

Saint Meinrad Archabbey: Portrait of a Historic Monastic Community

BY MATTHEW MATTINGLY, O.S.B.

Through its Benedictine oblate program, Saint Meinrad Archabbey builds bridges between the cloister and Christians living in the world. Oblates are living witnesses that centuries-old traditions of monastic prayer, contemplation, and practice can transform the world at a practical level.

Saint Meinrad Archabbey, a Benedictine monastic community of about one hundred men situated in the wooded hills of rural southern Indiana, is a destination for several thousand visitors who come here seeking God each year. Many arrive as retreatants or pilgrims, some as students of the abbey's School of Theology, others just to visit. Many weekends the abbey church is packed for worship. There might be several large retreats going on at the same time, the seminarians in the school may be joining the monks for Vespers, a group of high school students preparing for Confirmation perhaps is visiting, or it could be a weekend of pilgrimage to the Marian shrine on nearby Monte Cassino hill. On other weekends, by contrast, the church is not so crowded, just a few individuals scattered throughout the guest section: a religious sister here on sabbatical, one of the monastery's many lay coworkers, a young man making a "come and see" visit to discern if the monastic life may be for him, and always a handful of largely anonymous persons here on private visits, probably just looking for a quiet place to get away and find renewal. Many guests, many reasons for being here, but all of them, whoever they are and whatever their background, find themselves gladly welcomed here as Christ, just as the *Rule of Saint Benedict* prescribes.

People are attracted to Saint Meinrad on account of the restful silence, the beauty of the grounds, the peaceful isolation, the mystery of the monastic cloister, the rhythm and pace of the daily schedule, and the simplicity of life to be found here. But all of these, however much they are to be enjoyed for their own sake, are nonetheless ultimately for the sake of something much larger. People come to Saint Meinrad because it is a place of prayer. They come here seeking God, desiring to experience Christ more deeply in their lives, and they hope that they might somehow be able to tap into the life of prayer and contemplation cultivated so diligently by the monks who live here.



Many who visit Saint Meinrad come away wishing that they could somehow preserve or keep alive the peace and closeness to God they sense when they are here. Of these, a few may perceive that they are being called to become monks themselves. For the great majority, however, that is not a realistic or desirable option; most visitors have already established lives and families back home. At the same time, however, they find themselves attracted to the values of monastic life and wish that they could somehow integrate these into their own lives away from the monastery. It is for this reason that many choose to affiliate themselves to Saint Meinrad in a special way, by joining the monastery's chapter of Benedictine oblates.

"I was first drawn by the beauty and peacefulness of Saint Meinrad, as well as by the joy and happiness of the monks [my husband and I] came to know," recalls Pat Dorn, a long-time oblate from Cincinnati. "I [later] came to realize the opportunity for spiritual growth provided through the structure of the oblate program." Diane Rivera, an oblate from Bloomington, Indiana, recalls that "prior to knowing that the Benedictine oblate program existed, a friend and I had made a couple of weekend retreats to St. Meinrad and liked returning to the abbey for spiritual refreshment. We were taken by the possibility of something beyond regular church attendance, Bible study, and private prayer."

A Benedictine oblate, to quote the official oblate manual, is a "Christian who yearns for a spiritual life deeply rooted in God, and who chooses to attach his or herself to a specific Benedictine community and strives to live the spirit of the *Rule of St. Benedict* in response to this yearning." It is a structured program of spirituality that helps those who commit themselves to it to live as closely as possible the life of a monk outside of the cloister in the world. Although many oblates are attracted to the communal aspects of the program, being an oblate is not so much about being part of a group (like belonging to a parish or to a club, for instance) as it is about embracing a way of living that informs and deepens their understanding of the relationships and activities to which they are already committed.

The oblate program at Saint Meinrad is nearly as old as the abbey itself, and it is closely related to the monastery's overall mission of "seeking God

and serving the Church.” In 1854, two monks from the ancient Swiss monastery of Einsiedeln arrived in southern Indiana and settled near the banks of the Anderson River. They purchased a large tract of land and established a new monastic community. Their arrival here was prompted by two coinciding factors. Back home in Switzerland, the government at that time had enacted a policy of closing down all religious houses that could not prove their usefulness to society. Monasteries with their focus on prayer and contemplation were especially affected by this, and so Einsiedeln was looking at the possibility of making a foundation in the United States in case the monks should be forced out of their native land. At the same time, the diocese in which the new monastery would eventually be founded was actively looking for a German-speaking

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monastery from Europe to make a foundation in Indiana. Large numbers of German-Catholic immigrants had recently settled in the area, but there were virtually no native clergy able to serve their spiritual needs on account of the language barrier. In addition to providing priests who could help fill the immediate void in pastoral ministry, monasteries were also known traditionally to operate schools and seminaries for the training of new priests. The Abbey of Einsiedeln, fortunately, was never suppressed, but they did respond to the request for a monastic foundation in Indiana by sending over two monks to found what was first known as Saint Meinrad Priory, named after the ninth-century founder of the motherhouse. More monks from Einsiedeln would follow, and many locals joined the new foundation as well. By 1870, Saint Meinrad had grown large enough to be raised to the status of an abbey, independent from the motherhouse in Switzerland. The seminary was successfully up and running, and many monks from Saint Meinrad served as pastors in local parishes.

In addition to serving the needs of the local church through their outward ministries, Saint Meinrad had also striven to cultivate a strong inner life of prayer and contemplation, which is the foundation of the monastic life. Devotion to the liturgy and a strong commitment to developing and promoting the Church’s rich tradition of liturgical music, particularly Gregorian chant, have been a part of the monastery’s mission from the very beginning. Even on the day in 1887 when a devastating fire destroyed most of the newly constructed buildings at Saint Meinrad, the monks still made it a point to come

together and celebrate each of the prescribed hours of the Divine Office. This great common prayer of the universal Church has been offered here on the “Holy Hill” – as many visitors are fond of calling it – uninterrupted now for over 156 years. Today, the monks of Saint Meinrad come together in the choir of their church five times a day to offer their praise to God, once for the celebration of the Mass, and also for the morning, midday, evening, and nighttime offices of the Liturgy of the Hours. In addition, time is set aside each day for private Scripture reading, following an ancient practice known as *lectio divina* (literally, “divine reading”). All the other works of the monastery – the School of Theology, the Guest House/Retreat Center, the Abbey Press, Abbey Caskets, parish ministry, and the many other works and ministries that individual monks are involved in – all flow out of this deeply cultivated life of prayer, worship, and contemplation.

It is natural that others would be attracted to the monastery on account of the spiritual life to be found here, and that some might want to attach themselves to Saint Meinrad in a deeper and more committed way. On that account, the oblate program at Saint Meinrad was founded in 1879, on the twenty-fifth anniversary of the abbey’s founding. At first it was limited mostly to students and alumni of the school and to a few locals, but following the Second World War, and a nationwide resurgence of interest in monastic spirituality, Saint Meinrad’s oblate program experienced exponential growth. Today Saint Meinrad Archabbey boasts of having over 1,200 oblates active in the program, many of whom are members in one of the twenty affiliated local chapters scattered across the country. There are oblate chapters in places as large as New York City, population seven million, and as tiny as the town of St. Meinrad itself, population five hundred.



Oblates are attracted and committed to the program for a variety of reasons. Many cite the order and structure that it has given to their personal spiritual life. “I needed to find more order in my life – structure without the ruts or potholes that tend to develop over time,” recalls George Thompson of Louisville, Kentucky. “The oblate program has provided a good centering device for me. The [chapter] meetings in Louisville and the gatherings at Saint Meinrad help to bring me back in line, to refocus on what is important.” “They [fellow oblates] help to pull me back to the center of the path of my journey.”

Although oblates do not take formal vows that are ecclesiastically binding as monks do, they do make three commitments that mirror the formal monastic vows of *stability* of place to one’s monastery, *obedience* to one’s abbot, and *fidelity* to the monastic way of life. The oblate promises *stability of heart*, *obedience to the will of God*, and *fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life*. Stability of heart means, on the one hand, that the oblate promises to be faithful to the values and culture of their affiliated monastery, and, on the other, faithful to the way of life that they are already committed to, especially their family and

faith community. Obedience to the will of God is fostered through prayer and Scripture reading that sharpens the ability to see the presence of the Word in the needs of one's family and community. Fidelity to the spirit of the monastic life means that the oblate works to integrate the principles and values of the *Rule of Saint Benedict* into their daily lives.

Out of these general promises flows the program of specific duties that

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an oblate commits him- or herself to following faithfully. These include: praying daily at least the morning and evening office of the Liturgy of the Hours; practicing *lectio divina* regularly, including a daily reading from the *Rule of Saint Benedict*; being active members of their own church community (oblates do not have to be Catholics; the program is open to committed Christians of any denomination); and being actively attentive

of God's presence in his or her ordinary daily life. "I know that by disciplining myself to follow the *Rule*, saying the Liturgy of the Hours, *lectio divina*, and attending the periodic meetings, I am slowly growing in holiness. I feel certain that my life has more meaning now as I strive for daily renewal and perseverance," says Carl Schneider about his experience.

Apart from the structure that the program provides, others find that being part of a larger community, wider than their own local church, is the most meaningful aspect of being an oblate. Diane Rivera finds that "the community aspect of coming together with other oblats to learn, to share, and to pray is very satisfying and faith-building." "It fulfills a longing I have to give myself to God, and to be spiritually nourished outside of, and in addition to, my parish life." For Sharon Ogden, of Lancaster, Pennsylvania, the most important thing is the spiritual friendship that has been fostered within her chapter. "We are a diverse group, many different ages, but we all feel connected. We pray for one another and care about one another."

In addition to several general oblate meetings and retreats conducted at Saint Meinrad each year, the local chapters typically hold their own meetings about once a month. Occasionally, perhaps several times a year, a monk from Saint Meinrad will be present to give a talk. The Oblate Director and his assistants try to give focus to these meetings by having a specific monastic topic that serves as the theme to build discussion and reflection around for the entire year.

Finally, others see the connection with the abbey itself and its monks as the most important aspect of being an oblate. "The monks are like family," says Pat Dorn. "They pray for us and we for them." "When [my husband and I] go to Saint Meinrad, I experience the same sense of joy and excitement that I felt as a child when my parents took us to Indiana to visit my grandparents. It is a homecoming." Suzy Kalmar from Dayton, Ohio, is "comforted by the idea that the monks are praying for me and for all the oblates, as I am praying for them. I am also edified by the experience of belonging to something so much larger than myself. There is a timelessness about it all; like the Church itself."

The spiritual benefits of the Benedictine oblate program are not just limited to the oblates themselves. They add something real and valuable to the monastic life itself as lived at Saint Meinrad. "Our oblates are an important reflection of our prayer and work as monks in the monastery," offers Brother Francis Wagner, O.S.B. "They are very committed to [Saint Benedict's] vision – even more so than I sometimes am – and their own fidelity strengthens mine." Father Meinrad Brune, O.S.B., Director of Oblates at Saint Meinrad, echoes this when he says that "the witness of the oblates living the Benedictine values in the world strengthens the monks' love and appreciation for our spiritual life as Benedictines." He adds that "the oblates remind the monks of their own goodness and uniqueness."



The relationship between a monastery and its oblates, however, runs deeper than just the mutual support they provide for one another's spiritual lives. Monasteries serve a real and vital need within the life of the institutional Church as well as the world at large, and Benedictine oblates contribute in an essential way to the fulfillment of this mission. In a society that is increasingly obsessed with doing and achieving and solving problems, monasticism remains a powerful witness that the outcome of our world, its successes and failures, does not lie ultimately in our own human efforts and intentions, but rather belongs to God. The monastic life, through its commitment to prayer and contemplation, helps to keep a line of communication open and a space free for the Word of God to do its work in the world. In many ways, the oblates might be seen as the agents of the monastery working silently in the world. As Edward L. Shaughnessy puts it in his history of the oblate program at Saint Meinrad, "Benedictine oblates are men and women who strive to live a contemplative life in the world. The vocation calls forth no deep commitment to move the Catholic Church's social or liturgical agenda."¹ Benedictine spirituality is not about changing the outward structures of the world, but about renewing them from within by allowing God to transform the interior lives of the individuals who participate in them.

People often ask, what is the difference between a monk and a layperson in the Church? How does the spirituality of someone living in the cloister differ from that of those living in the world? Ultimately, nothing. All Christians are

called to pursue the same goal of building up the kingdom of God here on earth in preparation for the eternal kingdom of the life to come. The difference is in how each way of life contributes to this.

A monk or a nun is someone who has been called out of the world to live a Christian life at a level of intensity impossible for someone living in it who has to be concerned with running a household, raising a family, managing a career, and other practicalities of daily living. The lay Christian, on the other hand, is called to be a follower of Christ in the world and a witness to it of the truth of the Christian faith. Lay Christians are often able to find inspiration and spiritual guidance from those who have dedicated their lives fully to pursuing a life of prayer. The role of the Benedictine oblate, perhaps, is that of a bridge between the life of the cloister and that of the ordinary Christian living in the world. Oblates are living witnesses that centuries-old traditions of monastic prayer, contemplation, and practice truly are capable of transforming the world at a practical level. Their lives can serve as an example and an inspiration for all those who will never have the opportunity to pray and worship with the monks here on the “Holy Hill” at Saint Meinrad Archabbey.²

NOTES

1 Edward L. Shaughnessy, *The Benedictine Oblates of Saint Meinrad Archabbey: A Brief History, 1879-1999* (Saint Meinrad, IN: Abbey Press, 2000), 55.

2 For more information about the Benedictine oblate program at Saint Meinrad Archabbey, see www.saintmeinrad.edu/monastery_oblates.aspx.



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