

The Contemplative Oblate Today

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Sometimes people ask me – what led you to become a Benedictine monk? Before I answer I usually think of the desert father whose reply to the question ‘what is a monk?’ was this - ‘a monk is one who asks himself every day what is a monk.’ I find I can answer the question equally honestly in several different ways. Here today I would ask you ‘why did you become an oblate’?

The Benedictine life has perhaps the greatest range of manifestations of any religious order in the Church – from missionaries and educators, to farmers and hermits. As St Benedict says early in the Rule ‘there are different kinds of monks’. He says the *coenobites* are the best but also that the whole Rule is only ‘a little rule for beginners’ who are being trained for the ‘single-handed combat’ of the desert of solitude. He seems to see solitude in some form as the goal of monastic life. Only experience reveals what solitude means in terms of the individual vocation. The multi-dimensional approach to monastic identity explains the rich diversity and adaptability of the Benedictine charism over 1700 years. And all these different aspects of Benedictine identity apply equally to oblates.

What draws a person to become an oblate? How do they live oblation at different stages of their lives – as young parents or working professionals and later in retirement? What does it mean to be an oblate today at a time of great crisis in monastic history when many monasteries are closing or struggling to survive? I would like to explore some of these questions within the challenging theme of this Congress and especially through the understanding of contemplation.

Traditionally Benedictine life has been seen as ‘mixed’ – that is neither solely contemplative nor active. Monks are meant to earn their own living. Benedictines are not mendicants. This distinguishes them from Franciscan friars and Buddhist monks. Again, this mingling of the contemplative and active dimensions of the Christian life has stimulated a great diversity of expression. The *Cloud of Unknowing* says that ‘no life is completely contemplative or completely active’. That is good Benedictine common sense. And perhaps there is an even deeper meaning in merging contemplation and action, as this is what Jesus seems to mean by the ‘one thing necessary’ in the Martha and Mary story. Jean Leclercq used to say: was Jesus a monk? If so, should we not all be monks? If not, do we have the right to be a monk? This tension of identity is at the heart of the gospel and indeed of human life itself. It is a tension that Benedict handled wisely and brilliantly in his Rule. Monks and oblates live it out differently by their obedience to the same Rule.

In a secular age like ours, filled with conflicts and confusion and with shifting ideas about the meaning of religion and spirituality, the Benedictine wisdom accumulated

in many eras and cultures is a resource of immense potential and value – provided we are ready to grow with the times. The monk is like a tree planted beside fresh streams – rooted in stability and so able to grow, to be like a Kingdom-tree in which the birds of heaven come to roost, to be continuously converted.

Recovering the contemplative dimension

Peoples' search for spiritual experience in our time often leads them to leave the Church behind. Many feel – albeit superficially - that Christianity has little to offer except rituals, rules and social conformity. Yet monasteries often remain an exception to this widespread rejection of 'religion' in the West. Perhaps this is why the present Pope urges monasteries to renew Europe and create a 'civilization of love'. Monasticism retains a genuine fascination and represents a real alternative way of life. The phenomenal popularity of the film 'Into Great Silence' clearly reflected this.

Since the Second Vatican Council a widespread and ever-deepening recovery of contemplation in the mainstream of the church's life, faith, theology and prayer has been underway. The centuries' old marginalization of contemplation that followed the separation of prayer and theology after the 12th century, its increasing 'specialization' in cloistered communities and the suspicion with which it has often been held since the 16th century have all diminished dramatically. People of all walks of life – in many forms of vocation – seek and practice serious forms of contemplative discipline in their prayer that formerly would have been seen as strictly 'monastic'.

In *Vita Consecrata*, John Paul II pronounced on this re-emergence of contemplation into the mainstream of ecclesial life very clearly:

Even in the simplicity of their life, cloistered communities, visibly represent the goal towards which the entire community of the Church travels. As an expression of pure love that is worth more than any work, the contemplative life generates an extraordinary apostolic and missionary effectiveness.ⁱ

No opposition between contemplation and action here. Since the Council every Pope has called on monastic orders to renew their contemplative life and to share it with the whole people of God. Thomas Merton, Bede Griffiths and John Main are three of the many prophetic figures in this process. Yet let us remember that their prophetic vision led them to unusual and even disturbing insights and experiments.

How contemplative is Benedictine life? – The prophet's response

Merton was openly critical of his monastic culture for its lack of contemplative depth. Often he was more popular outside the cloister as 'Thomas Merton' than within it as 'Fr Louis'! Griffiths felt he had to leave his English monastery and go to India and immerse himself in its spiritual experience in order to 'find the other half of (his) soul.' Main, who more than either of them channelled a specific monastic form of contemplative prayer to those living in the world, was also led to form a new kind of Benedictine community which has subsequently taken shape both as a 'monastery without walls' and in a particular new form of Oblate life. The Benedictine possibility of including meditation in the Office and liturgy was one of John Main's great insights:

Each of our four sessions of meditation is in community. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of this physical and spiritual being together. Shared silence is a self-authenticating faith in God's presence among us. Learning to meditate in common is the greatest of our exercises of communal love. In these moments we hold open with and to others the most precious part of ourselves – the heart where our treasure also is, our faith in the presence of Jesus.ⁱⁱ

It is significant and hopeful for us today that each of these three very modern monks remained within the monastic institution and the church. In order, however, to achieve their vision they were forced closer to its periphery. Is not this itself a lesson for us in considering the contribution of Benedictine spiritual culture to our world?

Monasticism by its very nature is marginal. It gives most when it is closest to the edge. This is certainly how it began – in the desert and as 'flight from the world' and from ecclesiastical hierarchy. Desert monks dreaded to be made priests. Benedict himself was not a priest and was cautious about introducing clerical status into the lay-structure of the monastic community. Yet by the end of the 'age of monasticism' monks had largely been assimilated into the institutions of church and state.

The greatest spiritual flexibility and freedom of status was often to be found in the oblate or lay brother. John Main originally entered the monastery and asked to be lay brother. The abbot dismissed this by saying it was impossible for a university professor. The weakening of the spiritual influence of monasticism seems to be linked to its loss of marginality and the creeping confusion of the monk with the clergy and of the monastery with other religious and secular institutions. The high price of this was the depth of contemplative experience. Medieval monastic culture is one of the great achievements of western civilisation. But how contemplative was it really? Research shows that the big monasteries were often more like prayer-factories while the deeper forms of spiritual life were more likely to be found in the small priories and granges at the edges of the monastery's political empires and estates.

Understanding the problem of the contemplative element in Benedictine life leads us to look closely at the Rule – what it has and what it doesn't have. There are many elements in the Rule that allow us to see it as part of the Eastern tradition of the life out of which it grew.

Benedict's emphasis on 'peace as the quest and aim' of the life has often been reduced to a local and domestic security (no small thing in a world where things are falling apart). But he understood it more in terms of the 'hesychia' of the desert – the silence and stillness of heart in which contemplation arises. The opening of the heart to the abbot echoes the relationship of disciple to master in the Desert monasticism to which he looked back as a golden age. Benedict emphasises the constant need for control of thoughts – the guarding of the heart that is at the core of desert asceticism. And he saw spiritual progress in terms of the stages of humility. There is no doubt that the Rule is geared towards achieving the state of contemplation as a way of preparing for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven at an interior level.

But what does Benedict say specifically about how to develop and maintain this state of contemplation? Are the *opus dei* of the monk and his *lectio divina* enough? Benedict himself seems to say 'no', when he says that the full observance of the life is

not contained in the provisions he describes in the Rule, as a ‘little rule for beginners’. And he does not speak about particular forms of prayer apart from those of the daily Office and *lectio divina*. The life he regulates in the first 72 chapters of the Rule is designed to create the optimum conditions for contemplation. But then comes the all-important last chapter. Here, for those who want to go further into contemplation, he simply but decisively points to other authorities – especially Cassian whose Conferences he had already drip-fed into the monastic formation by having them read daily at mealtimes.

Contemporary and contemplative

I would like to suggest that if the Benedictine tradition and its practitioners, whether monks or oblates, today are to contribute to the spiritual and social crisis of our time that this Congress is considering, then we must examine more closely this question of how we pray in the Benedictine life.

Benedict does not speak much about the Mass. Probably it was not celebrated daily in his communities. This does not mean he did not love or revere the mass or see it as an essential and formative part of the monastic life. Nor does he speak about a method of contemplative prayer – although he says that all forms of prayer should be prayed in a contemplative way, that is, with attention and personal integration and harmony (mind and voice in tune in psalmody). But he does point, beyond himself and the Rule, to the great practitioners of the inner life within his and our tradition for more detailed instruction on what he himself refrains from addressing.

This issue is handled with refreshing and radical clarity by the eminent Benedictine scholar of the Rule of St Benedict and of pre-Benedictine monasticism, Adalbert de Vogue in his essay ‘From John Cassian to John Main’. He does not hesitate to identify what he calls a ‘lacuna’ in the Rule for which John Main’s contribution to modern Benedictine life offers one effective form of remedy.

The role of mediator played by Cassian in Main's story is interesting in several ways. First of all, in the historical dimension it offers an example of having recourse to a pre-Benedictine author to enrich and correct the post-Benedictine tradition. As Baker had already done-but somewhat differently, as we shall see-Main returns to a source of the Rule to supply for a lacuna in it which is left open or imperfectly filled by those who make use of it.ⁱⁱⁱ

John Main had become a monk in the 1950’s and was told to give up the form of simple, non-conceptual and image-free meditation that he had originally learned in the East – essentially the ‘monologistic’ or prayer of one word that he was introduced to and later called the ‘mantra’. Later, while headmaster of a Benedictine school in Washington DC and at a very busy period of his life, he was approached by a student fresh from the ‘trail of the mystic East’ with a simple but pointed question. Was there anything in Christian monasticism that corresponded to the meditation practices of the East? In helping this young seeker – with his very contemporary, experientially-angled question – John Main was led first to Augustine Baker and then to Cassian. Here he recognized a method of contemplative prayer that Benedict would have known, that we find in the medieval tradition and that is enshrined in the Orthodox church as the ‘prayer of the heart’. This is what he called Christian meditation.

De Vogue notes that Latin Christianity did not retain a parallel to the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church. With Cassian's *formula* or mantra, however, there was indeed a parallel method and one to which Benedict pointed. But it became largely forgotten or neglected in Benedictine monasticism. John Main's recovery of it, according to de Vogue, is an evolutionary moment of deep significance for our time. He points to an irony in monastic history. Benedict adopted Cassian's mantra "Deus in adiutorium meum intende" (O God comes to my assistance) as the opening of the Office, perhaps as a reminder of what the Office is preparing us for.

Cassian's role as liaison in this matter is all the more essential as Latin monasticism has not produced a phrase analogous to the Jesus Prayer, nor has it even used any other Christian mantra in a sustained way. It is something strange and cause for regret that the *Deus in adiutorium* recommended by Abbot Isaac has as far as we know not been used in the West in the way the author of the Conferences suggested. No echo has come to us of a school of spirituality which cultivated it as a phrase for continual prayer. Instead of this unceasing, personal practice at which Cassian aimed, we find only examples of liturgical or ritual use, whether in the Rule of St. Benedict himself or in his contemporary and countryman Cassiodorus or in the Franco-Celtic monasticism of the following century. "These do witness indeed to the fact that the message of Abbot Isaac was heard: the verse he recommended is greatly respected and its richness of meaning is perceived. But it is not used for continuous prayer. The very end which Cassian had in mind has been lost sight of."^{iv}

In his Tenth Conference of Abbot Isaac, Cassian describes in detail the reasons, the theology and the stages of this way of prayer. The reason is to control the problem of distractions. The theology is the poverty of spirit to which the 'single verse' leads and deepening union with Jesus in the glory of his Resurrection. The description of the stages illustrate the fundamental asceticism of the monastic life and indeed the achievement of his primary goal – the purity of heart by which the vision of God is reached.

From this moment of discovering Cassian's teaching, his 'how to', John Main's sense of the monastic life was transformed. He continued as headmaster for a few years. He then established a lay community – proto-typical 'oblates' – at his monastery where he led them in a more intensive novitiate formation grounded in meditation within the desert tradition. His vision had a destiny. It expanded to become a 'monastery without walls', The World Community for Christian Meditation. Within this community, over the past thirty years, a new kind of Benedictine Oblate Community has developed. And more recently, and still emergent within this Oblate Community, a residential Oblate identity has formed. This allows for an oblate to make final oblation and at the same time to commit to residential life in a stable Oblate community for renewable three-year periods. In 2007 the World Community and the WCCM Oblate Community received canonical status during the 25th anniversary of John Main's death. His insight that 'meditation creates community' has been verified by the development of this global community.

At what level do monk and oblate become one?

John Main clearly stated that this form of meditation, the *oratio pura* or pure prayer of the Desert monks, was not the only way to pray, or even the best. He took it for granted that it would enrich *lectio* and sacramental prayer, not replace them.

His contribution to contemporary contemplative Christianity has been recognized by the monastic world. To Bede Griffiths John Main was the ‘best spiritual guide of his time’. De Vogue saw him as bridging Christian to the non-Christian world as Cassian had bridged Latin and Orthodox churches. But his teaching has been more widely practiced outside the cloister. Only a few monastic communities have recognized what de Vogue understood as the ‘lacuna’ and what John Main reinstated in his new form of Benedictine community – the integration of times of silent meditation with the times of *lectio*, divine office and mass.

It is not surprising that this does not happen in most monasteries. The perception that silent prayer of the heart is the ‘personal prayer’ of the monk, whereas the Office and Mass constitute the collective prayer of the community is deeply established. There is, however, an older tradition that points to community prayer as including both silent meditation and the Office. It would be unlikely that that this older tradition could be recovered in existing monastic communities with their well-established practices and customs. But newer manifestations of Benedictine life – such as the oblate communities that both John Main and Bede Griffiths saw as emerging in the monasticism of the future -are more ready to integrate meditation with the Office or *lectio*. They see them as complementary precisely because they see the distinct differences between them.

In this kind of Benedictine community the experience of meditating together (as well as of praying the Office and celebrating Mass) creates a deep perception of union within the prayer of Christ. In Christ, at this level, there is neither monk nor oblate.

Oblates yesterday, today and tomorrow

How does this experience of unity in shared contemplative experience affects the forms of commitment and common life that constitute a Benedictine community? This is a real challenge. It can also create big problems. The Rule, however, is good at resolving such problems. It has helped many generations to solve their difficulties of adapting to the times. After all, the Rule is about learning how different and often quite odd people can live together in love. Monks can feel threatened in their identity by sharing community with other kinds of commitment. Often this cannot work, certainly not without shared contemplative prayer. Then again, oblates may not want to be formally monks or live with them even though they do love and wish to live the monastic life. These are the kinds of challenges of identity, vocation and meaning that we now face in monasticism today. It is an aspect of what we call the ‘crisis of vocations’. It means can we adapt or do we cling to the death to old forms? The future of Benedictine life depends on first facing and then risking some new ways of living these challenges.

Benedictine life is not supernatural. The Rule is very down to earth. So, we should not be surprised to see that forms of the monastic life that do not evolve and adapt will become extinct. The vow of *conversatio morum* has never been more relevant and deserves our attention today even more than the vow of *stabilitas*.

In the past the interweaving of the vocations of oblate and monk was the norm. They were frequently much closer and more creative in their combinations. Some scholars claim that periods of rich spirituality in monastic life coincided with a multiplicity of forms of oblation. In that historical perspective of depth and variety we can foresee new forms of Benedictine life evolving around oblate communities. This was Bede Griffiths' strong intuition and John Main had already begun some constructive experiments in new forms of life obedient to the Rule and incorporating communal meditation.

Four times a day we meditate together for half an hour – the 'short time' of prayer suggested in the Rule. Each meditation period follows the appropriate hour of the Divine Office. The Office, which we see as a form of communal *lectio*, is our way of preparing for the silence of meditation by an attentive listening to the Word in scripture.^v

The integration of communal times for the 'work' of silent meditation is not new to monastic tradition but it is rarely found today. Oblates encourage the recovery of this custom – the opening of the full spectrum of prayer - through their life in the world. The oblates of the World Community, for example, have already begun to embrace the discipline of twice-daily meditation before they begin the novitiate year. As they learn also to weave the Office and *lectio* into their daily spiritual life a fruitful symbiosis happens in which the Word leads to silence and silence empowers the Word. Cassian in the 5th century already describes this marriage-relationship between *lectio* and meditation in his Tenth Conference. He was surprised to find how the imageless prayer of the mantra led to a deeper reading of scripture.^{vi} The modern oblate's balanced daily prayer (lectio, worship and the prayer of the heart) brings to light the entire tradition of oblation and its enormous potential for our time. It does not matter essentially whether the oblate is living in the world or in a residential community. Grounded in this balance and liberating discipline in their daily life the oblate soon becomes the witness and the teacher for others that is common to all forms of Christian discipleship.

As Augustine Baker remarked in the 17th century, a certain re-prioritizing of life activities may be necessary if a person wishes to live a contemplative life in the world. He mentions going out to dinner less often. We might add less time in front of the television or online. But as Baker stressed, long before Vatican II, the call to contemplation is universal. Recovering this contemplative dimension of the Benedictine ethos in the oblate life holds out promise for the other forms of monastic life itself which we see under such severe pressure today. A rediscovery of oblation may save and renew monasticism.

A historical review of oblature may be very helpful in the reconstruction of monastic communities. We have seen how oblature has been remarkably responsive to the spiritual needs of the times, and has always cherished the precious legacy of monastic prayer. Consider the variety of legitimate roles and functions that oblature provided in the Cluniac *familia*, in large cenobia, in small priories, in eremitical orders. It has shown a remarkable elasticity--not shapelessness, but a creative response to the needs of a particular situation interpreted through a vital tradition. The Oblate may live for life in monastic communities as *mortui mundo*, having given himself and his property to the community without reservation (a *plenus oblatus*, a *persona ecclesiastica*). He

may face the challenge of living "in the world" by the principles of the Rule in fraternal union and affiliation with the monastic community. This is the option that probably most oblates in history have taken. It allows for a diversity of accommodations to persons and situations. Perhaps it is now time to consider yet another option which has recurred in history, and may have much to offer prayerful people in our time--the creation of residential communities of Oblates of St. Benedict who may minister to their fellows in a new monasticism to a world crying out for the silent, generous prayer which it has to offer. The free and supple structure of oblature adapts well to a wide variety of religious temperament and social circumstance. It seems to present marvelous and large opportunities for the life of intensive Christian meditation and prayer; it is a rich inheritor of, and contributor to, the life of evangelical humility and simplicity envisioned by Our Holy Father Benedict, a man of God for all times.^{vii}

Conclusion

The contemplative dimension of the Rule has often been under-emphasized because Benedict seems to concentrate on the challenges and structures of community life rather than on the interior journey. The oblate and the monk are, however, enriched and made more flexible in their respective vocations by remembering the full mystical import of the Rule.

The Life of Benedict reveals the saint as healer, spiritual father and mystic. His vision of the whole world gathered together in a ray of divine light pervades the therapeutic insights into the human soul – alone and in community – which has made the Rule a major part of Christian wisdom literature. There is only one Rule for all forms of Benedictine life – for monks, nuns and oblates living in the world. It has no clerical bias and, like the desert tradition, does not elevate one form of vocation above another. The monk who clings to his status in distinction to others is not yet a free monk. The oblate who sees himself as responding less fully to the call of discipleship, because he is not a monk is not yet a free oblate. All that matters is to ‘truly seek God’.

This spirit of equality and fraternity is a direct fruit of contemplative consciousness and pure prayer. It rings true with the modern mind. And it creates a contemporary and flexible form of following Christ through the ancient tradition of oblation. If we see the Rule as embodying the contemplative dimension of the Gospel by laying the moderate, ascetical foundations for the interior journey, then new forms of monastic life – renewed for our time by a return to the original vision – can be imagined. The oblate may live in the monastery. Or in lay communities of oblates that are probably closer in form to the monasteries that Benedict himself knew. Or, the oblate can continue in the more conventional form to live in the world as a spiritual friend, associate or member of a monastic community. In whatever form of commitment the oblate seeks God through prayer and work and makes peace his ‘quest and aim’.

In our modern confusion Benedict offers us a clear and liberating understanding of the true nature of these three spiritual elements of life. Prayer means more than ritual and mental prayer. It needs to nurture and lead into contemplation – the prayer in which as Cassian says ‘all the riches of thought and imagination’ are surrendered. Work means more than making money. It is about service and the making of a just world that consciously and continuously awaits the coming of the Kingdom. And peace is not

just a passing state of mind, a temporary relief from stress and anxiety. Peace *is* the mind of Christ because ‘he himself is our peace.’

Monasticism in its many forms, including a renewed form of oblate life, has a special and precious capacity to teach contemplation to a spiritually thirsty world.

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ⁱ *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vita Consecrata*,

ⁱⁱ John Main, *Monastery Without Walls*, The Spiritual Letters of John Main, Canterbury Press Norwich 2006, p.29

ⁱⁱⁱ Adalbert de Vogue, *From John Cassian to John Main*, in *John Main: The Expanding Vision*, ed. Laurence Freeman, Canterbury Press, Norwich 2009

^{iv} *ibid.*

^v *Monastery without Walls*, *op. cit.*, p.27

^{vi} Cassian, *Conference* 10.5

^{vii} Derek G Smith, *The Oblate in Western Monasticism*, *Monastic Studies* 13, 1983

Further reading:

John Main, *Community of Love*, Medio Media 2009

Laurence Freeman, *The Selfless Self*, Canterbury Press 2009

Paul T Harris, *John Main: A Biographical Memoir*, Medio Media 2009

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