all up: “A satisfying meal, following an edifying talk”!

St Francis de Salles’ Direction of Intention

My God I offer you this day. I offer you now all of the good I shall do, all the difficulty I shall meet.
Help me to conduct myself during this day in a manner pleasing to you. Amen