

What is an Oblate?

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This manual contains articles regarding prayers, procedures, virtues, saints, history and people. These are some of the pieces which go together to make oblates. However, oblates, individually and collectively, are more than the sum of these parts. Oblates (at least the vast majority of them) are first of all Christians, who want to live as intensely as they can the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit into which they were baptized. They are oblates because in living their baptism they find support in a monastery, a rule and a community of oblates.

Although the practice of oblates varies from monastery to monastery, there are three things all oblates have in common. They try to pray some of the liturgical hours, joining their prayer with that of the monks and oblates of the monastic family. All try to find inspiration and guidance in the Rule of Benedict and the almost 1500 year old tradition of prayer and community, hospitality and service, which stems from the Rule. Finally, in various ways and degrees, all oblates feel some identification with the monastic and oblate community of which they are a part. Some live far away or are very busy and seldom can visit the monastery or take part in oblate events; others are much more involved in oblate functions.

Living reverently in the presence of God can be seen as the purpose and goal of Benedictine life. "Living" implies vitality, work and hospitality nurtured by prayer and reading. There is nothing esoteric about these aims or practices; they are obvious and general. They make clear the expansiveness of Benedictine spirituality, which emphasizes basics, and leaves it to the individual to add devotions and practices and ministries according to his or her calling and talent. There is no one Benedictine "work"; rather the goal is that every work be a work of God nurtured and directed by the Word of God.

The Rule of Benedict is open-ended and flexible. When Benedict finishes his "little rule for beginners," he gives a list of further reading: the Bible and the writings of Cassian and Basil, along with the lives and sayings of the early monks. Benedict drew on these writings and many others when he wrote his Rule. When he sent his monks to these sources, Benedict knew that all of them did not all agree with each other on all points. That didn't bother him, because he didn't expect all his monks to think alike. His goal was that they would all seek God together, each in the way that God directed him, but within the framework provided by rule, community and abbot.

The oblation which oblates make is a reiteration of their baptismal commitment, made in the context of the monastic and oblate community. It is not a vow, binding under pain of sin, but it is a pledge to seek God, making use of liturgical prayer, the Rule of Benedict and the support of their oblate community.

Most oblates are active members of a parish community. Many also belong to one or more small Christian communities. Being an oblate is meant to supplement and enrich their participation in these other communities. The oblates seldom undertake service projects of their own as a group; usually their service occurs in their parish or in other communities of service.

At retreats, meetings and other activities, the monastic community tries to provide formation for the oblates and to encourage them to nurture each other's faith.