

Oblates of Weston Priory

from the very beginning...

— *brother John*

NEAR THE CLOSE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY, POPE LEO XIII is said to have remarked, "The Benedictine Order is the only Order in the Church without any order."

The assembly of Benedictine Abbots respectfully responded in their unique way. They created the "Benedictine Confederation". The 'Confederation' unites all independent Benedictine monasteries coordinated by the 'Abbot Primate' — the 'first among equals'. This is in polite contrast to Religious Orders which consist of juridically centralized religious congregations.

From this beginning it may be obvious that monks have their own language, or at least their own vocabulary. The word 'oblate' is a good example. Webster's Dictionary says that the word is related to offering or dedication. It then passes the buck by saying it is commonly used by religious. Resorting to the religious category on the internet, the expression 'Benedictine Oblates' will produce a plethora of information — and a variety of meanings.

Benedictine monasteries are deeply united in their spirituality based on the Rule of Benedict. At the same time they foster a rich variety of monastic communities with a variety of traditions and customs.

Benedictine monastic communities usually welcome the Oblation of secular oblates. By adopting the spirituality and Rule of Benedict and offering to be of service to the community, oblates become a part and extension of the Benedictine family. Oblations are usually professed by individual persons who fulfill the requirements of a particular monastic community. A year of study of the Rule of Benedict, reflection on monastic history and tradition, and practice of monastic prayer and *lectio* are common requirements. The process is finalized with a public expression and celebration of Oblation.

Weston Priory has been blessed from its very origins with the Oblation of three *communities* of oblates. This custom of receiving the Oblation of *communities of oblates* is a variation from other monasteries. The year of novitiate is required as in other monasteries. In the Weston process, the personal Oblation is still honored and publicly celebrated but it is woven into the Oblation of a community. The traditional diversity-in-unity of the Benedictines is thus respected and preserved.

Three very different communities of Benedictine oblates played a significant part in the history of Weston Priory in its earliest years. Each community gifted the priory in many ways. A story from each comes to mind.

Dormition Oblates

The Dormition Abbey Oblates were military personnel who were stationed in the Holy Land during the occupation of Palestine until 1948. They returned to England and continued to meet and pray together. Whenever Abbot Leo traveled from Israel to Weston, he made it a point to meet with them.

In 1958 I had the good fortune to travel with Abbot Leo to Rome and Israel. We stopped in England on our way. The oblates gathered at Farnborough Abbey to greet us. We shared prayer and a festal meal.



"Listen with the ear of your heart"

Abbot Leo then shared his hopes for the meeting of abbots in Rome that would take place shortly. He would propose that Benedictine communities be empowered to grant equal rights to ordained and non-ordained monks. Up to that time, communities were divided between ordained or clerical monks who prayed the monastic office and lay-brothers who performed manual labor and prayed privately. Only ordained priest-monks were eligible to hold major offices in the community.

To garner support for his proposal Abbot Leo wanted to speak with as many Benedictine abbots as possible. Immediately, two of the oblates, Tom Bethel and Frank Betten, generously offered to facilitate visits to the English Benedictine abbeys.

With the help and accompaniment of these gentle military oblates, Abbot Leo won the support of the abbots of England. Their assistance was a significant gift to Weston Priory as well as to all Benedictines in the pursuit of equality within monastic communities.

Keyport Oblates

The Keyport Oblates were urban Catholics, dissatisfied with a static church. A decade before the Second Vatican Council, they were searching for a more vibrant and renewed experience of faith and worship. Those oblates were a small band who had come together to support Father Leo, Father Damasus, and the other refugee monks from Germany that made up the Benedictine Priory of St. Paul in Keyport, N.J. in the 1940's. The Keyport Community disbanded in 1947. Father Leo returned to Gerleve.

When Father Leo was named Abbot of Dormition Abbey in Jerusalem in 1952, he visited the United States and confided a dream to his oblate friends in New Jersey. Concerned with his precarious and aging community in Jerusalem, Abbot Leo dreamt of founding a new young community in America. The new community would embrace his vision of monastic renewal and also strengthen the Dormition community.

The oblates drawn to Abbot Leo's vision were headed by Dr. Leon and Dorothea Smith of Clifton, N.J. With the dedication and energy of those early oblates, Abbot Leo was able to found Weston Priory. They discovered the ideal location for the monastery in Weston. Following the purchase of the property, Dorothea served as a trustee for the initial incorporation of Weston Priory – shades of feminism! Other New Jersey oblates joined in the movement to encourage and inspire the blossoming community in Weston. Among them were Ron Beck of CBS and John Quinn, president of the Mix Place in Manhattan, who facilitated publicity and the recording of Weston Priory music. A group of women oblates from New Jersey fashioned new work habits for the aspiring young monks. To augment the income of the struggling community a 'dollar-a-month' upkeep fund was organized.

Oblates from the beginning!

Burlington Oblates

The Burlington Oblates were a quiet faith community in Christ the King Parish in Burlington, led by a socially conscious rustic Vermont pastor, Father Charles Towne. Father Towne, who served also as Chancellor of the diocese, shared Abbot Leo's dream for a renewal of the Church through dedication to prayer, community, and social justice. In the name of the diocese, Father Towne welcomed Abbot Leo and the Weston community in a solemn celebration with the Trapp Family Singers at South Park in Burlington in June, 1953. Following that event he enlisted parishioners to form the first Vermont community of oblates.

The new oblate community met regularly to study, pray, and discuss the Rule of Benedict as it applied to their daily lives. With Father Towne they enjoyed days of recollection at the priory and searched for ways to assist and support the growing monastic community.

With the leadership of Father Towne, members of the group extended the spirit of the priory by their involvement with the poor and with refugee families in Burlington. Brother John's parents were also dedicated members of this pioneer community.

The outreach of the oblates included the struggling young priory itself. Weekly supplies of surplus groceries—including the rare treat of day-old donuts—regularly graced the priory table from the generosity of a faithful oblate member, Omer Verrett, who managed a local IGA grocery store in Burlington.

Each of these Oblate Communities offered a gift--their Oblation to the priory. They became extensions of the Weston monastic family in their daily lives and neighborhood. They continued to meet as small independent communities, exploring the spirituality of the Rule and the Gospel—each with their own personality.

In their diversity and unity, Oblate Communities are like a rainbow—a colorful symbol of hope! ■