



# **THE MONASTERY, A SCHOOL FOR COMMUNION**

## **THE OBLATE'S VIEW**

Françoise Melard

During this presentation, I would like to let the Oblate speak. I would like us to look together at the nature of an Oblate: how he lives in the time and place in which the Lord placed him. I will therefore seek to enter into the reality of the Oblate's life.

I will structure my talk around three themes which can be linked together:

- His outlook on the monastery;
- His life in communion with the monastery;
- His prayer with the monastery.

In the prologue to his Rule, Saint Benedict states that the monk enrolls in a “*school for the Lord's service*” (RB. Prologue). It is the only prerequisite for admission. In order to carry out his engagement, the monk's day is to be divided between **Ora and Labora** which, practically speaking, is lived in a balance between rest, work and prayer.

### **What is an Oblate?**

An Oblate is a person, man or woman, married, single or a member of the clergy, who gives him or herself up as an offering to God through a clear commitment to a specific monastery that is freely chosen. The Oblate accepts to “truly seek God” in the spirit of the Rule of Saint Benedict. In canonical terms this commitment is a promise.

The **monastery** is a cell of the Church which has a purpose like all other members of the same body as described by Saint Paul.

What is the expectation of an Oblate from the monastery that he or she freely chose? Conversely, what is the expectation of the monastery from the Oblate that it freely agreed to accept?

Surely the monastery and the Oblate are firstly attached to each other by an affective relationship. However, they are especially brought together by growing spiritual links. As the Baptist says: “*He must be raised, and I, lowered*”...

From the beginning, the laity rallied to monasteries. Parents offered their children so that they might receive a Christian...and chivalrous, education. Adults have come to monasteries to seek the Bread of Life.

Oblature is a branch of the Benedictine Order, born in Europe.

As far back as the 7th century, the Annals of the Abbey of Lérins, near Cannes and headed by St. Aigulphus, allude to the presence of laypersons at the monastery.

In the 10th and 11th centuries at Cluny, St. Ulrich wrote:



*There are numerous Christians who seek to live in fraternal communion with us; we accord them a part of the good works of the monastery, whether it may be prayers or alms. We pray for them especially during their lives and after their death.*

In 1091, Pope Urban II published a Bull on this subject:

*We declare that this institution is laudable and worthy of being maintained, even more so because it was established following the rules of the Church's first centuries. We therefore declare it holy and catholic, and we confirm it in the name of our apostolic authority.*

Oblature would continue to develop until the 14th century, going through highs and lows. From this time, until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, no mention is made of Oblature. It would however continue to exist.

In the 19th century, at Beuron in Germany, at Affligem in Belgium, at La-Pierre-Qui-Vire and Solesmes in France, and in Hungary, monasteries began to rethink secular Oblature.

The first statutes for Oblates were drafted in Italy, presented to the Holy See, and approved on the 17th of January 1871. These would later be revised.

The same situation repeated itself with the Statutes of Oblates in Belgium, established in 1880 and revised in 1904.

Quite a debate ensued in Europe, with the Church also finding itself facing modernity and industrialization.

In this period, the emphasis was more on granting indulgences and other ecclesiastical privileges, than on training Christians with foundations upon the Rock.

It is also in the 19th century, during the period of missionary fervour and colonial expansion, that Oblature will migrate to other continents.

In Europe, no further rethinking on the subject would occur till the 20th century. It was not until Vatican II and the synod on the mission of the laity in 1988 that further reflection on the subject would take place.

The Congress that we are attending today can therefore be inserted into this wonderfully rich history.

It may even be possible to dream of a return to the Christianity of the first centuries, as described in the Bull of 1091.

What is a **community**? In the dictionary it is a *group of persons sharing the same ideal, the same good.*

Do Monks, Sisters and Oblates share the same good? Linked by the same Bible and Rule, is it possible to speak of one and the same community?



To define the Benedictine spirit, consider the words of Fr. Michel Van Parys, Abbot Emeritus of Chevetogne, in an article published by the “Pax Christi” movement in 2003, on the expansion of Europe to 25:

*My Christian and monastic formation gives me roots in a spiritual tradition that celebrates liturgical prayer, listening to the Word of God, prayer, fraternal life in community, hospitality, concern for others and harmony with creation.*

*The “concern of the soul”, to borrow an expression from Jean Patocka, Czech philosopher and defender of Charter 77, is a priority for the monk.*

*The necessarily gratuitous nature of the “care of the soul” could be our monastic contribution to Europe.*

And why not to the world as well ?

**THE MONASTERY** IS A PLACE WHERE ONE LIVES SEPARATE FROM THE WORLD, NOT A PLACE TO FLEE FROM THE WORLD. IT IS A HIDING PLACE.

The monastery is a memorial where we can recall tradition, all that God has done for the salvation of His people, and all that God does for each one of us today, *hic et nunc*, for our salvation.

The Oblate, like the monk, plants roots in a tradition steeped in history, a tradition steeped in praise for the Lord. He learns and retains what he is taught. He must have a long, active and lively memory.

Monks, sisters and Oblates thank and praise the Lord for these facts.

*Ascribe to the Lord glory and strength ... (Ps. 28).*

The monastery is a place of **love** and **fraternal life**. It is a place where we can chant with the psalmist:

*Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! (Ps. 132).*

The monastery is a **laboratory**. Throughout human history, the monastery has played an innovative and relaying role, as the example of monastic schools illustrates.

It seems difficult to find new experiences throughout our Oblatures around the world. If possible, do extend the list!

- One must consider the monastery of Amay-Chevetogne, which stands at the vanguard of ecumenism. In this endeavour, Dom Lambert Bauduin is backed by an Oblate, Fr. Paul Couturier, and Cardinal Mercier.
- Throughout time, there have been Oblates with giant personalities: for example, Robert Schuman, one of the founders of Europe; also Jacques and Raïssa Martain, Paul Claudel, and others. They lived in abbeys where debate existed and in which they took an active role.



- Since the beatification of Dom Columba Marmion in 2000, the abbey of Maredsous launched a « Quarentenaire » intended for Oblates or for any Christian seeking to deepen his or her faith. Forty phrases from Dom Marmion describe forty steps to discover the richness of life.
- In Latin America, as in France, some Oblates have chosen to live in community.
- Reflection on a new formula for Oblature is expected to take place: a secular Oblate making a temporary commitment to living a cloistral life.

Why should there not be prayer meetings between Oblates of different monasteries who live in the same city?

What is the significance of **the cloister** for the monk or sister, as well as for the Oblate?

All material and spiritual life revolves around the cloister: work, rest and prayer.

The cloister is a **desert**; a place where God spoke to His people and continues to speak to them. The cloister is a place of meditation, of Lectio Divina. It is therefore a place of silence.

It is the place where each turns his gaze inwards. If the cloister is a place where one thirsts for God, it is also a place of temptation.

Can we say that the cloister is a **place where one is called to holiness**? Is this impossible for an Oblate? Listen to the words of Blessed Columba MARMION, in his book “Christ, the Monk’s Ideal” (“Le Christ, idéal du moine”), a theme taken up again in the “Quarentenaire”:

*Nobody can say that holiness is not for me. What can make it impossible? God desires it for everyone.*

It would be prudent to add this thought, taken from the book “Christ in His Mysteries”:

*It is a legitimate ambition to channel all our forces towards obtaining this glory that God mines from our holiness.*

What can serve as an **Oblate’s cloister**? In all that I have described, have I not spoken of the heart, the seat of reason, and the meeting place?

The Oblate must move the cloister, and install it into his or her heart.

*Keep peaceful, my soul, next to you, Lord.*

The time preceding a definitive commitment is a time of **formation** or **study**. This study is individual. There is no miracle recipe, other than exchanges of know-how. The monastic world excels in the art of living the spirit of “come, see” (Jn 1, 39).

For monks, sisters and Oblates, sapiential books instruct us to:

*Ask for wisdom, and pursue it.*



Since the beginning of monasticism, the monastery has been a place of education.

Charlemagne wanted to extend the education from abbatial schools for the good of the population...and the extension of his Empire, by creating cathedral-schools.

He issued a decree in 789. In order to accomplish his project, he called upon the services of Alcuin, an Irish monk.

In the Middle Ages, we witnessed the development of universities, where a former Oblate, having become a Dominican by the name of St. Thomas of Aquinas, would teach.

One apparent difficulty is that Saint Benedict did not regulate the formation of monks. He simply said that we shall “*read him the Holy Scriptures*”, and also “*the teachings of the Fathers*” (RB 73). No doubt he was inspired by Ps. 31:

*I will instruct and teach you the way you should go,  
I will give you counsel with my eye upon you*

Through reading your documents, for which I thank you, I have identified two groups of Oblatures: those of Western Europe, and those in the rest of the world. The life of Oblatures varies from one country to another, from one monastery to another. I have however identified several constants:

In all countries, Oblates have an annual retreat. They also sojourn regularly and individually in their monastery, where they receive adapted teaching.

Oblates from European countries meet several times per year in their monastery to receive instruction.

In Eastern Europe, the fall of the Berlin Wall had a liberating effect on Oblature.

Oblates from other countries meet regularly in their home city, to pray, and they instruct one another. There are few group meetings within the monastery.

Personally, in Western Europe, I have noticed that three words are used and emphasized: they are Obedience, Humility and Discretion.

If poorly applied, they may become security blankets, inhibitors of initiative.

I find it difficult to determine where the Oblate studies the Rule (RB 58) or the “Dialogues” of St. Gregory. Could he or she not learn to live “in the spirit of the rule”, to find inspiration for all daily acts, in the location the Lord has placed him?

The Oblate first idealizes the monastery to which he seeks attachment. Afterwards, he discovers the reality of community life. It is surprising, if not disappointing, to learn that the monastery is really a microcosm of life in our times.



The Oblate faces difficulties when he encounters the different rhythms of life in the monastery. When an Oblate loses his job or reaches the end of a professional career, he must leave the stress of his occupation which is a difficult adjustment. He goes against the current of the efficiency and productivity he had been living.

The apprenticeship needed to learn liberty is disorienting and arduous. It is the apprenticeship of obedience.

At the monastery the Oblate also studies the Bible. He learns *Lectio Divina*, a method of rumination on the Word of God. He reads the Bible through the Bible.

Generally speaking, the Oblate seeks to understand his own weaknesses, to discover his talents, and allow his talents to blossom. In order to forgive himself he must reach out; he must put into practice spiritual maturation. This consists in the condition, *sine qua non*, of reaching out to his brothers. He must know that he feels “*bitterness, anger...*” but that he also was created “*in God's image*” since Genesis. And God said that this was good...

Is an Oblate only murmuring?

Is a monastery only a place to murmur?

For Dom Marmion, and also Lytta Basset, a Swiss Protestant theologian, murmuring is disobedience, a lack of faith, opposition. On the other hand, complaint is prayer (Ps. 50); it is from the heart. In this case, the will does not adhere to resistance. It is its biblical dimension. The monk, like the Oblate, deposits his complaint at the feet of Christ.

St Augustine can enrich this thought: take for instance his “*Treatise against Faust on the True Cult of Martyrs*”:

*But, what we teach is something else; what we support is something else; what we are ordered to correct is something else, but we are, for now, constrained to tolerate it.*

I would like first of all to tell you about my difficulties in developing the theme of **service**. I searched on the Internet to discover what went on within monasteries and Oblature. I must admit that there were only a couple of sites that satisfied my curiosity.

I could cite the conciliar documents *Ad Gentes* and *Lumen Gentium*, or Canon Law. I prefer to refer to paragraph 54 of the post-synod document *Vita Consecrata* (1997).

Dom Marmion would cite the following from “*Christ, the Monk's Ideal*”:

*Love is what measures, as a last resort, the value of all our acts, even the most ordinary.*

Monasteries never cease to say that the presence of Oblates is a grace. They note that the path of Benedict bears new fruit. The common quest for God is a sign of God, a contributor to communion.



The monastic guesthouse is a summit of hospitality, a privileged place. The Oblate can find contact with other persons, sometimes from other religions, and with other philosophies. The guesthouse is a turntable that sends us out to the world.

Respect for others naturally introduces the Oblate to inter-religious dialogue.

In his daily life, the Oblate will always be in contact with other religions through the evolution of society, or because of migratory flux.

Apparently however, apart from Australia, there are no Oblates truly engaged in inter-religious dialogue.

As for Dom Marmion, he wrote in "Christ, Life of the Soul":

*I do not fear saying that a soul that gives itself supernaturally, and without reserve, to Christ in the person of others, greatly loves Christ and is in return infinitely loved; he will make great progress in the union with Our Lord.*

The formation of an oblate must also pass through a deeper study of liturgy. The Oblate participates as a Christian through baptism. .

Through his participation in the Divine Office, the Oblate takes on an integral role in the celestial liturgy. Through his effective participation in the Eucharistic liturgy, he becomes an actor in the same celestial liturgy. He positions himself in this inhabited place in fear, that is to say, in love and respect for God.

The Oblate learns to serve God with this love and with all necessary zeal. As Saint Benedict requires of us through the voice and the heart (RB 19-20), he will integrate himself with all other actors in this service.

Origen said :

*By praying well, with one heart, we, the living stones can become foundation stones for the altar on which Jesus offers His sacrifice to the Father.*

Another Oblate, St Bede the Venerable, said:

*Matthew did not only offer to the Lord a corporal meal, in his earthly dwelling, but even more so prepared a feast in the dwelling of his heart through faith and love.*

In the same manner, Oblation is inserted into the celestial liturgy:

The "Suscipe" that the Oblate recites or chants at the moment of his offering to the Lord in the Order of Saint Benedict, makes him an active participant in the procession of offerings. His "Suscipe" precedes, and is completed by, the "Suscipe" said by the priest over the offerings, at the beginning of the Eucharistic prayer.

For this reason, Oblation has no business being carried out in secret, in the Abbot's office, as happens on occasion.





Oblation is a biblical act. The Oblate offers his most precious possession, himself. He offers himself in a sacrifice of praise.

*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired...See God; I have come to do your will. (He 10, 7).*

From a sacrificial offering, Oblation becomes an alliance signed with God. It is symbolized by the Charter deposited on the altar.

Oblation signifies the preeminence of eschatology.

The Oblate who arrives, is a human being; the monastery will develop his spiritual being, to borrow the words of St Paul.

Lectio will always give a pronounced desire to the learning of the mysteries of God. The Oblate will always seek to go further in this knowledge. He will live his interior cloister.

One way or another, the Oblate associates himself to the prayer of his monastery. He recites the Liturgy of the Hours to the best of his abilities. The practices do vary.

The liberty inherent to Benedictine prayer is a real difficulty for Oblates. It suffices to let the Spirit pray within each of us.

We know very little about the prayer of the Oblate. It is the King's secret; each has received his white stone (Ap 2, 17).

The Oblate prays for the unity of Christians which he perhaps practices in his own Oblature. He prays for harmony between all believers; in this manner he enters into the spirituality of inter-religious dialogue.

The Oblate is therefore a creature of intercession; but he is also, and especially, a creature of praise since he loves beauty.

The monk and the Oblate hear the murmur, the cry of the world, and they offer themselves to God who will reply: *I have heard the cry of my people.*

Author Albert Camus noted:

*When we have seen only once the splendor that illuminates the face of someone who is loved, we understand that for Man, there can be no other vocation than to provoke this light on the faces of those who surround him.*

Here, I allow a Swiss Oblate, Maurice Zundel to speak. He wrote:

*Religion is the creation, with God and in His image, of a world of light, joy and beauty.*

Are we not creating “*a new Heaven and Earth*”? (Ap 21) ?

John-Paul II said, on June 27 2003 :





*“if you are what you should be, you will set fire to the entire world !”*

I will let Gandhi conclude:

*We are the change which we wish to see happen.*

Fire lights this change. We could be the agent of change and Light which, instead of being kept hidden, illuminates all nations.

*Translator's note: in order to simplify and lighten the text, the masculine form has been used throughout. This by no means is intended to imply any superiority of the masculine over the feminine.*