

THE OBLATE PATH

Laurence Freeman OSB



1. Introduction

As modern society passes through its extreme period of crisis and (let's hope) an evolution into a better world, we need every scrap of wisdom we can find. The Rule of St Benedict and the monastic wisdom it distils can be a source of hope, vision and imagination for building a new way of life both during and after this time of darkness where the light can shine. But it is sometimes hard for people to see or trust. Many of our social institutions are in crisis, deep flaws are visible in protecting human rights and the just distribution of wealth; blind greed and a lack of reverence for the sacredness of nature threaten our planet and simple trust, the essential quality of all human organisation, is being eroded.

To many in secular society today monasticism is hardly perceived as a relevant source of wisdom. They are more likely to see it as an antiquarian curiosity, even a way of running away from the world and life's challenges, religious escapism. However, even a brief acquaintance with the great teachers of monastic wisdom – like Benedict himself – can make it clear that this is a gross misreading that deprives us of contact with one of humanity's most accessible sources of wisdom. The real, operational values of life, the way of dealing with daily problems, healthy lifestyle and a respect for human nature with tolerance of differences and 'weaknesses of body or character' – these are at the heart of monastic wisdom and of our current concerns. Yet, they stand apart from merely secular values because they incorporate an understanding of the transcendent dimension of human consciousness.

IN THIS ISSUE

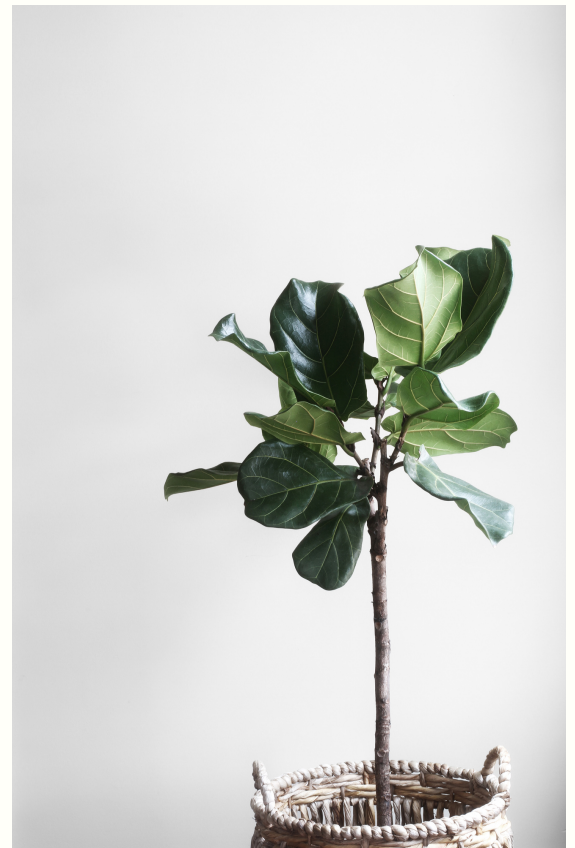
1. INTRODUCTION
2. ONE RULE FOR A LAY COMMUNITY
3. THE TRADITION OF MONASTICISM
4. THE RULE
5. OBLATES
6. JOHN MAIN
7. WHY SOME MEMBERS OF THE WCCM BECAME OBLATES
8. THE COMMITMENT
9. VOWS, PRECEPTS AND PROMISES
10. THE OBLATE CELL
11. ENTERING THE COMMUNITY
12. THE FORM OF OBLATION
13. BONNEVAUX
14. SUMMARY

The monastic source of wisdom accepts certain truths as sacred and self-evident. It also tries to live them and this attempt to live one's insights (as on the Oblate path) gives life more purpose and depth: for example, that human beings are not perfect or striving for any kind of perfection that can be 'achieved; that life needs continuous calibration and rebalancing; that personal discipline needs to complement acceptance of a rule of life; that love and service of others is integral to our spiritual growth; and, above all, that life, every person's life, has a purpose within the meaning of existence and that transcendence is necessary for that meaning to be known.

While remaining grounded in the realities and untidiness of human character and society, monastic wisdom affirms to the rest of the world that life has meaning. That meaning is life-giving and healing, restoring what is broken and making sense of the greatest hardship. It is not hidden or esoteric. It is not to be found in a purely abstract realm of thought or speculation. It is both incarnate and transcendent. Benedict's little Rule is a heroic epic of human dignity written (almost) as a soap opera. It does not romanticise the spiritual quest or treat it with false piety. It is informed by the key gospel principle that we cannot love the God whom we cannot see unless we love other people close and far. It reminds those who are not living in its lifestyle that, although we are not and will never be perfect, we are called to wholeness in the great community of being which is the meaning of holiness.

Monasticism is a universal and trans-cultural phenomenon. Most societies generate it in some form once they have passed a certain degree of materialism or complexity. There are, however, significant differences between its cultural manifestations. For example, in Buddhism (in which monasticism developed about 500 BCE), the monk is not meant to work for his living but depends entirely on lay people.

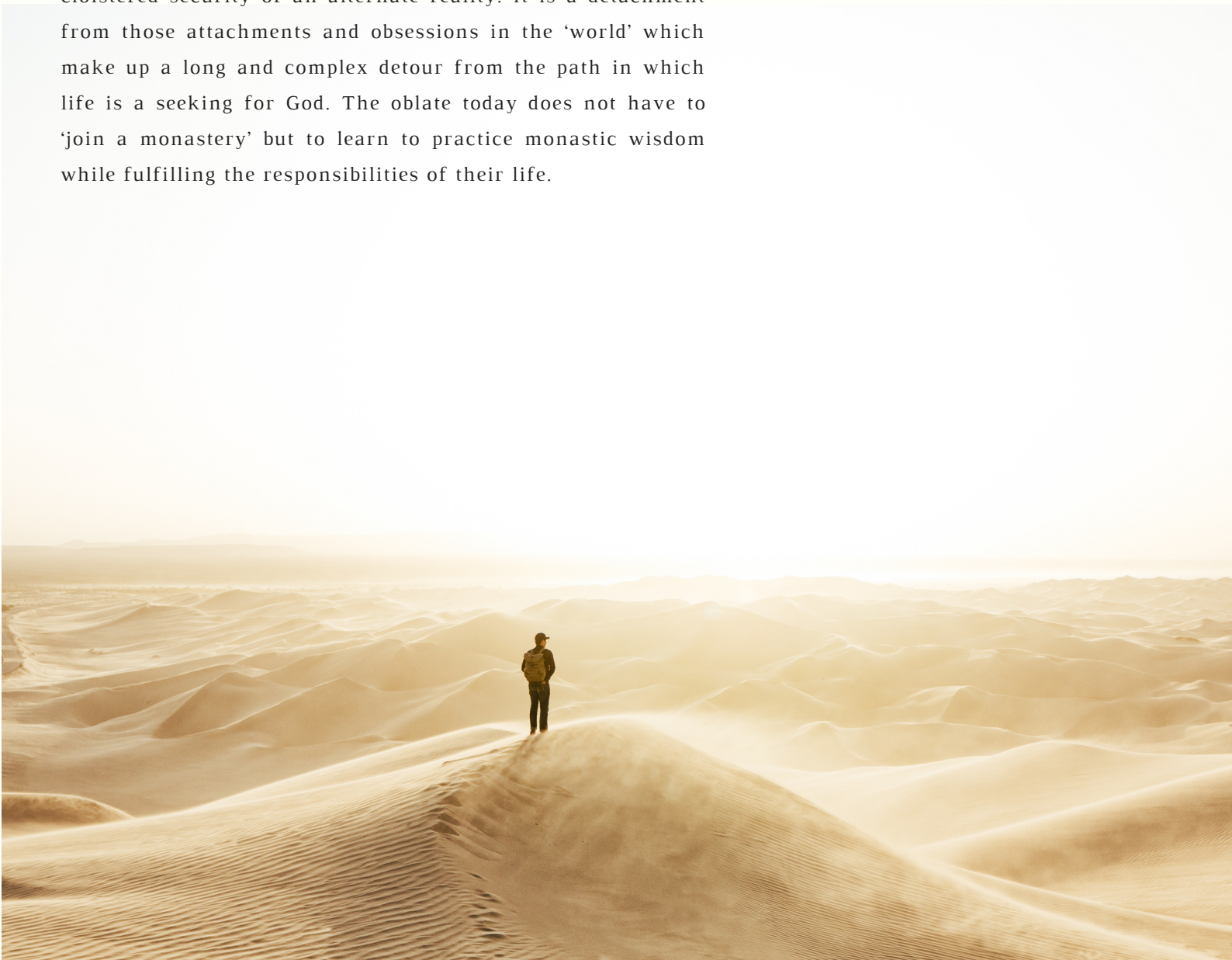
For Benedict, monks should live by the work of their own hands and, while renouncing personal property, may be in a position to help the poor. They can sell what they produce in order to support themselves although at a price a bit below market rates. In this sense, it is easier to speak of Christian monasticism as a lay movement than in its Buddhist counterpart where monks form a distinct clergy. Of course, after Benedict Western monasticism itself became clericalised; but its roots and essential spirit is lay and therefore universal. This essential or 'primitive' monasticism is being rediscovered today and a new form of oblate life is pioneering a serious spiritual path open to everyone in all walks of life.



MONASTICISM IS A UNIVERSAL AND TRANS-CULTURAL PHENOMENON. MOST SOCIETIES GENERATE IT IN SOME FORM ONCE THEY HAVE PASSED A CERTAIN DEGREE OF MATERIALISM OR COMPLEXITY.

The essential archetype that Benedict is describing in the Rule is not a caricature of the medieval monasticism still prevalent today in film and popular imagination. It is a self-renouncing identity formed in a process of 'seeking God' in and through all aspects of one's life. The monk makes fullness of life uncompromisingly central to his or her way of living. He or she has already been touched by an experience of this fullness; and, for all their inevitable and recurrent imperfections and failures, they can never forget it.

In the desert tradition it was said that monks 'flee from the world'. True and false. This is not an escapist retreat into the cloistered security of an alternate reality. It is a detachment from those attachments and obsessions in the 'world' which make up a long and complex detour from the path in which life is a seeking for God. The oblate today does not have to 'join a monastery' but to learn to practice monastic wisdom while fulfilling the responsibilities of their life.



THE OBLATE TODAY DOES NOT HAVE TO 'JOIN A MONASTERY' BUT TO LEARN TO PRACTICE MONASTIC WISDOM WHILE FULFILLING THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF THEIR LIFE.



2. One Rule for a Lay Community

Unlike other monastic founders who left a Rule behind them, Benedict wrote only one rule of life, a ‘little rule for beginners’ as he modestly called it. There is no evidence that Benedict wanted to start a religious order – any more than that Jesus wanted to found what we today understand as the ‘institutional church’. He described the ‘ordo monasticus’, the monastic order itself.

Central to the vision of Jesus is the ‘kingdom’, the ‘reign’ of God. Seeking and discovering this reality creates a distinct community in the world though it remains not ‘of’ the world: the prophetic meaning of the church which is in and relates to the world and its needs but is in a distinct sense unworldly as marginal people are. Benedict is essentially a disciple of Jesus. He is nourished by this vision of the kingdom, by the spirit of Christ and his teaching in the scriptures that grew up around them. His Rule is an emanation of this teaching expressed through the domestic details and basic operating principles of community life. Yet Benedict was apparently the spiritual guide for a number of communities in his lifetime and his little Rule evolved over time. The Rule is the fruit of the experience of a wise and dedicated monk.

Benedict’s spiritual family then evolved historically and culturally, always adapting to changing needs and circumstances. Benedictine monasticism is not identified exclusively with one form of service – education, scholarship, missionary or pastoral work or rural life on the land. John Main believed that an urgent need for monasticism to meet in our time is the recovery of the art of prayer. Maybe Benedict did not even consider if his Rule would survive as it has done; but it has flourished and found a place in the great wisdom texts of the Christian tradition. For a thousand years, it generated a major social institution in Western Europe with an eventual global presence influencing the social development of education, politics, social service, medicine and agriculture. The Rule he wrote 1500 years ago has been interpreted and applied in myriad forms. In our time it is generating new expression especially in the oblate path. Like the sacred scriptures, the key into its perennial wisdom and relevance is discretion and interpretation. Benedict calls ‘discretion’ the ‘mother of virtue’. The Rule, like sacred texts, cannot be understood if it is taken literally. It has to be engaged with interpretatively and, we might add, communally.

In later forms of religious life their founders wrote a rule for men, another for women and another for third order associates. Benedict wrote one rule that is lived and interpreted by men and women inside the physical monastery as monks, nuns, but also by people within or outside a resident community who make sacred promises but do not take formal consecrated vows.

Benedict himself was not a priest and, as the Rule makes clear, was even rather cautious about admitting priests or clerics. After Benedict the creeping clericalisation of monastic life occurred over several centuries. Many see it as a dilution of the original monastic vision although it also brought some benefits. But Benedict clearly imagined his monasteries as lay communities and a modern lay oblate community may reflect his idea more exactly than the clerical model with its daily concelebration of mass and nearly automatic ordination of professed monks. Benedict's Rule, however, is eminently flexible, allowing each community the right, indeed the challenge, to find its unique charism within the model that he describes.

The Benedictine oblate path is a contemporary form of life, rooted in the universal wisdom of the monastic tradition. It is open to innovation and expresses and explores the ever-deepening integration of body, mind and spirit through the practice of work, mental discipline and prayer. Through the key principles of obedience, stability and inner conversion it develops an other-centred approach to life, of service to others in a vision of the whole human family as a community of love. For this reason, every oblate community is essentially, as John Main describes it, a 'community of love'.



**THE BENEDICTINE OBLATE PATH IS A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF LIFE,
ROOTED IN THE UNIVERSAL WISDOM OF THE MONASTIC TRADITION.**



3.The Tradition of Monasticism

Monasticism is one of the oldest sources of wisdom in humanity – in forms ranging from the life of a marginal shaman to large monastic institutions. In all its manifestations – and the Oblate path is one of these - it testifies to the unquenchable thirst of the human soul to discover what it is and where it came from. We are a Mystery to ourselves.

The first Christian monks appeared in the early days of Christian life as a way of making this search and as an attempt to recover the primary experience of faith described so vividly in the New Testament. Our monastic tradition is therefore both part of a universal, perennial movement of wisdom and a specifically Christian phenomenon.

The first Christian monks began in hybrid forms – both as hermits or in communities combining solitude and common life in Syria and Egypt and the Near East. It flowered in the Egyptian desert for about a 150 years around the 4th century AD. We know most about it through the collection of the ‘Sayings of the Fathers’ collected from the different hubs of the desert. It became a spiritual honeypot of wisdom and inspiration for the whole Christian world of the time and spread early to the far reaches of Western Europe as records of the desert influence in early monastic settlements in Celtic monasticism near Skellig Michael reveal.

THE FIRST CHRISTIAN MONKS APPEARED IN THE EARLY DAYS OF CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A WAY OF MAKING THIS SEARCH AND AS AN ATTEMPT TO RECOVER THE PRIMARY EXPERIENCE OF FAITH DESCRIBED SO VIVIDLY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.



The desert tradition was injected directly into the Western monastic movements by John Cassian through his foundations for men and women in Southern France in the early 5th century and especially through his writings which were intended to bring more structure and spiritual theology into the often idiosyncratic monasteries and life of the time. Early Christian monasticism, as mentioned, was essentially non-clerical and developed on the margins of ecclesiastical authority. By contrast with the rest of Europe, the Irish church was strongly marked by the monastic charism. Monks were generally seen as free, maybe rather wild spirits seeking. Because (as John Main often pointed out) freedom needs discipline in order to flourish, the 'Institutes' and 'Conferences' of Cassian, the Rule of Benedict and many Celtic monastic rules together with that of St Basil in the Eastern Church, were composed as necessary guides and norms for preserving the true spirit of the monastic call.

Cassian thus strongly influenced both Celtic and Benedictine forms of monasticism and is regarded as one of the Fathers by the Orthodox Church. Skellig Michael off the Irish coast and Monte Cassino in Italy, touched by this influence, were founded in the 6th century. In the last chapter of his 'little rule for beginners', Benedict points to both Cassian and St Basil as guides for those who wish to go further. He also ordered Cassian's Conferences to be read daily in the refectory.

By the 6th century Benedict's wisdom was already a major part of the mosaic of monastic expression. Like all works of wisdom, it was both a synthesis and an original work of genius and the fruit of a long and courageous life.

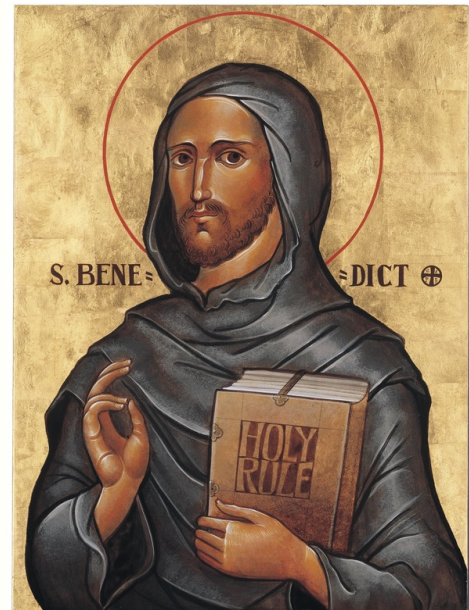
THE DESERT TRADITION WAS INJECTED DIRECTLY INTO THE WESTERN MONASTIC MOVEMENTS BY JOHN CASSIAN.

4.The Rule

Benedict began his monastic life as a young man as a hermit, guided by an experienced teacher for three years in the cave now called Sacro Speco near Subiaco, seventy kilometres from Rome where he had dropped out of school. As St Gregory the Great, his biographer said, Benedict began as a monk with ‘learned ignorance and unlearned wisdom’. Later he became the spiritual father of a number of monasteries for which, over the years, he composed a short Rule, which adapted a contemporary rule called the ‘Rule of the Master’. Benedict’s little Rule is about 9000 words and mostly concerned with the practical details of community life and its careful regulation. It is marked by moderation and unwavering focus, flexibility and clarity. The way it deals with details of food, clothing, healthcare, travel and internal discipline shows it to be a work rooted in its time and place and yet, transcend its era and cultural conditioning.

His essential question to those seeking entry into the community is ‘Does the monk truly seek God?’. The vows of obedience, stability and ‘*conversatio morum*’, or conversion of life, are supplemented by small, precise disciplines of mindfulness and self-discipline aimed to bring the monk to spiritual maturity through the growing experience of the love of God. As John Main understood the ‘community of love’ that he saw meditation giving birth to, Benedict believed it is love not fear that achieves the goal of the human journey.

Prayer (*oratio*), work (*labor*) and reading (*lectio*) are the main ingredients of Benedictine life together with regularity of eating and sleeping. The Rule calls the communal prayer times the ‘work of God’ and nothing must be preferred to it. If you are doing some work or reading something interesting, when the time comes for it you must drop what you are doing and go to pray.



Prayer is therefore the motor, the pumping heart of daily life, providing the frame and purpose in which the other two essential elements; work and reading are integrated. The spirit of the Rule is one of moderation, tolerance, respect, discipline and the priority of love. But it is single-minded. As John Main said, ‘the times of meditation are the most important times of your day’. The Rule is saturated in scripture and Christian wisdom but it is not a theological treatise. It is a source of wisdom needing intelligent interpretation – discernment – according to your circumstances of life. It is not a rule book but a rule by which you can draw the straightest and most direct line to follow between your starting point and your ultimate destination.

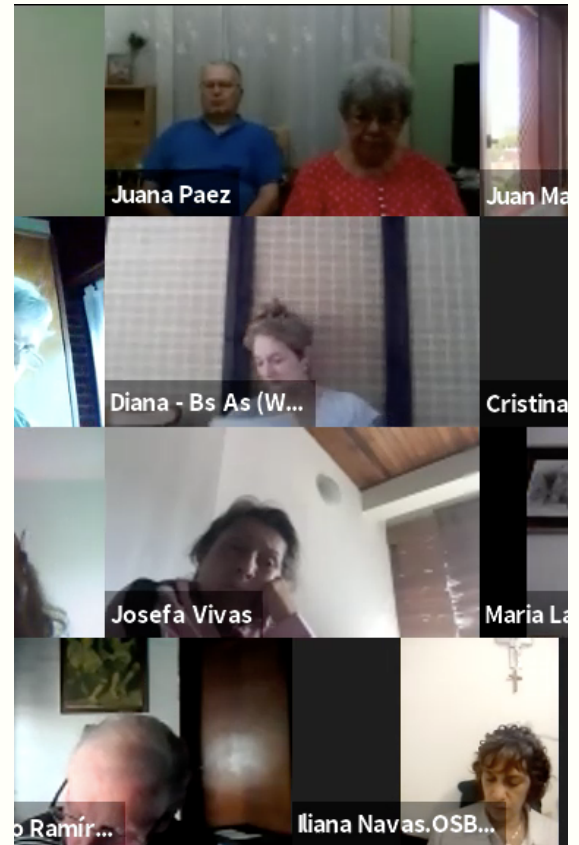
PRAYER (ORATIO), WORK (LABOR) AND READING (LECTIO) ARE THE MAIN INGREDIENTS OF BENEDICTINE LIFE TOGETHER WITH REGULARITY OF EATING AND SLEEPING.



John Main recognised a fourth stage in the development of the oblate path within the monastic tradition, made possible through the means of modern society: a committed contemplative life in a monastery without walls.

5.Oblates

The Latin 'oblatus', meaning 'offered' originally referred to children placed in the monastery by their parents for training and education. The custom is still found in some Asian monastic traditions. Once they reached the age of about 13, the boy thus offered would choose whether to remain in the community or leave. Later, as monasteries became more formalised under church law, the term oblate could also refer to resident members of the community who for whatever reason did not take canonical vows but lived under obedience in the community. A third stage in the development of the oblate path was when it referred to people who lived outside the monastery but who had a special, familial relationship with it.



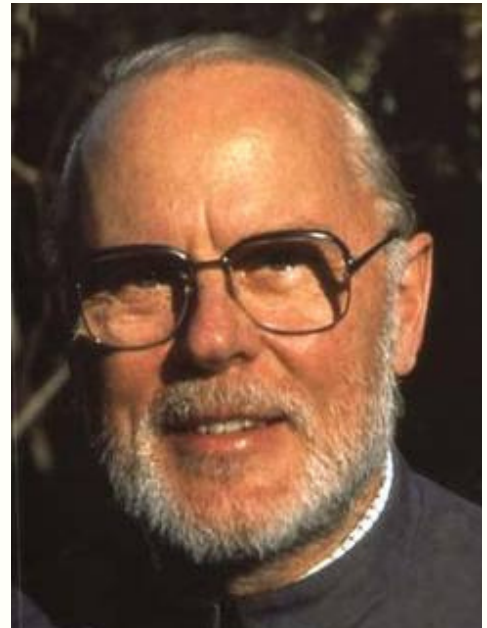
**A COMMITTED CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE IN A MONASTERY
WITHOUT WALLS.**

6. John Main

John Main (1926-1982) entered monastic life in his thirties after experience as a colonial administrator and as a professor of law. He said he became a monk in order to be free. A practising Christian in the Catholic tradition all his life, he was introduced to meditation through the Eastern tradition and immediately integrated the practice into his other prayer practices. Later, after becoming a Benedictine monk and studying the teachings of the Desert Fathers and Mothers, especially through the Conferences of Cassian, he recognised the teaching on the prayer of the heart and on the mantra at the heart of his Christian tradition. From this point, keenly aware of the urgent spiritual crisis of modern culture he dedicated himself to teaching meditation as the lost art of Christian prayer

In the 1970's John Main founded a new kind of Benedictine monastic community based on the Rule and on the practice of meditation as taught in the desert tradition. In a unique way he integrated the times of meditation with the regular times of Benedict's 'work of God' (the Divine Office) and as part of the Mass (after communion). From its beginning he welcomed equally the forms of commitment made by monks or oblates. Oblates were thus not merely 'attached' to the physical monastery of Montreal but formed an integral part of the monastic family; they were full, participatory members. This represents both a return to an ancient tradition and a new development.

Since 1990 the Oblate Community became explicitly a monastery without walls, united in its love for the wisdom of Benedict and their daily practice of meditation. John Main believed that 'meditation creates community' and the WCCM and its Oblate component illustrate that indeed it does. The opening of Bonnevaux as the International Centre of the WCCM and with its core community living in the spirit of the Rule signals a strengthening of the monastery without walls from its own walls.



Community takes many forms. Meditation takes us to the essence of the monastic identity – truly seeking God – and quickly forms a sense of how sharing this path forms strong and enriching bonds with others on the same path.

Of course, not all meditators become Oblates. The WCCM represents, with many other inspired movements and networks, a contemporary form of Christian contemplative life marked by diversity within unity. A member of the WCCM is defined as anyone who meditates in the tradition John Main passed on 'in the spirit of serving the unity of all'. A WCCM Oblate is one of these members who also finds the Rule and wisdom of Benedict to be a particular source of wisdom within this community.

THE WCCM REPRESENTS, WITH MANY OTHER INSPIRED MOVEMENTS AND NETWORKS, A CONTEMPORARY FORM OF CHRISTIAN CONTEMPLATIVE LIFE MARKED BY DIVERSITY WITHIN UNITY.



7. Why Some Members of the WCCM Become Oblates

Practising meditation every day or sharing in the work of the WCCM in teaching meditation does not mean you have to become an Oblate. Why then do some meditators do so? (A 'member' of the WCCM is understood in its Constitution to be someone who meditates in the tradition as passed on by John Main)

Because, through their commitment to the daily practice of meditation, they have felt moved and inspired by the Rule; and they feel that their lives can be supported by its wisdom in community with others who have been similarly touched in this specific way. We all need support, encouragement, regular inspiration and even sometimes challenging correction from our fellow pilgrims, fellow seekers. Deepening commitment is at the heart of every growth process. For some meditators, then, becoming an Oblate is their way to go deeper and share in the life and work of the WCCM more freely.

Because the Benedictine tradition is naturally inclusive it is deep and strong enough to welcome a very broad spectrum of people. Younger and older, married and single, richer and poorer, in good health or challenged – many people today see that modern life is spiritually undernourished. Its contemplative dimension is often repressed. Therefore, for all kinds of people life can lack meaning and purpose and, above all, peace and balance. In the 1500-year-old Benedictine wisdom which they may have encountered for the first time through meditating in the WCCM, they recognise the missing elements of a healthy style of life. These elements are balance and harmony of body, mind and spirit, a sense of the sacred in the ordinary things, a spirit of service to others, especially those in need, supported by an interior experience of transcendence – othercentredness, as John Main called it. Through the 'hours' of the Daily Office, the Oblate path also provides a structure for a nourishing daily contact with scripture and other sources of wisdom which the way of meditation illuminates and makes a source of delight.



Contemplation is the best cure for prejudice and fundamentalism, narrow-mindedness and polarisation – all real forces threatening peace and justice in our world today. The Oblate is at the heart of the work of loving and serving the world back to health.

The Oblate path integrates the two sides of the monastic coin: solitude and community. The point of union in this vision is the centrality of pure prayer, the prayer of the heart. It enriches all forms of prayer and opens the meditator to the light of the Word – for us made flesh in Jesus – that is to be found in all revelations and traditions. This spiritual path offers a liberating sense of spiritual discipline appropriate to one's temperament and state of life.



CONTEMPLATION IS THE BEST CURE FOR PREJUDICE AND FUNDAMENTALISM, NARROW-MINDEDNESS AND POLARISATION.



8. The Commitment

Being an Oblate involves a deeper commitment to some practices but it is not a legalistic undertaking. The Daily Prayer, for example, must be read with delight rather than merely a sense of duty – although the discipline of a structure helps us to find and hold this delight in ‘willing obedience’. The Rule of St Benedict says we should obey from love not fear. It is a highly flexible document that is clear about commitment and gentle in dealing with failure. The Rule makes many exceptions without compromising on its call to commitment and growth. Therefore, it demands to be interpreted and it has received very diverse interpretations throughout its history. In the same way, the life of an Oblate has structure and discipline but it is not bound to a set of rules and regulations.

The Rule is a yardstick, a measure, a way of seeing straight and around corners and understanding how God writes straight with what we see as crooked lines. Benedict’s sense of the root virtue of discretion is at the heart of making the Rule a guide for daily life and a source of wisdom. The Rule is not a book of rules.

For many in Asian culture, the I Ching is such a guide. Although the Rule looks and feels very different from this ancient text, for those who connect with its implicit wisdom, it becomes an explicit guide in the challenges, conflicts and moods of life.



BEING AN OBLATE INVOLVES A DEEPER COMMITMENT TO SOME PRACTICES BUT IT IS NOT A LEGALISTIC UNDERTAKING.

9. Vows, Precepts and Promises

The three pillars of the Benedictine life are stability, fidelity to the conversion process and obedience. Benedict calls them promises. In canon law they are vows. They can also be understood as precepts – ‘a guiding principle or rule that is used to control, influence or regulate conduct’.

At full oblation, the Oblate novice promises to live these precepts – which are expressions of the inner laws of the spirit – in their daily life for the rest of their life. The vows of the Benedictine Rule are therefore fundamental principles of life to which the Oblate makes a free and loving commitment with heart and mind.



**THE THREE PILLARS OF THE BENEDICTINE LIFE ARE STABILITY,
FIDELITY TO THE CONVERSION PROCESS AND OBEDIENCE.**

Stability – Stillness

This does not mean merely physical stability but faithfulness to the community one has joined. This interpersonal stability arises from the sense that 'this is where I belong, where I can grow and serve'. Its deeper meaning is as a commitment to the core stability of one's inner being, the stillness we practise in meditation.

Conversion of Life – Silence

In Latin this precept is 'conversatio morum', suggesting commitment to an ongoing process of change at all levels. Dramatic conversion experiences have value but their full meaning is revealed as they expose a new phase and deeper acceptance. The Dalai Lama thought this the most Buddhist of the Benedictine vows because it describes the truth of impermanence. As a promise, it commits the Oblate to the pilgrim path, letting go, moving on. It is the fruit of stability. Conversion puts us into harmony with the principles of peace, tolerance, selflessness and generosity and the courage to confront all forms of falsehood and injustice. The silence we practise in meditation is a full acceptance of the power of the Spirit that moves in stillness.

Obedience – Simplicity

The Rule describes a community formed by a spirit of obedience in both the vertical and horizontal planes. Sometimes we have to do what we don't want – vertical – and to do it without grumbling or resentment. Always, we have to practise mutual obedience – horizontal – listening sensitively and selflessly to each other. Obedience is the ear of the heart attuned to the Word of God, as an active presence sounding in every encounter and in all situations.

'Obedience without delay', as Benedict puts it, reveals a non-duality, a fundamental unity in all the relationships that make a person who they are. This is the simplicity we practise in the mantra.

THESE PRECEPTS ARE LIVED DYNAMICALLY – WITHIN THE FLUX AND FLOW OF LIFE. BUT THEY GIVE CONTINUITY AND PURPOSE TO ALL WE DO.

The WCCM Oblate's commitment to them is expressed in a number of regular undertakings to which they become faithful:

- A commitment to the twice daily practice of meditation each day in the tradition which John Main handed on;
- Participation in the Daily Prayer as circumstances allow, especially in linking meditation to times of morning and evening prayer;
- A reading of the Rule of St Benedict each day;
- Regular reading of Scripture and wisdom texts; and
- Sharing in the life and work of the community whose mission is to pass on the gift of meditation in the Christian tradition.



A READING OF THE RULE OF ST BENEDICT EACH DAY.



10. The Oblate Cell

There are many forms of community. Today's oblate lives a new form of the kind of community St Benedict described 1500 years ago. The WCCM Oblate may live singly, in marriage or loving partnership or in one of the new forms of modern society. All ways of life that reflect our 'truly seeking God' can be included in the WCCM Oblate Community. We recognise the need for inclusivity, pluralism and for adventurous experimentation as the ancient tradition evolves as a source of wisdom for our time.

An important element of the WCCM Oblate Community is the 'cell'. It is a regular local meeting of Oblates, preferably in person, of course, but sometimes online. It includes a common reflection on the Rule and a time of meditation. The word 'cell' has a long monastic tradition. It originally designated a monk's cave or room.

The elders of the desert would listen to the questions and problems of those they were guiding and then say, 'now go back and sit in your cell, and your cell will teach you everything'. It signifies presence and attention as well as a physical space or time together. It has a solitary as well as communal component. The cell is the heart and it is the meeting with others.

There is also a newsletter and occasions like retreats, the John Main Seminar and other events in the meditating community at which Oblates can meet and share the strength of their common bond.



THERE ARE MANY FORMS OF COMMUNITY. TODAY'S OBLATE LIVES A NEW FORM OF THE KIND OF COMMUNITY ST BENEDICT DESCRIBED 1500 YEARS AGO.

11. Entering the Community

As the Rule describes it, entering a community is a process. It takes time and requires reciprocal discernment. Nothing that can be called a community, certainly not an oblate community, is just a kind of club. But, because becoming an Oblate involves a core spiritual call deeper than the self-knowledge with which we start the process, it needs to be approached with patience, reflection and through an authentic process. Obedience, deep listening, begins on day one. The meaning and benefit of becoming an Oblate requires the clearest possible understanding of all one's reasons for feeling the attraction and of the nature of the call to which one is responding.

Having sensed an attraction to the Oblate path, the first step is to make contact with the National Community Coordinator. Previous discussion with other Oblates or with an Oblate cell would be advantageous. If they have not yet happened, the Coordinator will recommend they begin during the Enquirer stage. Then a period of Postulancy begins for which there is a very simple ceremony. During this period, of about six months, the postulant benefits from attending meetings of a regular cell, getting to know the whole WCCM better and participating in teaching sessions with other meditators. (The meetings of the cells are always 'open' to those interested in the Oblate path). With prescribed reading and especially the personal guidance of the mentor to whom the postulant has been assigned, a fuller understanding of what the Oblate Community is and what it is not can develop. A reading of John Main's 'Community of Love' is required at this stage together with a growing familiarity with the text of the Rule with the help of an appropriate commentary and the sharing of the cell and help of the mentor.

At the right moment, the Novitiate begins with a short ceremony. At this, the novice promises to live for the coming year in the spirit of the Rule and pursue a serious process of discernment.

The Novitiate normally lasts a year but is frequently extended until the 'fullness of time' has come. During this time, with the guidance of the mentor and other teachers in the community the Oblate novice begins a study of the Rule, the Benedictine tradition and the teaching of John Main and other teachers in the Christian contemplative tradition.

Although this formative year is not primarily just about reading, it is important to set aside regular time for this work of 'lectio'. The essential formation is in a deepening awareness and conviction that this path is a lifelong journey fuelled by the desire to share in the life and work of the community one is entering. It takes place as the novice understands why, as John Main said, 'the times of meditation are the most important times of the day'; why we integrate the meditation with the 'hours' of the Office; why the Rule informs all aspects of one's life with a spirit of gospel wisdom; and why the solitude of the journey is the oxygen of community. At the right moment, with the agreement of the mentor and after a time of retreat the novice writes to the Director of the WCCM Oblate Community requesting to make full oblation.

The Oblate path begins at depth in the transition from Novitiate to full oblation. The third of the process stages is the Final Oblation. It is not a step to be rushed and the novice should not be impatient to get it done just in order to complete the stages. It is a sacred step in which one offers one's whole self to God in and through the community which is a manifestation of a living tradition of wisdom and service. A personal retreat should precede the Final Oblation, allowing for a synthesis of the process of discernment so far and the meaning of the vows as applied in life.



With Bonnevaux, a new option has begun in the life of the Oblate Community generally. It is possible to spend the Novitiate or a part of it at Bonnevaux, sharing in its life and work. It is also possible to reside at Bonnevaux and join the core community.

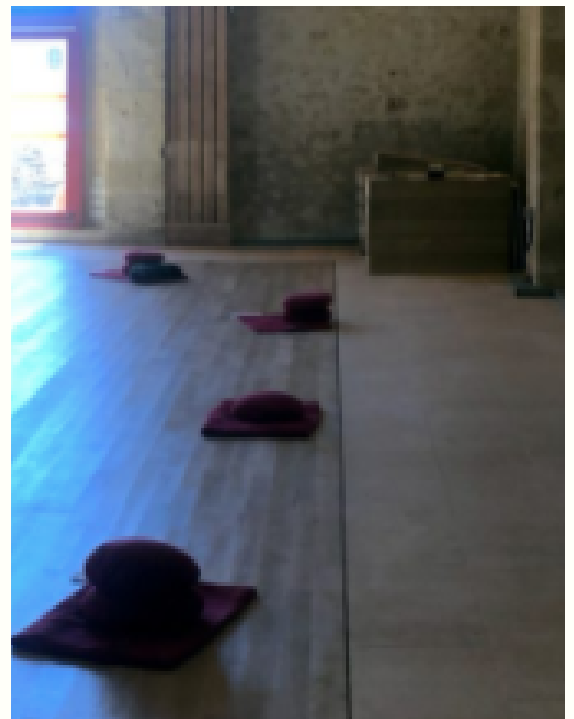
Oblates from around the world are welcome to visit Bonnevaux for retreat, alone or in groups, and to discover it as a spiritual home and sustenance for their Oblate path.

12. The Form of Oblation

Oblation is made to and within the community of the WCCM, a ‘monastery without walls’ whose cloister is the heart of each of its members and whose life is the spirit of the gospel: a community of love.

13. Bonnevaux

Since 2019, Bonnevaux has been the spiritual home of the WCCM. It has a special significance for the Oblate Community because the life of Bonnevaux is shaped by the Rule. Each day the resident community, several of whom are Oblates, meets with their long-term guests and interns to read and reflect on the Rule that guides the spirit of the community.



**OBLATION IS MADE TO AND WITHIN THE COMMUNITY OF THE WCCM,
A ‘MONASTERY WITHOUT WALLS’ WHOSE CLOISTER IS THE HEART
OF EACH OF ITS MEMBERS AND WHOSE LIFE IS THE SPIRIT OF THE
GOSPEL: A COMMUNITY OF LOVE.**

14. Summary

Meditation is the journey to the centre – to one's own centre and the Centre which is God. Christian meditation is the path into this centre through the heart and mind of Christ by a way that gives priority to silence, simplicity and stillness in a spirit of love and service.

Becoming an Oblate in the WCCM is an expression of all this and a way to realise it. It is a beautiful and challenging way to raise the human journey into transformation in the love of Christ and the wisdom of Benedict, one of his great disciples.

Laurence Freeman OSB

Bonnevaux

January 21, 2021



[HTTPS://BONNEVAUXWCCM.ORG/](https://bonnevauxwccm.org/)
[HTTP://WWW.WCCM.ORG/](http://www.wccm.org/)