

Reaching for God



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The Benedictine Oblate Way of Life

*Roberta Werner, OSB*



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# Dedication

I dedicate this book to Pope John XXIII who listened to the Holy Spirit and whose positive, hope-filled attitude, along with his concern for the spiritual needs of the present time, gave us Vatican II with its unique and valued documents referring to the importance of the laity as members of the church and as a key and irreplaceable element in the work of the church and the world.

In memory of my parents and grandparents whose love and self-giving were models of true Gospel-living and Christian witness to the God who is unconditional Love.

For all who cannot ease their longing and for all who seek and reach for our mysterious God Who promised to be with us always.



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In conclusion I give my love and thanks to all of my Benedictine sisters, my family, and friends whose presence in my life manifests God in so many ways.

May each of us keep our ears and hearts open to our all-loving God whose Spirit continues to renew the earth and all who live on our planet.



# Introduction

Teilhard de Chardin once wrote: “We are not human beings having a spiritual experience. We are spiritual beings having a human experience.” When we are unaware of that profound truth and start to live shallow lives bogged down in materialistic pursuits, the sense that “there must be something more” is with us daily. So many people look for quick fixes to their unhappiness. In their search for meaning, they turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, constant activity, new self-help programs, unending work, mindless, constant entertainment, and the like. They have never learned what Karl Rahner put so well: “In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable we eventually learn that here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.” Having come face-to-face with that realization—having acknowledged that, plus our longing for meaning—we have then reached the point where we can discover (or rediscover) who we really are, where we are really going, and whether or not we want to change our path. It is at that point in life that we are ready to exchange shallowness and superficial living for depth and meaning and endeavors that are worthy of us.

Have you reached that stage in life? If you are restless, feeling “out-of-joint” and unfulfilled; if you are reaching for that unknown Something or Someone that can help to anchor you at the same time as it challenges you, enriches you, and plunges you into Mystery, you may find the answer here, in this book—in this spirituality. Whether or not you are aware of it, the “Someone” you are seeking is God, and Saint Benedict found a path to a fruitful, rich life in God that has proved itself over the centuries—that is, from the sixth century into our twenty-first. In his Prologue to the Rule, Benedict asks, “Is there anyone here who yearns for life and desires to see good days? (Ps 34[34]:13)” (RB Prol. 15). He then invites

us to open our eyes and ears to God's invitation through Scripture and through Benedict's own loving guidance in the Rule, which he wrote for the good of all, out of love. Do not be confused or daunted by the term "rule." It is not some harsh, unyielding dictum but an invitation to follow a prescribed path, to use a type of framework, a trellis structure through which you can grow to personal fulfillment and a meaningful life.

If you are searching for a *why* and a purpose in your life—if you are aching for a sense of fulfillment, a feeling of belonging, a need for wholeness—this book may help you find the way. In their personal search for meaning, many men and women have found the answer by living a life based on Benedictine spirituality. They found their spiritual home in their affiliation with Benedictine monasteries as oblates. In the Benedictine family of their choice, and through their monastic connection, they sought and continue to seek God together in the company of thousands of others. This book will tell you both the why and the how of that path to meaning.

The reawakening and resurgence of Benedictine spirituality for the laity has produced many recent books on this subject. Some of them address the Rule of Benedict directly in the form of new translations, others combine the quotation of the Rule with commentaries, and some publications address oblates of Saint Benedict directly. There are books with essays by oblates and books about prominent oblates. This book is a compendium, a type of integration-convergence, of Benedictine spirituality for the layperson. In its comprehensiveness, this book brings together, in one volume, the essence of Benedictine spirituality: its history, its relevance through the ages into the present century, and its ongoing values for living a meaningful life. It gives the history of lay connections to Benedictine monasteries from their inception as it addresses Benedictine spirituality in the form of lay oblation. This book confirms the importance of the laity in the work of the church and the world as stated in the documents of Vatican II, offering the reader an opportunity to connect with the documents' important affirmations of the laity's role in spreading the Good News about salvation.

At the same time as it invites the layperson into the rich spiritual life of a Benedictine oblate, this book provides many bibliographical

resources for the reader's spiritual life in general. Accessing these, in addition to the websites and additional materials included, offers a good foundation for the reader's continuing personal spiritual growth. There are also examples of prayer and *lectio*, which are applicable to any spiritual life and can enrich the mind and heart.

Benedict's wisdom, offered through his Rule, has proved itself by enduring through every age since its birth. When we live in a "throw-away" culture such as ours; when the new "toy" we bought is suggested to be obsolete just weeks after our purchase; when the new fad for healing and the new self-help books disappoint; when we look for something that has proved itself to be stable enough to depend on for the long haul, we can trust Benedictine spirituality. Saint Benedict knew human nature. He lived in a time of great upheaval, unrest, spiritual dissolution. He found the answer to a meaningful life through Scripture, prayer, and specific life values and practices. His answer just might be yours as well. Take a peek into this book and be surprised and delighted to find a piece of yourself in Benedict's wise recognition of and approach to humanity. As Benedict would say, "That in all things God may be glorified."



# Benedictine Spirituality as Related to Oblate Life/Living

## **The Essence of Benedictine Spirituality**

The Benedictine goal is to seek God. Benedictine life is fueled by Scripture and prayer and an effort to see and find God in each person and experience in daily life. Every person is to be treated as Christ and all material things are to be treated with respect and care. Life is to be lived in moderation with a healthy balance between work and prayer. Benedictines are to listen in loving obedience to the will of God as they have perceived it in their prayer, *lectio*, and life events. They live the Rule and the Christian life in community with other God-committed individuals and continue their efforts at conversion of heart. Fidelity in faith and stability of heart and place are also key aspects of Benedictine life. Benedictine spirituality advises and points the way to living the Christian life to its fullest extent by deepening the person's relationship to God and developing a personal relationship/friendship with Jesus Christ. The Benedictine tries to live in the present in prayerful and loving connection to God and family, as well as to his or her religious and civic community.

## **What/Who Is an Oblate?**

Oblates are Christian women and men who affiliate with a Benedictine monastic community and consider the monastery their spiritual home. Oblates study the Rule of Benedict as a spiritual guide and live its spirit in their daily lives in whichever way their unique situations permit them to adapt it. They do what they can to be witnesses to Christ by word and example. They make a commitment

to follow and be shaped by Benedictine spirituality. Oblates try to live the ordinary in an extraordinary way, fueled by the Gospel of Christ in the midst of a secular and often Godless society. Oblates can be a leaven for good in the midst of their family and civic and church communities, and they become an extension of their monastic family for a world that does not know God and is often lost in darkness.

### **Why Become an Oblate?**

Our culture is steeped in materialism and is often antiritual. Oblates have found that living the shallow life is unsatisfactory. Instead, they seek God and a deeper relationship with Christ by choosing to connect themselves to a spiritual home—a Benedictine community committed to living out the Gospel values according to the Rule of Benedict. Christians who choose to become oblates are attracted to Benedictine values of living a life centered in God, the present moment, wholeness, moderation, prayer, and the Gospel. Oblates can establish a network of relationships and friendships with the monks, brothers, and sisters at their monastic communities and with other oblates who support and enrich their life experiences. They have an opportunity for continuous deepening of their spirituality through oblate meetings, renewal days, and participation in spirituality center programs and other offerings at their chosen monastery. Oblates are also included in the daily prayers of the monastic community. In this time of severed family bonds, declining family life, and eroded community life, oblates know that their monastic home is stable and will always be there for them despite an ever-changing world. Oblates grow in their awareness of God's unconditional love as they start to live the Rule of Benedict. They become more deeply aware of the truth of a personal God who is involved in all creation and is by nature operative in their daily lives. They begin to experience the undeniable fact that they, and all who exist, are God's beloved. They enrich their spiritual lives through their connection with God's presence in the Benedictine community of their choice.

## **The Partnership of Oblate and Monastery**

In choosing to become an oblate, Christians select a community to help them to live out the promise of their baptism in a more serious way. We are all on a spiritual journey, which, because of our weaknesses, includes constant conversion and is basically a process of continuous renewal. The Benedictine community that the oblate chooses as a spiritual home is a source of prayerful support and offers spiritual resources through activities, special events, and both digital and print publications. The monastery welcomes oblates to participate in its daily Eucharist, Divine Office, and special occasions. It shares its Benedictine way of life through mailings, e-mails, Facebook, and other methods of contact and also includes the needs of oblates and community in its general communications and prayer.

Oblates are an extension of the monastery to a needy world. Their commitment to living Benedictine spirituality makes them a presence for good wherever they are. They love their monastery and are advocates for its values and spiritual culture/life. They support the monastic community in prayer and are one of its links to the world of work, family, church, and civic communities to which the oblates try to bring peace, justice, love, and all the elements of their learned Benedictine values.