

History of The Oblate Program at the Monastery of the Ascension

The First 20 Years, 1982-2001

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Beginnings: 1982-1994

In December 1982, the community of the then Ascension Priory agrees to begin an Oblate program. A Benedictine Oblate is a lay person who chooses to affiliate with a Benedictine monastery and to share in their spirituality and life through retreats, days of recollection, visits, private recitation of the Divine Office, living according to the Christian values presented in the Benedictine Rule and tradition, and, sometimes, volunteer work.

Fr. Joel Kehoe is named the first Director of the Oblates. He serves in this capacity until May 1994. He initiates a monthly newsletter; in which he explores with us topics of interest to an Oblate who is a disciple of St. Benedict. In all his newsletters he explains various aspects of the Rule of St. Benedict. He encourages all of us to read on our own and to purchase and pray a copy of the Book of Christian Prayer or the full Liturgy of the Hours.

The first Oblate retreat is held in May 1983. Twelve people indicate they would like to begin their year of novitiate to become Oblates. Fr. Joel also starts to schedule dates in the future for Oblate retreats, picnics and days of prayer. The schedule he establishes is followed closely for the next twenty years.

In 1984 we are introduced to the "bona opera" sheet. It is the custom in many monasteries to distribute to the members of the community "bona opera" (Latin for "good works") sheets at the beginning of Lent. The sheet contains a quotation from the Rule, "Everyone should make known to the abbot what he or she intends to do (as a Lenten observance)". Benedict was concerned that the vice of pride not creep in to one's Lenten practices. Penances undertaken must have "the permission of the spiritual father." In our case, the bona opera went to the Director of Oblates.

In May of the following year our first oblates make their profession: Bob and Peg Sass, Rosa Sofia, Mary Anderson, Madeleine Sawaya, Cal and Pauline Harper, Kate Spessard, Patti Wilkins, Mary Last, Deanne Prost.

In July, 1985, the Oblates donate \$350.00 for the meditation corner in the cemetery. Rosa Sofia spearheads this project. By now Oblates are starting to volunteer and help out at the Priory in many ways. We now number 30 Oblates, and many more are interested in joining the program.

In September, 1989, Fr. Joel leaves for school in California. During his absence the oblates are under the watchful eye of the new Prior, Fr. Boniface. Membership in the Oblates rises to 65.

After 4 years in school, Fr. Joel returns and resumes his duties as Director of the Oblates. He recommends meditation on the readings for weekday Mass as a way to open oneself to the richness of the Advent season. In May 1994 Fr. Joel resigns as Oblate Director in order to have more time for his counseling practice.

1994-1997

Fr. Simeon is named the new Director of the Oblates. We now learn the word "obsculta" or "listen," the first word of the Prologue of the Rule of St. Benedict. By this word we are called into a mode of attentiveness, receptivity, and acceptance and ultimately to a change of life. We need to be "listeners" before we become "talkers " or "performers". Being a good listener is not an easy skill to acquire.

The Oblate Newsletter is now known as The Link. We are linked to one another as we journey toward holiness in the way of St. Benedict. Many oblates are volunteers in the new Ministry Center.

1995 brings the resignation of Fr. Simeon. Father Joe Wood is named Director of Oblates. He reminds us that making oblation is similar to a making profession. When monks are professed they say the psalm verse "Receive me, Lord as you have promised and I shall live: do not disappoint me in my hope" (Ps 119.16). This is a wonderful and consoling little phrase to pray. It reminds us of God's love for us, inviting us to respond to him with a hope and returning love. May we all continue to have this prayer in our hearts as we give ourselves to St. Benedict's school of the Lord's service. We now have 80 Oblates.

Fr. Joseph reminds us about what St. Benedict said in the last chapter of the Rule which is read on December 31st: "But for one who would hasten to the perfection of life there are the teachings of the holy Fathers, the observance of which leads one to the height of perfection. And what page or what utterance of the divinely inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not most unerring rule for human life?"

In 1997, Fr. Joseph is elected "as Abbot of Mt. Angel" and goes back to Oregon to assume his duties.

1997-2001

Fr. Hugh is appointed Director of the Oblates, and we are reminded that each of us, baptized, confirmed, married or celibate, priest, doctor, farmer, teacher, or nurse, is called to enter and to extend the reign of God, to bring God's love and justice to every part of the world and every part of the day. The liturgy of the hours is one way Benedict uses to sanctify the world, the way of time.

We are also introduced to words such as "medieval, monastic "familia", Frances of Rome Wolfgang, Odilo and Richard of St. Vanne, St. Hildegard, Emperor Henry II patron of Oblates, Louis de Blois, and the list goes on. We learn the history of the Medal of St. Benedict.

There are now Oblate who meet in Boise and Idaho Falls, as well as come to the monastery for scheduled events and private retreats..

Retreats fill up and Fr. Hugh adds additional retreats to accommodate our 150 Oblates, it is an

exciting time to be an Oblate. The format of the Link changes. Oblates begin to contribute articles and book reviews for the Link.

During the twenty years of the program we have had five different directors, all with their own personalities and style, but all leading us down the same path, guided by the Rule of St. Benedict.