

## The Benedictine Oblate Path - for Today

Since the time of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, when the Christian monastic movement began, there have been many ways of expressing the monastic archetype. Even in the Desert there were anchorites, hermits and coenobites. The Desert wisdom also knew that the monastic archetype dwells in each human soul as that which orientates us to seek God “before everything else”. For the monk the archetype takes a visible expression in what we call the monastic life – a life that received its great expression in the Rule of St Benedict. But those working in the world can no less be in touch with the power of this archetype and form a special bond and community with those living in monasteries. The oblate expresses this bond in the monastic archetype by uniting monk and lay person in a way that is especially powerful and necessary today.

If there are different kinds of monks it is not surprising that we find new forms of oblation developing today to respond to the particular spiritual needs of our time.

Thirty years ago John Main received the first oblates of a small monastic community he had started with a special emphasis on the practice and teaching of meditation. He saw his experiment as a restoration of the essential link between the traditional form of monastic prayer in the Divine Office and the *oratio pura* as taught by Cassian whom St Benedict points us towards at the end of his Rule.

Monastic life today is in crisis and is seeking new forms of serving the Kingdom of God through the Church. The insight of John Main that ‘meditation (*oratio pura*) creates community’ is proving to be of great relevance to this search. It is impossible that the monastic charism will die and therefore it is inevitable that it will take new forms. This must include a more flexible and less legalistic approach to monastic commitment and it will place less emphasis on the clerical aspect of the monastic vocation as it has developed in the western tradition. As Bede Griffiths once said “every Benedictine monastery must be a centre of contemplation”.

In my life as a monk for the past thirty years I have come to believe firmly in the future of Oblates. I feel that new kinds of Benedictine oblates will help develop the new forms of monasticism that our world needs in order to find the spiritual depth from which alone we can respond to our overwhelming problems. The oblates of the World Community for Christian Meditation offer one example of how a new wineskin for the perennial new wine of monasticism can be developed. They do not ‘belong’ to one particular physical monastery and so form a global ‘monastery without walls’. This represents a variation on the idea of *Stabilitas* but one that can speak powerfully to people’s experience of community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century without in the least diminishing the value of physical stability.

They are men and women, spread through many parts of the world, committed to a regular practice of contemplative prayer which they integrate with the *opus dei* and the vows of St Benedict. Like all Christian contemplatives they are conscious of their silent presence at the heart of the church and their love for the world radiates from this centredness in the Body of Christ. Many lead meditation groups, in schools, churches, prisons and hospitals. Others are involved in teaching children to integrate the contemplative dimension of prayer at an early stage of their spiritual journey. Others specialise in inter-faith dialogue and in work for unity and peace in our fragmented and violent world. Some of our younger oblates are now choosing to serve their novitiate as a year of fulltime service and study which becomes a special kind of spiritual formation for their future vocation in life.

The characteristic Benedictine tradition of tolerance and inclusion, of balanced diversity and stable yet radical openness to conversion is needed today more than ever before. A new manifestation of the spirit of St Benedict is demanded by our times. No one program or group can achieve this as it is the work of Wisdom itself but the Benedictine Oblate has an increasingly important role to play in this contemporary evolution of a great tradition.

Laurence Freeman OSB  
The World Community for Christian Meditation  
Monte Oliveto Maggiore