

# Sabbatical Reflection

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**How different Benedictine Communities nourish their relationships with Oblates and Associates**

## Background

For some 24 years I have been an Oblate of the Community of St Benedict at Elmore Abbey (formerly at Nashdom Abbey and recently moved to St Benedict's Priory, Salisbury). This is an Anglican community which had its heyday in the 1960s and 70s and whose influence was felt throughout the Church of England in the post-war years with members such as Dom Bernard Clements, Dom Gregory Dix and Dom Augustine Morris. As a result the community grew in number, with many testing their Religious vocation there, and over the years a great many who didn't feel a call to the Religious Life still felt drawn to the Benedictine spirit and wished to incorporate something of this into their daily lives. Thus the number of Oblates grew over subsequent years, whilst the number of monks gradually decreased. The reality today is a community with just four monks and nearly three hundred Oblates. As one of this number, and looking to undertake a period of sabbatical, I felt drawn to explore my own links with my community, to reflect on the ways in which this had fluctuated over the years and to see whether the Spirit might be saying something to both communities and those linked with them about the nurture of our common life.



**Ampleforth Abbey**

Over the months building up to the sabbatical I became increasingly aware, through contacts with other Benedictines, that I was not the only person interested in this area. Another community with which I have a strong relationship (Holy Cross Convent, Costock) was also receiving requests from people around the country asking about the possible presence of local Benedictine groups for support and spiritual growth: these often came from people whose link with their own communities was hindered by physical distance and who felt the need for something to 'keep them going' between visits to their communities.

So there seemed to be a shared need among some Oblates and Associates, as well as those beginning to explore Benedictine life, but a lack of something to meet their desires.

## Planning



Holy Cross Convent, Costock

Once the idea had been firmly planted in my mind, and having received encouragement from Religious and laity alike, I had to decide on a plan of action. I am not sure what I expected, but I am fairly certain I had a sense that there would be fairly common practice 'out there.' After all, there is an English Benedictine Congregation which, among other things, publishes the Benedictine Yearbook, containing both Roman and Anglican communities. I presumed there would be some uniformity of approach, and this view was encouraged by a reply to an exploratory

email to the Oblate Master at Ampleforth Abbey, Fr Anselm Cramer, who wrote:

"I don't think we have anything unusual in our system, which is fairly standard."

So I suppose I continued my plans with the expectation that something 'fairly standard' would be the model I found around the Benedictine scene.

Thus I made preparations to visit communities in this country and in North America, where I would travel later in the sabbatical. I was already in contact with St Benedict's Priory, Salisbury and Holy Cross Convent, Costock. In addition I planned visits to Ampleforth Abbey, Yorkshire; Worth Abbey, West Sussex; Holy Trinity Monastery, East Hendred; Mucknell Abbey, Worcestershire; and the Abbey of the Genesee, NY USA. There were some more communities from whom I got information via email and websites.

## Discovery

The first thing to note is that there is, or certainly has been, something 'fairly standard' in Oblate/Community relationships over the years whereby an Oblate has a link with a particular community, sharing some part of its life as personal circumstances allow (usually by saying part of the Daily Office and an annual visit as a benchmark). But every community exerts its own independence in adopting



Worth Abbey

this to suit its own particular circumstances. So, for example, I was to learn that the principle at Ampleforth is that Oblates live within a 100 mile, or 2 hour, journey from the Community. The Sisters at East Hendred have decided that there will be no more than 3 or 4 Oblates per member of the community so that relationships are manageable. I was surprised to learn that Worth Abbey

does not have any Oblates, something which shattered by preconceptions. The community at Mucknell Abbey has decided to take no more Oblates. The Sisters at Costock used to have an all-female Oblature but now accept some men. St Gregory's Abbey at Three Rivers, Michigan, have a select few Oblates but many more Associates, and the community at The Abbey of the Genesee have a group called the Genesee Lay Contemplatives, which "is not an oblate program in the canonical sense, rather a relationship with the Abbey of the Genesee."

So quite quickly the vision of something 'fairly standard' began to grow as my appreciation that Benedictine life isn't quite as monochrome as I had presumed. Through my visits and email conversations I found there is much more variety in the Benedictine world than I had thought and, of course, with the advent of modern forms of communication, new ways of keeping in touch with each other and nurturing this spiritual life are available.

My visits also made it clear that an issue of crucial importance is the life and needs of the community itself, over and above its relationships with those who feel drawn to link themselves in some way, for if the community life is not healthy there may ultimately be no community with which to link. Sister Catherine Wybourne at East Hendred put it candidly when she explained:

"Oblates are part of the community but not on a par with the professed....the question then is 'how much can you allow Oblates into the private life of the community?' In short, laity want a connection and communities still need to maintain their enclosure."

Each community also has to bear in mind the resources it can give to relationships with Oblates and Associates. Worth Abbey, for one, took the novel step some 40 years ago of creating what has become the Lay Community of St Benedict: a group which started life living at the abbey but which is now independent and consists of members living around the country (with some now abroad) meeting in regional groups.

A view expressed by more than one community concerned the 'drain' Oblates can be on a community and there seems to be an increased desire to help people "live the Benedictine life where they are, in their parishes" (Fr Patrick Fludder, Worth, speaking about the creation of the Lay Community of St Benedict). However, this was also countered with the question from another community:

"can you learn stability, obedience and conversion of life in the same way as part of a lay community?"

It seems Oblates and Associates may be something of a burden as well as a potential blessing to their communities..

Relationships with individual Oblates are also subject to change, reflecting events both in the life of the community and the individual. Fr Anselm Cramer gave me a rather good illustration of Oblates given him by an elderly Oblate of his community:

“Oblates are like volcanoes. There are basically three types: active, dormant and extinct!”

Having occupied at least two of these categories myself, this does illustrate one of the difficulties of community/oblate relationships, in that oblates are not under the same discipline as the professed and the personal application of Benedictine life can alter dramatically due to personal circumstances and events, of which the community in question may be completely unaware.



Abbey of the Genesee

Perhaps the issue that has come to the fore for me in community/oblate relationships is that of vocation. There are those who feel called to test their vocation as professed Religious within an enclosed community and there are those of us who feel similarly called, but to sharing a part of this life whilst living outside the enclosure. One is not better than the other, but on the other hand, one cannot exist without the other. There has been a well documented problem with Religious vocations everywhere in a post-modern, even post-Christian world such as ours. One Sister put it well when she said:

“seekers come with a checklist of what they want – they want their rights and to express their specialness!”

I am sure there is something of this within oblate and associate vocations, whereby we too can be tempted to take what we want and not always receive what the community has to give.

### **The future**

So something ‘fairly standard’ was not what I discovered in the life of Benedictines, here or in North America. There are things we hold in common as those seeking to find stability, to learn obedience and to explore conversion of life, but each community does it their own way to an extent. It seems there is indeed an increasing number of people living outside the enclosure who are looking for something else, something more with which to be fed in their Benedictine journey. Perhaps the most concrete example of this I discovered was through visiting the Administrator of the Lay

Community of St Benedict and discovering the centrality of Lectio Divina for this group. In their Promise, members of the Lay Community seek to “Live Holy Communion, Create Holy Space and Offer Holy Service in the ways in which my circumstances allow.” The Lay Community is no longer part of Worth Abbey and they are developing a network of local Lectio Divina Prayer Groups in order to share this way of praying with scripture with the wider church.



**Abbey of the Genesee**

Indeed, one such group is just about to explore this in Leicestershire at MONOS (Centre for the study of monastic culture and spirituality), Mount St Bernard’s Abbey. This focus on Lectio Divina as central to Benedictine life and growth was a major discovery in my sabbatical, especially its use as a group activity. This is a practice I have applied to life in my own parish church and which others have found exciting and quite liberating. Also, in these days of some ecumenical difficulty, Lectio Divina is something in which Benedictines of different traditions can share freely and easily.

The other major discovery was of the use of various forms of modern communication technology by communities in maintaining and nurturing their relationships with oblates and associates. Most communities I encountered now use email to communicate and most now have a website which, to a greater or lesser degree, helps them communicate with the outside world. However, there are some that have taken things further and are exploring innovative modes of communication and nurture: media rich websites with videos of various aspects of monastic life and spirituality; films on YouTube (e.g. Finding Sanctuary); public and private Facebook pages; Twitter; video conferencing; online forums; blogs, etc.

Admittedly, these are early days in this area for most communities, but the fact that new avenues are being explored seems all to the good.

But perhaps the most pertinent question I was asked by more than one Religious was:

“what is it that parishes are not providing given the numbers of laity looking to be fed by the Benedictine tradition?”

Just as I wanted to find out what is perhaps ‘lacking’ in some community/oblate relationships as well as what is good and affirming, to have this question posed to me as a Benedictine parish priest brought a whole new dimension to my sabbatical journey which is not answerable here. However, the examples I discovered through visits and conversations will, I hope, enable me to continue to

explore this question and to enable both myself and fellow travellers “to live holy communion, create holy space and offer holy service.”

