

## 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 1600 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. This will lead us to look at the *praxis* of realizing this, the practice of meditation

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 Benedictine life and the Gospel and indeed of human life itself. Even the bi-hemispherical structure of the brain illustrates this tension of complementarities. 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 has 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. The growth needed today is a recovery of the contemplative energy of the Rule.

### *Recovering the contemplative dimension*

Peoples' search for spiritual experience in our time often leads them to leave the Church. Many feel that Christianity has little to offer except rituals, moralistic certainties, rules and conformity. Yet monasteries are often an exception to this 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 there has been a widespread recovery of contemplation in the mainstream of the church's life, faith, theology and prayer. The marginalization of contemplation that followed the separation of prayer and theology after the 12<sup>th</sup> century, its increasing 'specialization' in cloistered communities and the suspicion with which it has often been held since the 16<sup>th</sup> century have all diminished dramatically. People of all walks of life – in many forms of vocation – 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.<sup>i</sup>

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 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. Contemplatives tend to rock the boat and challenge complacency.

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

Merton was quite critical of his monastic culture for its lack of contemplative depth. 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 channelled a specific monastic form of contemplative prayer to the world, was led to form a new kind of Benedictine community based on meditation, the 'pure prayer' of the desert tradition. This has since taken shape both as a 'monastery without walls' and in a particular new form of Oblate life. Including meditation in the Office and liturgy was one of John Main's great insights. This is what he said about it:

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.<sup>ii</sup>

It is a hopeful sign that each of these three very modern and prophetic monks remained within the monastic institution and the church. But, in order to achieve their vision they were pushed closer to the edge. Is not this itself a lesson for us as we consider the contribution of Benedictine spiritual culture to our world? Monasticism by its very nature, like Jesus, 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. Living on the edge is hard to sustain. By the end of the great 'age of monasticism' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century monks had largely been assimilated into the institutions of church and state.

Great spiritual flexibility and freedom from status was often to be found in the monastic life of the oblate or lay brother. But this had become devalued by an excessive emphasis on the clerical status of the 'choir monk'. When John Main originally entered the monastery he asked to be lay brother. The abbot dismissed this by saying it was an impossible option for a university professor. The weakening of the spiritual influence of monasticism is connected to its loss of marginality and the confusion of the monk with the clergy and of the monastery with religious and secular institutions. The high price of this institutional respectability and acceptance by the centres of power in the church was the decreasing quality 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 centres 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 historical problem of the contemplative element in Benedictine life forces 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 mystical tradition of the monastic life from which it came and which Benedict looked back to with reverence and even a certain nostalgia.

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 *ascesis*. And he saw spiritual progress in terms of the stages of humility. The Rule is geared towards achieving the state of contemplation, a way of preparing for the coming of the Kingdom of heaven at an interior level. If the Benedictine life does not mean a direct path to contemplation what on earth is it for? Education, social work, a quiet, secure life without responsibility, an escape without a return, a taking without giving? These are indeed the dangers of monastic life

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 his 'little rule for beginners'. He does not speak about particular forms of prayer apart from those of the daily Office and *lectio divina* – although he refers to the personal prayer of the monk being extended beyond prescribed limits, by the direct action of the Holy Spirit. The life he regulates for in the first seventy-two 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 to John 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 Benedictine monks and 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. In the process we may discover different priorities from those we have come to take for granted.

For example, 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 mind and voice in harmony. But he does point, beyond himself and the Rule, to the great practitioners of the inner life within our tradition for more detailed instruction on what he himself does not speak specifically about.

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 Vogüé in his essay 'From John Cassian to John Main'. He identifies what he calls a 'lacuna' in the Rule and says that John Main's contribution to modern Benedictine life offers a genuine way to fill the missing link.

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.<sup>iii</sup>

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 question about experience – 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 Vogüé 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 Vogüé, is an evolutionary moment of significance for our time. He points to an irony in monastic history. Benedict adopted Cassian's mantra "Deus in adiutorium meum intende" (O God, come 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.<sup>iv</sup>

In his Tenth Conference of Abbot Isaac, Cassian describes 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 stages illustrate the fundamental *ascesis* of the monastic life and indeed the achievement of its primary goal – the purity of heart by which the vision of God is reached.

From this moment of discovering Cassian's teaching on meditation, 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 an intensive novitiate formation grounded in meditation and integrated with the familiar forms and structures of daily Benedictine life. 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. More recently, and still emerging within the 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 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of John Main's death. His insight that 'meditation creates community' has been proven true by the development of this global spiritual family.

*At what level do monk and oblate become one?*

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

His contribution to the contemplative renewal of Christianity has been recognized by the monastic world. To Bede Griffiths John Main was the 'best spiritual guide of his time'. De Vogüé 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 Vogüé understood as the 'lacuna' and learned what John Main understood when he filled it in his new form of Benedictine community – the integration of times of silent meditation with the times of *lectio*, divine office and Mass. Many Oblates of course do this normally, integrating meditation morning and evening with their Office, *lectio* and daily routines

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 set. 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 long-established practices and customs. But for 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 that they are distinct and different. Meditation is different from *lectio*, *lectio* from *oratio*... but *contemplatio* is the goal of all prayer.

Meditating together is a powerful experience of faith and love. It can deepen and heal the wounds and friction of community living. In a Benedictine community the experience of meditating together (as well as of praying the Office and celebrating

Mass) creates a perception of personal and corporate 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 affect the forms of commitment and common life of a Benedictine community? This is a real challenge. It can also create big problems. Contemplative experience creates a sense of unity and equality. Oblates and monks are one and equal in this contemplative dimension of the life. It enables them to love Jesus' teaching on discipleship as a way of mutual service not a competition for precedence or about who can be closer to the teacher.

This equality and unity is hard to live in daily life. 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 good for 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 it cannot without shared contemplative prayer. Then again, oblates may not want to be formally monks or live with them even though they do love the Benedictine life. These are the kinds of challenges of identity, vocation and meaning that we face in monasticism today. It is an aspect of what we call the 'crisis of vocations' but which is fact a crisis of perception. 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.

Remembering what Benedict points to beyond his own Rule can help monasteries to explore new forms of commitment within the community or parallel to it. The ancient form of oblation offers many examples that can be adapted for modern circumstances. 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 perhaps than the often idolized vow of *stabilitas*.

In the past the cohabitation of the vocations of oblate and monk in a monastery was normal. There were very creative variations and combinations. Some scholars claim that the richest periods of monastic spirituality coincided with an increased diversity of forms of oblation. In that historical perspective of depth and variety we might foresee new, more flexible 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.<sup>v</sup>

Communal times of silent meditation is not a new idea to monastic tradition but it is rarely found today. Oblates encourage the recovery of this custom – the opening to the full spectrum of prayer – through their life in the world. The meditating oblates of the World Community, for example, have already embraced the discipline of twice-daily meditation before they begin the novitiate year. As they then learn 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 5<sup>th</sup> 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.<sup>vi</sup> The modern oblate, living in the world can balance daily prayer and work (*lectio*, worship and the prayer of the heart) and bring to light the entire tradition of oblation and its potential for our time.

It does not, then, really matter 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 – a development common to all forms of Christian discipleship.

As Augustine Baker remarked in the 17<sup>th</sup> 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 could provide a model and influence for monasticism generally which faces so many difficulties today. A rediscovery of oblation may save and renew monasticism for our time.

A historical review of oblation may be very helpful in the reconstruction of monastic communities. We have seen how oblation 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 oblation 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 oblation 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.<sup>vii</sup>

## *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. Seen in the light of Chapter 73, the mundane details of the Rule acquire a rich symbolic meaning that points to the goal of contemplation in every aspect of life: 'so that in all things God may be glorified.' The goal of the monastic life according to the first monks was simply 'continuous prayer'.

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/herself as less of a disciple, because he/she is not a monk is not yet a free oblate. What 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. The Rule embodies the contemplative dimension of the Gospel by laying the moderate, ascetical foundations for the interior journey. Seen like this, new forms of monastic life can be creatively imagined and courageously risked. 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 clearer understanding of the nature of these three spiritual elements of life. Prayer is 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.'

If the oblate today recovers this latent contemplative energy in the Benedictine life we could expect to see a greatly increased influence of the spirit of the Rule in our world. This would affect not only monasteries but all the institutions of society: in the ways in which dialogue is conducted, the church is run and families raised. Benedictine monks and oblates face the same challenges and so are equal partners in this work of seeking God through the wisdom of our Holy Father Benedict.

<sup>i</sup> Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*,

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

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

<sup>iv</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Monastery without Walls*, *op. cit.*, p.27

<sup>vi</sup> Cassian, Conference 10.5

<sup>vii</sup> Derek G Smith, *The Oblate in Western Monasticism*, *Monastic Studies* 14, 1983

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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

Websites:

The World Community for Christian Meditation: [www.wccm.org](http://www.wccm.org)

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