

Oblate and Friend

"I tell you most solemnly,
unless a man is born through water and the Spirit,
he cannot enter the kingdom of God:
what is born of the flesh is flesh;
what is born of the Spirit is Spirit.
Do not be surprised when I say:
You must be born from above.
The wind blows wherever it pleases;
you hear its sound,
but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
That is how it is with all who are born of the Spirit."

--John 3:4-8

During the current reassessment of the Oblate Program at St. Andrew's Abbey, perhaps the most perplexing question for some has been: why is an oblate an oblate? As a corollary to this the following question is often asked: what is the difference between someone who gets consistent nourishment from contact with the Abbey, someone who has a genuine relationship with the Abbey, i.e. is a friend of the Abbey, and someone who is an oblate? Is there a difference? Is one better than the other? The answer initially to those two questions is: yes, there *is* a difference, but one is *NOT* better than the other. There is *not* a two-tiered system of personal or spiritual worth and value operating here, and to think in these terms is really contrary to both the spirit of the Rule, and to God's manifestation of love for each of us, and our *individual* vocations. Ultimately, there is only one vocation: that is to love God and neighbor with one's whole mind, heart and soul. But there are different ways of manifesting that love.

I think the best way to examine this often asked question very much lies in looking at it not from the viewpoint of the Abbey, but rather from the person who desires to be an oblate. We must strive to understand the nature of how the *person* who is coming to the Abbey desires to *develop* the varied dynamics of their own spiritual relationship to the Abbey and the practices of Benedictine life and spirituality. You don't become an oblate to join a club. So what then is an oblate? And from out of that arises another question: what is the *purpose* of an oblate group and its meetings?

These reflections are not primarily based on my own particular intuitions, but rather on two documents that have been open and available to all of us for well over a decade, both published on our web site or available from the development office. The first is "What is an Oblate"? I wonder how many of us have actually read and carefully reflected upon what it says, and what it implies about our own oblation. We ought also to reflect on the spiritual, and social, commitments of oblates as specified in St. Andrew's oblate constitution, our second document of reference, which has been available to all of us for over 15 years. These are two texts worth meditating upon, reflecting upon, and discussing, not only in terms of theory, but in terms of both discernment and practice. They also offer tools *for* discernment regarding one's choosing, or not choosing, to be an oblate.

Let's start from the more general and work towards a specific answer by looking at what is applicable to anyone who has a genuine relationship to the Abbey. We are not referring now to the occasional tourist, festival visitor, or one-time retreatant—rather someone who has gotten to know the monastic spirit of St. Andrew's, and finds in it something *nourishing* and rewarding for their own life; they sense that this is a relationship *worth continuing*. I would say this person is a true friend of the Abbey, someone who relates to the Abbey in a way that tends to foster mutual nourishment and spiritual growth, as well as through the way of friendship. This friend of the Abbey is also someone who wants to visit the Abbey *when possible*, makes an effort to do so, is willing to help the Abbey, again when possible, in various ways, and is invested in the well-being of St. Andrew's and its monastic community. One does not have to be an oblate to be all this, or to

do all this. This is a genuine relationship of friendship, both spiritual and social, with and towards the monastic community. This kind of open attitude is in fact needed for any kind of friendship to grow. And, frankly, I think friendship towards the Abbey is a pre-requisite, a grounding, for making one's oblation. You do not become an oblate in an idealistic vacuum, or a phantasized reality about what monastic life is like. This is also rooted in the fact that spiritual friendship is a core monastic value: a friendship in which both partners open themselves up to Christ in their lives; Christ, in fact, becomes the third person in the friendship one develops with the monastery, or with the individual monk one might be attracted towards. Christ also becomes a hallmark of a distinctive Benedictine hospitality.

What is this particular sense of friendship rooted in? Where does Benedictine hospitality stem from? To what degree are you willing to experience these two attitudes? And importantly, to what degree are you willing to offer this friendship and hospitality to others? These are questions that ought to be part of one's discernment. How do you understand these offerings?

As stated in the first of the above mentioned texts, the roots of monastic identity "are found in a good theology of baptism, baptism which not only marks a person as a son or daughter of God, but a baptism which gives a special orientation of the person to Jesus Christ." This is a desire, and that is an important word in spiritual discernment, that must be characterized by a search for God in a powerful and personal way. This desire is manifested as a desire to become more like Christ, someone ready to listen to the Father, and to be self-giving rather than self-serving, someone who is willing to empty oneself in service and love in order "to become filled with the fullness of God." This is of course what *all* Christians are asked to do, each in their own way. So again, the difference for an oblate stems from *how* that search and desire for God is manifested *on the part of the oblate*—how one *responds* to that call in a concrete way. For the oblate this leads to "the intuition ... to adopt a way of life that takes very seriously this search for God." This spiritual intuition will then have to find fruit in a life change

or transformation offered within their attraction to monastic spirituality and viewpoint towards the world. As monastic profession for the monk is essentially a renewal of baptismal promises within a particular setting, so then are the promises made by an oblate when he or she make their final oblation: they are baptismal in nature with a view towards a particular kind of life-style reformation. What is born of the Spirit is Spirit.

The experience of Christ in one's life always elicits a call to transformation. "The concrete response to this intuition often means the person must adopt a new life style; one that takes seriously both the inner life of prayer and in the way one speaks and acts... a determination to change ones manner of life." For the oblate this transformation of life will center around the *incorporation* into one's own life, in whatever way is possible in that life, of St. Benedict's spiritual core: silence, obedience, humility, stability, prayerfulness, hospitality and reverence for one another. These are not, of course, ends in themselves, but rather means to an end—that end being growth in love of God, and growth in love of neighbor. As the monk is called to the perfection of his own life, so the *oblate* is called to a journey that uses the same tools and methods *adapted* to a non-monastic lifestyle.

We consistently read in the Gospels and in Paul of the need for personal reformation and transformation—this is the great and general clarion call to all who follow Jesus. But along with these injunctions lies the realization that all are called to different ways of expressing their response. If we look at the life of a monk, and correspondingly the life of an oblate, we see the need for a general transformation and reformation of personal and characteristic ways of behaving: the need to develop an interior stillness, a greater simplicity of needs, a pre-disposition to prayerfulness, an openness to others, respect for others, respect for the planet we live on, and respect in how we use that planet, the ability to grow in listening skills, the modification of ways in which we act and react towards others, and towards all creation. "It is a reformation that involves a movement from noise to silence, from speech to listening, from manipulating to beholding, from pride to humility." This is a new way of looking at the world—a

world now seen under the glowing light of Christ's resurrection. But again, this is for all Christians.

Perhaps what is particularly characteristic of monastic, and oblate, life is stability and how it relates to community. This is important: the oblate is a person who has established a particular, concrete and realistic relationship to a particular monastery. Within this relationship is what one might experience as a "coming home", a sense of being a part of something. It is more than comfort, more than historical connection, it is belonging to a place, and the way that place exists helps to define who we are and what we are to do with our lives. For example, if hospitality is a hallmark of St. Andrew's, so must hospitality be a defining characteristic of the oblate towards others—in welcoming, sharing, greeting, listening, and teaching. For an oblate, the monastery is the place one spiritually belongs to, and has a vocation towards. It is recognition of particular ways of life, and a particular kind of rootedness. You are not a member of some general order of Benedictine Oblates, you are an oblate of Saint Andrew's Abbey. And your life thus reflects what it is that caused you to desire to make oblation, and promise to walk a particular kind of spiritual journey. "The oblate carries off some of the monastic life into his or her own home so that they might always share the monastic identity, living as best they can a monastic manner of life." The oblate incarnates in his or her own life the life of Christ and the Rule of Benedict as lived at St. Andrew's Abbey.

It is the role of the formation program for those investigating the life of an oblate to clarify, help and direct those who are seeking to be oblates. It is the role of the oblate group to be welcoming to all, and offer continuing spiritual sustenance and growth. It is the role of an oblate sponsor to help guide the novice in this journey. The important thing is this: when you become an oblate you are aware of what you are promising, and why you are making that promise—not because it would be nice to be an oblate, but because there is something in you that needs to be defined by a particular way of life and commitment to change. It is your spiritual journey that you promise to undergo, or at the very least be willing to undergo.

Out of this desire and promise to live one's life in a particular way come a number of options and areas for consideration. I quote from our Oblate Constitutions: "the oblate is someone living in society who has heard God's call to guide their life in the light of the Rule of St. Benedict, and who has responded to that call by living in spiritual union with our monastic community." To do this one of the general means offered is the gathering together on a regular basis in geographical areas, and/or at the Abbey for monthly meetings. These should be formative and strengthening occasions, and also ones that foster friendship and mutual congeniality. Mutuality ought to be a key note. Yet, this might not in fact suit everyone, but the reality remains: contact with the Abbey and with each other is essential, but it can also be maintained through private retreats, oblate retreats, and visits to the Abbey, if feasible for the oblate given their life obligations, health and situation.

At the heart of the oblate's spiritual journey is a "never-ending process of integration – a deepening of their awareness of and responsiveness through the practice of contemplative prayer." This is truly a part of that conversion of life to which we are called. This conversion is propelled by daily practice of silent prayer, *Lectio Divina*, and the prayer of the Divine Office, and regular reception of the Sacraments; all taken into proper balance with the duties and obligations of one's life and situation. Spiritual direction ought to be a part of this process, and this is, admittedly, a difficulty since there are simply not enough monks able to engage in this spiritual practice. Hence one is encouraged to find others who can guide and direct in line with the Benedictine charism.

An oblate also attempts to simplify his or her life. It is through this simplification of life that there is "an ongoing effort to keep for one's self only that which is sufficient, and to generously share with others the spiritual and material abundance with which one has been blessed." This also implies using time well— a simplification of schedules, getting necessary leisure for reflection and reading, making the living out of one's life into a genuine Christian Sabbath. All this, of course, is once again tied into the life-situation one is in: demands on one's time vary from person to

person, family to family, place to place. Part of the oblate journey is to discover the right balance for oneself. And this is the key to keeping the promise we make as an oblate—one that prevents us from falling prey to discouragement and fear—and develops a willingness, a wanting to keep the promise, even though we might so often fail.

To be an oblate, then, is to see in monastic life the tools that one can use to build up one's own life in God. One can find in the particular monastery, a place that will nourish and support that building up of the spiritual life. One finds in the monastic community both support and example. One finds in one's oblate group a like-minded and committed group of people who are all searching for God in their own lives, and in our mutual willingness to help each other find Him. To be a friend of the Abbey is a wonderful thing and is hopefully a source of common affection and growth. To be an oblate of the Abbey is also a wonderful thing which arises out of a person's recognition that he or she *needs* certain tools, certain instruments of good work, to reach the universal Christian end: to prefer nothing to the love of Christ. One becomes an oblate because one needs to become an oblate—not because one wants to be one or to think it carries a special cachet or title.

May God Bless all of us in this search—no matter which road we take, no matter which path we need to follow. No matter which way the Spirit leads us. But let us journey it together.

Let us again recall the words of today's Gospel:

You must be born from above.

The wind blows wherever it pleases;

you hear its sound,

but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

That is how it is with all born of the Spirit.

Amen.

